

Living Christ

One of my seminary professors used to tell us that rat poison is ninety-nine percent good seed corn. It was his homespun way of telling us that toxic, spiritual error usually comes wrapped inside a lot of ordinary truth, truth we might otherwise affirm. It's that one percent that does you in.

That's what makes those who teach error from within Christianity so slippery. They are often eloquent and persuasive, using familiar words and phrases which lead us to think we're talking about the same things. It's 99% true but something's off, not quite right. We can get sucked in before we notice the error.

And there is a good reason why we can be so susceptible. It has to do with a very right instinct especially in new believers.

For instance, I remember the first year after God called me to himself. My life-changing encounter with God's love was joyously intoxicating and left me eager to pursue anything that would deepen my walk with Jesus. Jesus himself identified that time as our "first love."

One of the immediate changes I made was to withdraw from my studies at WMU and apply to a small, Bible College in California. My first semester was a glorious immersion in Old Testament Bible Survey taught by Dr. Brock who knew and loved God. I was a sponge, eager to grow in my new faith, open to whatever God had for me, and whoever could point me in the direction of a deeper love for God. I was passionate, eager, open, but immature and therefore *vulnerable*. I wanted all that God had for me and could have been easily influenced by a smooth talker who promised to deliver a spiritual shortcut to God's secrets.

The church in Colossae faced exactly that kind of problem. False teachers had slipped in with a message that robbed the gospel of its power and entangled believers in a toxic brew of hyper-spirituality and legalism.

One commentator says of their teaching: “It urged upon these young Christians the challenge of fullness of spiritual life and experience. It called upon them to be satisfied with nothing less than a life free from the stain and tyranny of sin. It pointed the way to a zeal and devotion that put to shame all complacency or half-heartedness. It spoke of the need to get out of the shallows, and open the heart and mind to the deep things of God. It made much of leaving the rudimentary stages of spirituality and the possibilities of swift advance to a wider understanding.”

Who wouldn't want that?

Steve was a godly young man in our first church who, shortly after his conversion, became enamored with a group that made much of the fulness of the Spirit as evidenced by speaking in tongues. He said that whenever he felt discouraged or threatened, they taught him to give himself to this ecstatic language.

But Steve began to be troubled as he noticed that his Christian walk was becoming all about that. Instead of seeking Christ, he was seeking the high he got from tongues. It had become for him a distraction that misdirected his faith.

We don't tell Steve's story to disparage those who still believe God's Spirit gives the gift of tongues. Steve was in a group who in their hyper-zeal distorted what the Bible teaches. Tongues-speaking was their shortcut to spiritual fulness. They led Steve into what he eventually perceived to be false teaching, the end result of which actually caused him to drift away from a deeper walk with Jesus.

It's easy to understand how enticing their teaching was for a young, eager believer like Steve.

That's why the Apostle Paul was so intent on anchoring the believers in Colossae in the reality of Jesus. They, and we, have all we need in Jesus. Turn with me to Colossians 2.

“Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk [keep on walking] in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority” (Colossians 2:6-10 ESV).

This passage marks a turning point in Colossians. Everything Paul has written thus far has been preparation leading up to this. Paul has been laying a foundation in truth he now intends to apply.

In verse six he turns to direct exhortation. Beginning here and continuing through 4:6, he will speak in imperatives, calls to action, obediences to embrace.

And notice something else in these verses. Paul’s encouragement to *walk* in Christ Jesus the Lord is balanced by a *warning* against anything that detracts from that. These are complementary exhortations. Because of our immersion in the surrounding culture that preaches uncritical tolerance we are often uneasy about the warnings in Scripture. But they are critical correctives for Christ’s Church. We need both.

Paul starts with our walk: “...as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so *walk* in him [that’s the command], [how?] rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” That’s how our walk in Jesus unfolds.

When Paul spoke of receiving Christ Jesus the Lord, he meant more than what we mean when we speak of receiving Christ. When we say that someone has received Christ, what do we mean? The words describe conversion. They responded to God’s invitation to repent and believe the gospel.

