

“The Way In Is The Way Forward”
Colossians 2:6-7

February 16, 2014

SI: Our Scripture reading today marks a transition in the letter. Paul has written to the Colossians about the supremacy of Jesus Christ, and the greatness of the Christian faith which they have professed. He’s spoken of his own faith, and how Christ has redeemed suffering.

After all of that teaching, Paul now makes a transition.

He says: Therefore, so then, this is how you are to live. He’s moving into his critique of the teachings and ideas that were troubling the Colossian church, so-called Colossian heresy.

I’ll be reading from the English Standard Version this morning— just two verses in which Paul maps out what his application is going to be for the rest of the letter.

INTRO: In college, I majored in English and minored in education. Several of the education classes I took were very helpful to me.

I learned things about teaching that I still use today.

On the other hand, there were several classes mandated by the state of Georgia. that were just hoops I had to jump through to get a teaching certificate.

One of those courses was classroom technology. This was 1985-86.

Personal computers were barely on the radar screen.

Some schools had them for computer classes, but not in the classroom.

So what cutting edge technology did I master?

Film strip projectors. Do you remember those?

Overhead projectors, Scantrons.

And my personal favorite—the ditto machine.

I really miss the ditto machine.

Compared to a photocopier, it was like driving a stick shift.

You had to prepare the master and attach it to the drum, make adjustments.

And a stack of fresh copies was a sensory delight—slightly damp and cold, bright purple ink, and best of all, the faint smell of solvent.

If you ever run across a ditto machine in a yard sale, let me know—especially if it is one of the old models that you crank by hand.

That class, and a few others like them, got me a teaching certificate, which helped me get my first job, for which I am forever grateful.

But those classes serve no role in my work today.

When I'm working on a lesson or a sermon, I don't draw on what I learned from those state-mandated classes. I've moved on to bigger and better things.

Substitute the Gospel for my 1985 classroom technology class

and you have an idea of what was going around the Colossian church.

Some people were saying: Yes, saving faith in Jesus Christ is important.

It's required. If you don't have it, you can't get your salvation certificate.

You'll always be grateful for the simple Gospel message and your profession of faith back when you became a Christian.

But that's all saving faith in Christ is for.

It just gets you into the Christian life at the elementary level.

Now it's time to move on to bigger and better things and really reach the mountain top as a believer.

Isn't that what you want?

Don't you want to experience the fullness of the Christian life?

Don't you want to rise higher and live free from the tyranny of sin?

Don't you want to leave the elementary things behind and open your mind and heart to the really deep and secret things of God?

Yes. All that sounds great. OK, good. Well, this is the way forward.

And at that point, the Colossian Christians were presented with a number of different paths and plans that were being advocated to get there.

As I've mentioned before, some of these plans to spiritual fulfillment were

Jewish in origin—special diets to follow, and devotional schedules.

Some Greek—asceticism, rejection of the physical, self denial.

Some Asian, the mystery religions—secret teaching, communication with angels.

In other words, popular spiritual ideas from the culture were baptized with biblical terminology, and then promoted as what you need to move forward into bigger and better things in the Christian life.

It's important for us to recognize that what the Colossian Christians were being offered is what every Christian longs for. I do. I want to be a holier man.

I want deeper intimacy with God, deeper understanding of his ways.

I want freedom from power of sin. I want mountain top experiences. Don't you?

But Paul says that to get there, you don't need something else, something new.

You need the Gospel that you first heard.

You don't put it aside after you are saved, you continue in it.

Faith in Jesus Christ is both the way into the Christian life and the way forward in the Christian life.

Here's how we're going to divide this passage for study.

Not usual 2 or 3 points.

Paul gives us five metaphors, five word-pictures, of life in Christ.

We're going to look at each briefly, see how they show us that we don't need some new teaching, something different and dynamic—but but we move forward with the faith in Christ we already have.

The way in is the way forward.

The first metaphor of life in Christ is walking in him.

“Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him.”

