

# Deep Roots and a Firm Foundation

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Lesson: Colossians 2:1-10

While putting in a new driveway, my contractor dug up some flowers and left them on the hardpan exposed to the sun. His indifference was compounded by own neglect. Some days later I stripped the withered skin from the bulbs and slipped them into the moist soil. Then I watched and waited to see if the mystery of life would be reestablished. Amazingly the roots rescued my impoverished plants.

At the same property, I tore out a poorly installed foundation. A corner was severely out of level and the walls were cracking from the stress. The house is now well grounded on a firm foundation.

Today's Scripture speaks passionately about life with strong roots and a firm foundation. The first readers of this letter had been transplanted from a toxic soil of paganism into the rich soil of Christ. Or to switch metaphors, they had been transported from a crumbling foundation of false religion and human philosophy to the solid rock of Christ. Paul, however, was aware that there was an insidious influence in his church. So, what I want to talk about today is Paul's angst, his adversaries, and his antidote.

## 1. Paul's angst.

Why is Paul agonizing over the church in Colossae? What worries him about its members?

This is the reason. Word had come to him in prison that the Colossians were under the influence of a new teaching. That alone would evoke plenty of pastoral angst. But, as everyone knows, crafting a critique of someone's religious views needs an incredibly delicate touch. It's easy to do more harm than good. Even the best-intentioned religious reprimand can sound like mindless scolding. So, how can he be kind, do full justice to the soulful sincerity of the Colossians and yet fiercely oppose the corrupting influence? A tall order to be sure. No wonder Paul was in a struggle that wracked both heart and mind.

I think he did the best he could. He commends them heartily where he can, and warns them as he must.

His guiding strategy was to commend them to the apostolic tradition, the very gospel that brought them to faith in the first place. There is no other way to gain knowledge of Christ without that testimony. It is drenched in the blood, sweat and tears of those who first spoke it and who later put their collected memories in writing. So in pointing them back to the apostolic tradition, Paul longs that his readers enjoy "the full riches of a complete understanding" of Christ. He wanted them to realize Christ needs no modification or supplementation from human philosophies. Already in him – and in him alone – are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

I have a concern about our church, the United Church of Christ. Our Constitution says so eloquently that we

Acknowledge as . . . sole head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession. It looks to the Word of God in Scripture, and to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, to prosper its creative and redemptive work in the world. It claims as its own the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers. (Notice these acknowledgements are about the content of the faith.)

Then it adds an important line about the subjective dimension of "this faith" with the words

It affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God.

I agree heartily. The problem in many quarters is that the intellectual content of the faith is minimized. Pastors are ordained who do not believe it, who reject the atonement, the resurrection of Christ, the uniqueness of Christianity, the Trinity, and such. On the other hand, the statement that the church is "to make this faith its own . . ." has been interpreted as freedom to believe just about anything one wants to believe – that is to make faith a personal feeling and choice rather than a shared truth. The national logo is a comma and the national motto, "don't put a period where God has put a period". This seems to allow whatever revisions we desire, and this has become a matter of deep concern among many throughout the UCC.

When Paul refers to "hidden" treasures in verse 3, he doesn't mean that the knowledge of Christ is undiscoverable, and so we are free to make up our own private creeds. Not at all. He means the wisdom of Christ is so inexhaustible that we continue to discover its precious depths like miners going deeper into a rich vein of gold. So, for Paul, the thought of scavenging uselessly through human traditions and philosophies was abhorrent when the truth is already ours in Christ.

So, who were these adversaries of Paul who brought in troubling ideas? What was the pernicious influence that Paul refuted?

## 2. Paul's adversaries.

An answer would require far more time than we have. But in short, the answer is he was opposed to Gnostic ideas and Gnostics. Gnostics means those who know, or in this case, think they know. The Gnostics believed that reality is divided into material evil and spiritual good. They believed that we are like tiny drops of good spirit trapped in an evil flesh. Our salvation for them was to escape and be united to the universal spirit. By making this bifurcation of creation and spirit, of bad and good, they naturally rejected the humanity of Christ and rejected the plain truth of his history. They fabricated a fiction about the "Christ" spirit as opposed to the man Jesus of Nazareth

our Lord. This disconnect meant the idea of "Christ" could be bent and molded into their preexisting philosophy. It meant that they could invent spiritual ideas with no foundation in history, no roots in the soil of reality. Some of their ideas still exist in the so call "Gnostic gospels".

This strange philosophy led to two moral expressions. Gnostics became *libertines* who practiced every form of bodily excess because they considered the flesh to be so evil that one need not and cannot govern it. They pretended that their spirits were pure even while they practiced lives of sensual excesses. Others tended toward *asceticism* who punished the body and repressed natural desires – eating meat, marrying, etc. Monasticism is one expression of this that survived in the church. This was the form manifested in Colossai.

Naturally, they did not buy the idea that God created the world, at least not the god they believed in. A good God could not be the origin of a material world. They attributed our sinful nature to cosmic dualism rather than our own irresponsible choices.

But don't you see what this does? It denigrates the incarnation of Christ. It demeans the creation of man in the image of God. It rejects the Old Testament. It robs Christ of his unique role as mediator between God and man. It rejects the public revelation in the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth for unverifiable private visions. It commits the grand larceny by stealing the prestige of Christ to prop up its air-fairy gospel of untethered, self-concocted spirituality. As such it repudiates the sufficiency of Christ as the true bridge between God and man. It replaced the apostolic testimony of historical deeds with unsubstantiated private imaginations. It also wreaked havoc with morality.

