Fullness of Life in Christ: Exegetical Study on Colossians 2:11,12

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Brilliantly conceived and written, the Epistle to the Colossians stands in the New Testament as an example of great prose and sublime proclamation.¹ The Apostle Paul is at his diplomatic and doctrinal best portraying a magnificent Christology and a clear ethic based on his theology of salvation.

As is so often the case, Paul writes against the background of a powerful heresy in the Colossian church which threatened to steal away the sufficiency of Jesus Christ. Though variously described,² the so-called Colossian heresy is an admixture of elements found in the letter itself. The total adequacy and unique supremacy of Jesus Christ were under attack by a philosophy which had an astrological element (2:8,20), which made much of the power of demonic spirits (1:16; 2:10,15) and the worship of angels (2:18), and which insisted on an initiation into a way of life demanding the observance of special days and rituals, and whose slogans mark an unnecessarily ascetic life-style (2:16,21). In short, the heresy we have to call incipient gnosticism had to be countered by the fullest proclamation of the gospel, of Christ’s person and work, of the true way of salvation and its effects for the lives of Christians.

So Paul, imprisoned though he was, probably at Rome, wrote this epistle with Timothy (1:1) and in so doing gave the church at Colossae and of all time the highest reaches of his thought and at the same time very practical help in knowing what Christian life looks like.

As with his other epistles, after his address and greeting Paul gives thanks to God (1:3), commending the faith and love of the Colossian church (1:4). Along with the commendation goes a good word for the gospel, of its spread and growth, of its bearing fruit among them and across the whole world (1:5,6). Next come his apostolic prayer (1:9-14) and the unique proclamation of the person and work of Christ (1:15-23), followed by Paul’s statement of his own ministry (1:24-29) as a divine office given to him for them (1:25), to proclaim Christ in them (1:27), to warn in all wisdom and to toil with energy inspired by Christ (1:28,29). The dual concern of Paul to encourage and to thwart false teachings leads him to urge that “as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him.”

This brings us to the paragraph of Colossians 2:6-15, within which our assigned passage lies (i.e., Col. 2:11,12).

Someone, or some group, is making a prey of the Colossians by “philosophy and empty deceit.” Human traditions concerning the elements of the world rather than concerning Christ threaten to sweep the Colossians from the foundation in which they were rooted and established.

The theme of the passage is the believer’s fullness of life in Christ, specifying four
particulars of Christ’s life through which our relation to him is spelled out, namely his circumcision and ours, his baptism and ours, his burial and ours, his resurrection and ours, all of which are accomplished by the agency of God’s power.

Several exegetical observations and decisions crucial to the translation and interpretation of the passage must now be made.

While our main concern is with verses eleven and twelve, the sentence begins at verse nine and continues through verse twelve. It begins with the causal particle “because” as Paul explains why the human traditions concerning the elemental spirits of the universe are empty deceit, “not according to Christ.” “Because,” says Paul, “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” That is to say, deity dwells not in any hierarchical platform of beings, not in astrological signs, but in Jesus Christ who is fully man. Further, he explains, your own fullness of life depends on that fact. Thus, Paul’s thought begins in this passage with the nature of Christ who as a man is fully God, and by analogy our fullness of life which is “in him.” Grammatically, the sentence (verses 9-12) stripped of its qualifying and explanatory phrases reads:

Because in him dwells the whole fullness of God bodily, and you have come to fullness in him... having been buried with him in baptism.

What we are to learn from the passage depends to a large extent on the syntax and key words of the qualifying and explanatory clauses of the passage which bear closer examination.

Dominating the structure of the passage are the phrases “in him” (vss. 9, 10, 12) and “in whom” (vss. 11, 12), as well as participles and verbs in the passive voice (“you were circumcised,” “having been buried,” “you were raised,”) in addition to one very important perfect passive verb in verse ten (“having been made full and continuing to be made full”). Thus, says Paul, what happens to Christ happens to us and we are acted upon in the process, the object of God’s faithfulness and power.

Colossians 2:11

In whom also you were circumcised, a circumcision not made with hands in the putting off of the body of flesh. a circumcision by Christ.