Paul’s meaning was much richer. When Paul spoke of receiving the Messiah Jesus, the Lord, it was a way of describing their total embrace of all that Jesus was proclaimed to be.

Paul has already described Jesus as “...the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation,” the one who created all things visible and invisible. Jesus is before all things. He is the one who upholds everything in the universe, and he is the head of his body, the church (Colossians 1:15-18).

It is this Jesus, whom God has vindicated as Messiah and Lord, whom Paul had preached and in whom they had believed. This is the Jesus they had received—the whole package. Now then, Paul says: Keep on walking in him!

Walking in Christ Jesus the Lord is simply a way of describing what it means to live as a Christian. We conduct our affairs—all of them—within the sphere of his presence and influence. Jesus isn't just a Lord for Sundays or just a Lord for the spiritual/religious parts of us, but for every day and every facet of our lives.

We don't have sacred parts of us that Jesus is involved in and secular parts we can separate from him. Jesus changes how we think about and engage with everything.

Proverbs 3:5-6 reminds us: “In *all* your ways acknowledge him...” Walk in Jesus. Acknowledge him as Lord in everything you do.

I have a friend who, when he apprenticed as a plumber, shared with me doubts about his vocation. He didn't understand how fixing drains accomplished anything for God's kingdom. How would you encourage him to live out his calling in Jesus as a Christian plumber?

If a glass of cold water given in Jesus name matters to God, how much more might a whole house serviced with clean, hot and cold, running water? And drains that do!

Plumbers can get stuck with some of the nastiest jobs ever. What would it mean to serve people as Jesus might, diving into the worst of our messes with joy, gratitude and integrity in order to bring wholeness and well-being? My friend is learning how to work on pipes and drains not just as a job, but as an expression of his life in Christ.

Walking in Jesus means Jesus becomes the larger context in which we do *all* of life: jobs, relaxation, recreation, TV, movies, music, chores, education, family, relationships—everything!

Further, we live our Christian life the same way we began our Christian life, by the obedience of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. We don't begin with Jesus and then move on to other things. There is much to know as we grow deeper in our faith but all of it flows out of our beginning in Christ.

So what do we do? First, stick to your roots.

When we got saved, Paul tells us we were rooted in Jesus. God breathed life into us by his Holy Spirit. He transplanted us like tender young shoots into the rich, nourishing soil of Christ and said: “Grow!”

Our roots are in Christ Jesus the Lord. It is by going deep in him that we receive all we need for life and godliness. There is no life, no living apart from him.

Walking in Jesus begins by **blooming where we’re planted: *in Jesus***. We live staying firmly rooted in Christ.

Second, we walk in Jesus by being continually built up in him. Paul shifts to a construction metaphor. God is committed to a ground-up renovation of our lives. He isn’t interested in a superficial, cosmetic make-over. We are being reconstructed—transformed—from the inside out.

And Jesus himself is the blueprint for the entire project. God determined from eternity past that all his children share the family likeness. In another place Paul described it as having been **“...predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son...”** (Romans 8:29 ESV).

That’s why anything that takes us away from Jesus falls woefully short of God’s plan for us, even when it pretends to take us deeper into God’s mysteries, or to instill in us strict spiritual disciplines. Jesus *is* the plan! Jesus is God’s mystery.

Third, we walk in Jesus by being established in the faith, **just as we were taught**. Paul is referring, not to our trust in Jesus, but what we have been taught concerning the **content** of our faith—what the apostles gave as authoritative teaching about Jesus Christ crucified, risen and coming again.

As they and others close to them wrote letters and gospels and prophecies, their collected works became what we hold today in the New Testament text of the Bible—inspired Scripture..

Our walk in Christ today has its only firm foundation in the truth of Scripture. The Bible is trustworthy and true. Only as we live out of a foundation in biblical reality are we able to navigate the complexities of life.

And this touches on more than just the categories of morality and religion to which we sometimes limit ourselves.

In her book, *Finding Truth*, writer Nancy Pearcy refers to how hip-hop artist LeCrae Moore discovered this when he came to faith in Jesus. LeCrae wrote: “Christianity is not just religious truth, it is Total Truth.”