This is the controlling image of these verses and Paul’s main point.

When you received Christ Jesus the Lord, believed in him, trusted him—
at that point you began a new way of life in him.

Paul says that the way forward is not some other way.

It’s the road you began to walk when you first followed Christ.

Americans don’t walk much. We drive or ride

If we do walk, it’s usually for pleasure or exercise.

But in the ancient world, everybody walked every day.

They walked to get places. They had purpose for their walking.

So walking became a metaphor for life, and more particularly,

the moral and spiritual orientation of a person’s life.

The Old Testament uses this image frequently.

We are told that Enoch walked with God.

God told Abraham, I am the Lord, walk before me and be blameless.

Moses told Israel to walk in obedience to the law of God.

The Psalms are filled with the image of walking as way of life—

as we read earlier in Psalm 1, the blessed man doesn’t walk in way of sinners.

Think for a moment about the act of walking itself.

There is nothing novel about it. You put one foot in front of the other.

Then you do it again. And you keep doing it until you reach your destination.

It’s repetitive, but it’s not monotonous, because you are going somewhere

and you have different views and landmarks along the way.

How do you walk in Christ? Paul says, Just as we received him.

How did you receive him? Repentance and faith.

Those are the steps of walking in Christ. You never put them aside.

As I said a few weeks ago: Suppose your young child prayed to receive Christ.

That’s wonderful.

But the next day what are you going to teach him to lead him to maturity?

If the very next day after he prayed to receive Christ, he was mean to his sister,

what would you tell him?

You would say: Son, what you did to your sister was cruel and unloving.

You need to repent of that and ask God to forgive you, and he will.

And you need to trust Jesus. Because that cruelty in our heart is too hard for you to fix, but Jesus can fix it because he died and rose for you. I know that because I've tried to fix myself and I haven't been able to without Jesus' help. I've had to ask Jesus to deliver me and trust him.

That's what you told your child the day he received Jesus as Lord, and that's what you are going to tell him again and again. And it's the very same message you preach to yourself. Walking in Christ, repentance and faith.

Nothing new. The way in is the way forward.

The second metaphor is agricultural—being rooted in him.

The Bible frequently uses agricultural images for our life in Christ.

He is the vine, we are the branches. Jesus' parables of the fields of grain.

In the Old Testament, believers as cedars of Lebanon, planted by stream.

So Paul is making use of an image that is thoroughly biblical.

How does this apply to the situation in the Colossian church?

What specific points is Paul making?

When a tree or the crop is planted, it germinates, and it never moves from that spot.

It doesn't say: Now that I'm a sapling, it's time to move to the mountain top.

The place where it begins is the place it stays and grows.

The way into the Christian life is the way forward.

And to press this home, Paul doesn't say: Root yourself in Christ.

He just says rooted in him. It's passive. It's done to you.

You don't root yourself, you are rooted.

Think of potting a plant. You put it in the soil in the pot—

and there is no other place from which it can draw nourishment.

God connects you to Christ in a life-giving union so that you

can draw moisture and nourishment from him and only from him.

So any other spiritual program or method that says the key to spiritual fullness

is some other thing besides faith in Christ is sending your roots into the air.

It may promise the moon, but it will starve you.

Time will pass, maybe even years, and after the excitement is gone,

will see that you haven't really grown like you were promised.

Many years ago, there was a family that attended our church,

but they weren't "being fed," they weren't growing.

They found a pastor who promised that if you really had faith, and proved that by

giving a lot of your money to his church, all sorts of wonderful things would

happen, you would grow spiritually, your bank account would grow.

You could do wonderful things for God's kingdom.

And he had the Bible verses to prove it.

Years later the wife showed up one day and just poured out her heart about how

this had seemed so great but it had been a disaster financially and spiritually.

They blamed God. Why did he let this happen?

I urged them to come back, but disillusioned, dropped out of church completely.