Circumcision is known to us from the Old Testament and Judaism both as the rite signifying God’s covenant with his people (cf. Gen. 17:23; 21:4, et al) and as signifying an inner (spiritual) cutting away of that which keeps one from God (Deut. 10:16; 30:6. Cf. also Jeremiah 4:4 and 6:10; Lev. 26:41 and Exodus 6:12, 30).

Two items concern us here. First, the kind of circumcision Paul has in mind, and secondly, whose circumcision is under consideration.

Verse eleven says, “in whom also you were circumcised... in the circumcision of (or by) Christ.” A phrase describing the kind of circumcision makes clear that Paul understands here not a bare ritual act of cutting away flesh of an eight-day-old male infant, but an inward, spiritual act having to do with the believer’s “heart,” one’s attitudes and affections, one’s stance before God. “A circumcision,” he declares, “not made by hands in the putting off of the body of flesh.”
“Not made by hands” is a phrase occurring only three times in the New Testament. Each time it signals a spiritual act done by God. Here it refers to circumcision. In Mark 14:58 it refers to the temple Jesus would raise after the temple “made with hands” was destroyed. In II Cor. 5:1 Paul uses the phrase concerning our body in heaven “not made with hands” contrasted with our “earthly tent.” So the circumcision in Colossians 2:11 is spiritual and not done by man. That the believer’s circumcision is meant is without question. “In him also, you were circumcised ... in the circumcision of Christ.” What must be made clear is how Christ’s circumcision and our circumcision are related. Does it refer to the baby Jesus’ circumcision at eight days? Are we related to this act of covenant-sign? Only Luke of all the Evangelists even mentions Jesus’ circumcision (Luke 2:21). Nothing is made of Jesus’ circumcision theologically by any of the New Testament writers except Paul and only here in Colossians does Paul use the phrase “in the circumcision of Christ.” The phrase might well refer then not to Jesus’ own circumcision, but to one achieved by him, an admissible genitive construction. The emphasis of the whole verse would then be that circumcision is metaphorical. It refers to a change of heart achieved in us by Christ—an initiatory act by which we are covenanted to God. This interpretation is consistent with Paul’s statement to the Roman church in Romans 2:29 that for a Jew, and he means for all who would be ritually circumcised including presumably his heretical opponents in Colossae, “real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal.” So far in this verse we have not learned where or how Christ achieves this spiritual act for us. An answer must wait until the entire passage is explicated.

Colossians 2:12

“Having been buried with him in baptism, in whom also you were raised through the faithfulness of God’s operation, the one who raised him from the dead.”

Here Paul joins three significant matters concerning believers and shows the agency by which these have come about.

The aorist passive participle which begins the verse ( suntaphentes) connects loosely with the grammar of verses eleven and twelve, and must be referred to the main body of the sentence which begins in verse nine, i.e., “You have come to fullness of life in him ... Having been buried with him in baptism.” Notice that Paul does not say in his baptism, nor does he say our baptism. It seems to refer to baptism as a rite of the early church presupposed. Both Christ’s baptism and ours are implied by the phrase “with him.” What is metaphorical in the verse are the “having been buried” and “you have been raised.” Baptism itself is the literal act of baptism, its meaning being explicated by the metaphors of burial and resurrection.

Only twice in all his epistles does Paul use the metaphor of being buried with Christ; here in Col. 2:12 and in Romans 6:4. The construction “you have been raised with him” is always used figuratively of participation in the resurrection of Jesus and only three times in the New Testament, e.g., Eph. 2:6; Col. 2:12, and 3:1 (elsewhere the noun resurrection is used when Paul has this concept in mind, as in Romans 6:5).
Another translation decision of importance is how to read the *en ho kai* of the second clause. Grammatically it can be either “in whom also” or “in which also.” If the former is taken it parallels the other “in him” phrases in verses nine and fifteen and the “in whom” phrase of verses eleven and twelve and “with whom” of verse thirteen. The emphasis of this reading would be to connect these life experiences of believers with Jesus Christ himself. If the latter is chosen we must read “in which” as meaning “in which baptism.” The former seems likely in view of the thrust of the passage, while the latter brings the metaphors of burial and resurrection into baptism much as Paul does in Romans 6:4. In light of this discussion it would seem best to choose the reading most appropriate to this context, thus, “in whom also,” but without ruling out the other possibility.