Pearcy adds: “In other words, the real transformation [for LeCrae] came when he realized that Christians are called to roll up their sleeves and work out the implications of a biblical worldview for justice and politics, for science and scholarship, for art and music—and all the rest of life.”

Walking in Jesus is a lifelong process of discovering how our foundation in Biblical truth shapes our response to everything in our worlds, and everything life throws at us.

A fourth dimension of following Jesus is found in the last line of v. 7: “...abounding in thanksgiving.”

OK, so that’s the throw-away line, right? We tend to treat it that way.

Please don’t!

Thanksgiving is an essential component of our life in Christ. It is a living witness to our faith in the goodness and love of God and our trusting contentment with whatever God has chosen to provide.

If we are chronically discontent with our jobs, our homes, our marriages, our relationships, our stuff—you name it—we open ourselves to all manner of covetousness and lust, envy and greed, bitterness and critical demandingness. *Ingratitude betrays our essential unbelief and breeds idolatries*. A measure of how well we are living in Jesus is how well our heart expresses gratitude for God’s goodness.

Cultivate thanksgiving as a spiritual discipline.

“...as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him [that’s the command], rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving” [those are the means].

That’s the positive exhortation in this passage. And with that in place Paul takes up his warning against stuff that can take us away from walking in fellowship with Jesus.

Look at verses 8-10: “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.”

Paul is not against philosophy. Philosophy is love of wisdom in pursuit of truth. What Paul is against is philosophy informed and energized by “empty deceit.” The two concepts mutually define each other.

The vain deception Paul warns against is framed up in accordance with human tradition, on the one hand, and the elemental spirits of the world on the other. Human tradition describes those corporate ways of thinking cultures devise to make sense of their world apart from their Creator. It’s what we come up with when we suppress what may be known about the God who is there, become futile in our understanding, and exchange the glory of the immortal God for some other created thing, treating that thing as ultimate and giving it what is due God alone.

Every culture and nationality has a narrative informing us how things are or ought to be. This is passed along by a kind of osmosis; we simply absorb it as how the world works.

And it is indeed how the world works—apart from God. Christianity is always a counter-narrative to the traditions of the world. It is a better story. It places the God of all creation at the center of our reckoning, and his perpetually binding moral commands as a true revelation about right and wrong in our fallen world.

The false teachers in Colosse presented a way of thinking about spirituality that struck all the right *cultural* cords. It creatively synchronized some of the most appealing elements of the philosophical and religious thinking in the world around them and offered it as an attractive addition to the gospel of Jesus.

Paul urges his readers: “Don’t let that sort of thinking drag you off as a captive. Stick to Jesus.”

The phrase “elemental spirits of the world” presents us with a concept largely foreign to us but thoroughly familiar to Paul’s readers. First Century secular people believed in four basic elements: air, earth, fire and water. From these, they thought, everything else was made. Further, they believed cosmic powers stood behind, inhabited and energized these elements. These spirits, along with the astral spirits who governed the dance of the heavens, largely determined what happens to people.

F. F. Bruce writes about natural human responses in a universe governed by such forces: “Man found two means by which to make his existence bearable: either he must worship the elements in order not to be harmed by them, or he must entrust himself to a deity that governs the elements and secures [one] against any threat by the [elements].”

The false teaching faced by the Colossian Church lined up perfectly with human thinking about how the world worked and sought to placate the unpredictable angelic powers at loose in the world. Paul urges the Colossians to trust Christ who conquered those spirits by means of the cross.

So Paul commends Jesus: “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.”

Jesus is all you need—you have already been filled with all the fullness of God in Jesus. There is much more to learn about and into which to grow, but there is nothing beyond Jesus.

And he rules everything! One of the last things he told his disciples before he left the earth affirmed this, claiming all authority in heaven and on earth was now his!

“Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.”

Follow Jesus. Know Jesus. Live in Jesus. And be warned: accept no substitutes!

Benediction:

And now, may you “...grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen”
(2 Peter 3:18).