What happened? They were Christians. They had been rooted in Christ.
But they didn't continue to draw their nourishment from him alone.
When they put their roots into this other thing—
prosperity, blessing, faith—whatever you want to call it—they starved.
They didn't reach the mountain top they hoped for.

Remember that when you are tempted by Christian fads.
Your nourishment comes from Christ alone.
God has planted you in him. Send your root down deep.

The third metaphor is architectural—being built up in him.

Now, there is probably not much difference between these two images of being rooted in Christ and being built up in him. Notice, Paul puts them together.

He says, “Rooted and built up in him.” So it’s probably just one idea. Your roots are in Christ, your foundation is on Christ.

Paul was prone to mix the metaphors of plants and buildings.

In 1 Corinthians 3:9 he writes: “You are God’s field, God’s building.” Also, the same passive idea is here. You don’t build yourself up.

God unites you to Christ, and in him, you are built up.

But I think there is a difference that is helpful

It’s the difference between the growth of a plant and the growth of a building.

The growth of a plant is organic, the process itself is invisible.

The growth of a building is deliberate. It progresses by stages.

You can’t put up the wall before the foundation, roof before the walls.

There is an order, and it’s hard work all the way.

I realize we’re talking in metaphors here and you probably need something more concrete. So let me connect it to the Colossian heresy.

One of the great appeals of Christian fads that promise fullness and mountain tops is that you get to skip stages.

You don’t have to follow the deliberate, hard, daily and weekly and annual and life-long rhythms of repentance and faith in Christ.

Instead, it gives you a shortcut.

There was a teaching that made a big splash in evangelical Christian circles in 90s called the deliverance movement or the power encounter movement.

It taught that sins and problems in your life caused by demonic forces.

So the key to moving ahead in the Christian life is being delivered from them.

You do that by having a power encounter.

You pray certain prayers, you speak the name of Jesus, the blood of Jesus.

You cast out demons of pornography, gluttony, anger, poor self image, whatever. Once demons cast out, path to victory is cleared and you move ahead.

There were books published, and conferences, and big names.

There was a woman in my parents’ church who got into this.

She was a troubled soul. With the help of Christian friends she had been slowly dealing with besetting sins and troubles. It was hard, Romans 7 kind of stuff.

And then, suddenly here was this teaching—your problem is demons.

The solution is being delivered from them. And it's all biblical.

Jesus cast out demons and we are casting them out in Jesus' name.

No need for the life-long struggle—that's your problem, shouldn't be struggling.

Come to this conference and you'll experience deliverance.

It was a disaster. After she thought she had arrived on the mountaintop, crashed.

Her friends were there to pick up the pieces and say:

Where were we, let's get back to building you life on Jesus step by step.

Do you want the contractor building your house to take shortcuts so you can get in sooner? Of course not. You want him to build well.

And so it is with the Christian life. No shortcuts.

You start by repentance and faith in Christ, build on him, finish in him.

The fourth metaphor is legal—established in the faith.

Commentaries say this is word established is a legal term in Greek.

It refers to an action of the court that confirms and guarantees, a legal precedent, a watertight will or contract, that sort of thing.

Did you also notice that Paul changes the formula he's used so far.

He doesn't say established in him. He says, established in the faith. So far it's been walk in him, rooted in him, built in him—but here it's established in the faith.

And the definite article is important.

It's not just faith, your personal trust, it's the faith.

The faith means the Christian faith, the faith once delivered to the saints.

It is the apostolic teaching about Christ and salvation.

What Paul calls elsewhere, sound doctrine.

Think how unshakable you would be if you had an established legal

decision in your favor by the Supreme Court. No higher appeal by opponents.

The Christian life is being firmly established in the faith you first believed,

so that you know the truth and can stand on the truth when you are shaken by life.

All Christian fads do one of two things with the faith:

Some of them focus on one element of Christian doctrine and blow it all out of proportion. They end up making it the main thing instead of Christ.

Like the deliverance movement. Of course there is a demonic world.

But it's a relatively minor point of doctrine. When it becomes the main thing it pushes the centrality of Christ right out the window.