A final and very important translation question is raised by the phrase beginning with *dia*. The RSV translates: “Through faith in the working of God . . .”; while the KJV has: “Through the faith of the operation of God . . .”; and the Living Bible has the impossible translation (paraphrase), “Because you trusted the word of the mighty God . . .” The crucial matter is how to translate *dia* tes pisteos. Whose faith is in view here? Is it *our* faith, that is, the faith of each individual believer, that brings the significance of baptism to bear on our fullness of life? The opposite is the sense of the entire passage since the dominant verbs and participles are all passive in voice. Consistent with the thrust of the verses, translate, “Through the faithfulness of God’s operation . . .” *Energeias* may be translated with other words like energy, efficiency, power, working, or action, any of which make plain that the motive power of baptism’s significance is God’s, not our own. The qualifying phrase further identifies God, i.e., “the one who raised him from the dead.”

Clearly then, the emphasis of the sentence of verses 9-12 is on baptism and its significance. The meaning of the metaphors of being buried and raised with Christ is understood in relation to baptism “in him.”

The verses which follow, verses 13-15, more clearly spell out the figures of verses eleven and twelve. To paraphrase:

You were buried because you were dead. Dead in trespasses and dead in uncircumcision. But God made you alive together with him, the results of which are: We are forgiven of trespasses, the bond against us is canceled (in the crucifixion), and the principalities and powers are stripped (*apekdousamenos*).

This last word is an interesting play on words with the stripping of flesh in circumcision (*apekdiasis*) in verse eleven. Paul uses it only in Colossians and only in one other place. Col. 3:9 has a charge to the Colossians whom he says have “stripped off the old nature.”

It is important to note what our passage does not say before we conclude with a summary of its positive message.

Because these verses of Colossians 2:11, 12 are the only verses in the New Testament where circumcision and baptism are in any way related, this passage has been used to demonstrate that the doctrine of baptism has replaced the doctrine of circumcision for Christians — the new covenant replacing the old covenant. It must be
made clear that this is not what the passage says explicitly. The relation is not stated in the sense that one sacrament replaces another sacrament. Having said this one ought to note that the relation of circumcision and baptism are at least implicit here. The notion is that the stripping away of the body of flesh of the inner person experienced by the believer, i.e., spiritual circumcision, is also a part of the baptism experience. The new and full life of a believer includes the covenant sign here spiritually conceived and achieved by Christ as well as the metaphorical death and resurrection "in him."

Further, there is no full-blown doctrine of baptism in these verses and certainly no prescription for how baptism is to be carried out by the church. Nowhere in this passage do we learn of the Holy Spirit's work in relation to baptism nor is any word here concerning an appropriate mode of baptism, nor are infant or adult baptism primary.

Still further, no role is assigned to the faith of the individual in this passage. The passage is all of grace. God is the actor. The Lord Jesus Christ is the one with or in whom we find ourselves joined by God's activity in baptism. In him we are circumcised, dead, buried, and raised metaphorically.

Finally, though verses 9-12 center on baptism, i.e., one sentence of the passage, the entire passage is not about the doctrine of baptism per se. It is employed only in passing as part of a larger concern of Paul. Neither circumcision, resurrection, or the atonement are at the heart of the passage although all these are present. Nor are we to suppose that Paul's message means that baptism is the end-all of doctrine. We still have to be purified more and more even though we are spiritually circumcised by Christ. We still have to die and we still await the resurrection even though we have been buried and raised with him. These are "sealed to us" "in hope" by baptism, but even this language is lacking in our present passage. Paul does not exclude future activity of God by stressing baptism in the passing way he does here. To put it another way, Paul's stress on baptism here does not replace the cross or death or resurrection but really includes each in an initial and not yet complete way. That is one aspect of what the participant in verse ten implies "having been made full and continuing to be made full." Another aspect leads us to Paul's meaning that one does not need anything alongside or in addition to Christ. In him we are made complete.

Thus the passage is about the fullness of life one has in Jesus Christ by God's activity. Paul makes the analogy, as in Jesus Christ dwells the whole fullness of deity bodily, so our fullness of life is linked with him, our spiritual circumcision, baptism, dying, and rising with him. So we may say that the passage in its totality is concerned with the doctrine of union with Christ including all the aspects mentioned. In him we have a world-view which rules out any other. He is sufficient, unequalled, unique. And in him we have fullness of life. Let nothing dissuade us from this faith.

FOOTNOTES


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