The alternative gospel of Paul's opponents had no roots in history, no flesh and blood reality. It was a web of imaginative conjectures. Like a kaleidoscope it offered speculations of every shape and color. Christian science and religious science have roots in this strange philosophy. It opened the door for people to believe what they want.

I believe people are free to believe what they want, but please don't commit identity theft by calling such things the Christian faith.

Our delicate task, like Paul's, is to uphold people whose faith is badly uninformed or misinformed by religious dreamers and entrepreneurial spiritualists, while at the same time instructing them in the treasures of wisdom and knowledge that we have in Christ.

Scholars sometimes refer to the view that Paul opposed as the Colossian "heresy", a word we seldom use anymore. It is quite out of fashion to suppose that some things are true and others less true, or even insidiously false. But I hope we are not too timid to claim that the Christian faith is based on trustworthy testimony. It is not just another religious opinion. It is factual story. I hope we will not succumb to the notion that nothing is lost if we reduce the narrative of the gospel into some vague "Christ" principle or "Christ" spirit?

We certainly would not make soup that way. We wouldn't add to our broth the "principle" or "spirit" of a carrot or potato, which might as well be the "spirit" or "principle" of a turnip or an apricot. Who would know the difference? Each could just imagine whatever they wanted. It would be a watery broth with no substance. Hopefully, we still want the real substance in our soup. With our faith, that substance is the gospel story and the Christ whom it reports.

### 3. Paul's Antidote.

What is Paul's antidote to this silly distortion? Simply, this: the whole Christian faith is anchored fully in the historical, flesh-and-blood life of Jesus of Nazareth. In him, bodily, dwelt the grace and truth of God. He alone is the fullness of reality that bridges God and man. The incarnation of God in human flesh dwelling among us in time and space is the focus of Christian faith. As a song writer put it:

In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o'er the wrecks of time,  
All the light of sacred story gathers round its head sublime.

In his crucifixion where we see man at his worst, God is at his best, bringing forgiveness. In his resurrection, death is stripped of its powers and life made new forever. So, our life of faith does not rest on unverifiable imaginations, but on Him, who embodied the grace and power of our creator and redeemer.

Paul turned to metaphors deep roots and a firm foundation to communicate how we preserve our life of faith.

Did you ever see a plant growing between two panes of glass? Remember how the capillary roots are woven throughout the soil as they reach everywhere into the soil. They are working to anchor the plant and bring to it the ingredients of life.

Let us remember we are rooted in Christ, because someone else planted the Gospel in our hearts. We don't plant ourselves. The Colossians had first been rooted in Christ by the teachers who delivered the apostolic tradition. That is what they must cling to it, lest they be uprooted or transplanted into a toxic soil. The same danger haunts every generation of believers.

Perhaps the best visual of survival roots is one of those weathered cypress trees, standing like a sentry on our California coastline. You've seen the gnarled roots that rivet themselves to the anchoring rocks like cables. In a storm the tree are may be severely bent and stripped by the merciless winds, but once the winds subside, it remains fully alive.

In construction, as everyone knows the foundation is first. Only when it is laid, does the building grow into a full structure. In a house, a mud-sill is bolted to the foundation. But that is hardly a house. On the mud-sill there must be built up the frame of walls. But that is hardly a house. The frame of walls must be nailed together with overlapping top

plates. But that is still hardly a house. On the connected walls must be added the ceiling joists. Do you see this is an on-going process? And those who own a house continue to manage, mend, and modify it into something more satisfying. By analogy, the building up of the Christian's life or a Church is a work in process. But if they do not rest on the foundation, the results will be disaster.

Jesus once told a story of a man who built a house on sand rather than rock. Evidently he built it on a calm, dry day when everything was going his way. But then one day, the bluebird on his shoulder flew away. Fierce winds and torrential rains came and his house caved in. Life is like that. There are the best of times, but there are also storms of wind and rain. Inevitably our foundations will be challenged.

My friends, these metaphors remind us that life needs an anchor that can feed and form us, a support that sustains and supports us. Do you have it? Are the roots of your life deeply imbedded in a soil that has resurrection and eternity in it? Is the foundation of your life set on a rock laid down by our Creator in that Man who is for all seasons?

Doesn't it make sense to depend on Someone proven, Someone who has been tested against physical suffering, emotional abuse, relational betrayal, character assassination, false charges, and the shame of a public death on a cross, yet who rose in power to forgive and offer transformation? Can you find that in any where else? Can mere human spirituality rescue you from death? Can any human philosophy put peace in your heart and hope as you face life's turmoil or the grave?

Where, pray tell, can we find leverage against these influences? Here's the Bible answer:

" . . . as you received Christ live in him" (verse 6) and again

"continue established in your faith *just as you were taught.*"

Here's how we find leverage against the mind-warping influences of our culture. We rely on the apostolic testimonies about Christ. Not the Christ of philosophers, not the Christ of spiritualists, not even the Christ of theologians, but the Christ of those who actually walked with him and suffered in his behalf. They are our sources even as He was theirs.

That is why Bible study ranks right up there with prayer if we want grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ.

So, my brothers and sisters, as we have received him – that is, in confidence and faithfulness to the Scriptures – let us live in him. Let his virtues be our standard. Let his values be our guiding lights. Let his mission be our mission. Let us at Campbell UCC cling to Christ with strong roots and rest on Him as our sure foundation.