And inevitably a crisis comes that this lopsided theology can't handle.

Second thing Christian fads do is denigrate doctrine. It's not important.

Someone in our church told me about a conversation he had with the music director of a church that emphasizes emotional experiences.

They were talking about a popular worship song and this Christ Cov member said—the lyrics of that song are so shallow they border on being unbiblical.

To which this music director replied: It doesn't matter. Lyrics don't matter.

I don't pay attention to lyrics. All that matters is that people feel close to God.

What will happen when they don't feel close to God?

What will happen to them when they go through those dark seasons that every believer faces, that the Psalms express so well, when it seems God is against you?

What will happen to them when all the voices they hear, even the voices inside them are saying that being a Christian doesn't work—
that the wicked are flourishing and the righteous are suffering?

And all they have to fall back on are some catchy tunes that got them jazzed up for an hour Sunday mornings?

I'm so thankful for Andy and Mike's careful work in choosing song lyrics, and Scott Miller's attentiveness to it when he was here.

Because they know the importance of the faith we first believed.

They want us to be established in sound doctrine, use music to do that.

The way forward in the Christian life is being built up in the faith, the apostolic teaching, sound doctrine, because that always brings us back to Christ and his work for us.

The fifth metaphor is culinary—abounding in thanksgiving.

Commentaries say this word abounding is often used in the context of food and drink. Tables piled high, jugs overflowing with wine—that sort of thing.

The same word is used to describe the 12 baskets of bread that the disciples picked up after the feeding of the 5,000.

It wasn't just a few little scraps of bread in each basket—the baskets were piled high with pieces falling out as disciples brought to Jesus.

What's Paul's point, and how does it relate to the problem in the Colossian church?

I think it's pretty obvious.

The reason Christians get pulled into Christian fads is because we're discontent, we're unhappy or restless.

Abounding in thanksgiving is the antidote.

Now, as I said at the very beginning, it's good and normal for Christians to want to be better people, to gain victory over sins, to know the Lord more deeply.

We can't be complacent about where we are. There is a kind of holy restlessness. It makes us get serious about Christ and worship and service and loving people right here and now, right where God has me.

But when a Christian is discontent or restless in this negative sense, always wanting something better, it distracts him from what the Lord doing now. And it makes them susceptible to getting sucked into the latest fad.

Creath Davis was Christian writer who was a close friend of James Dobson—he died in 1987. This is how he described it in his own life:

“I felt that if something spectacular was not transpiring, my faith was weakening. As a result, I missed most of what was going on in the valleys, waiting to get back to the mountain.”

I don't know what changed his perspective. All I have is this quote.

But I bet he started to give thanks more often and began to see God at work.

When you say, Lord Jesus for this or that, it changes you.

You begin to see his Holy Spirit at work in subtle ways you did not see before in your restlessness.

I know you've witnessed that in Christians who are always giving thanks—they see God everywhere. They aren't always longing for mountaintops, because every day and ever encounter is, to them, filled with spiritual meaning.

They get a parking spot close to the door at Wal-Mart and they say:

Thank you, Lord. Who needs a mountain top when you have that?

When your children are little, you make them say thank you.

You make them say it even when they don't want you.

You spank them for not saying thank you.

It's not that you want to create a little hypocrite, but it's funny how this works.

You make them say thank you, and then at some point, by God's grace they start to say it all by themselves.

Because they see the love of this other person who has given them a gift, and because they know giving thanks is a proper expression of their love.

Giving thanks changes you.

So do it. It's an antidote to discontentment and restlessness.

The way in is the way forward.

Faith in Jesus Christ and repentance of your sins is not just the ABC's of the Christian life—it's the A-Z of the Christian life.

Don't be distracted by Christian fads that promise mountain tops—
but abound in thanksgiving to God for all he has given you in Christ.

Dan DeHaan expressed it well in a simple poem:

With faith in Christ we walk each day,
Accepting all that comes our way;
So let us view each task at hand
As being His divine command.