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51-02-01.wpd --Human Emancipation in Christ

Gnosticism, legalism, sin nature, circumcision, baptism, nakedness

Col 2:6-15

In Christ we are in direct relationship to the fullness of God.

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INTRODUCTION: (Text read as Scripture reading)

--Whatever we have in this experience called salvation, we have in only one way: by being "in Christ," so Paul tells us, v.6-7. So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

--Colossians contains amazing information about our eternal destiny as humans. We are body-spirit beings for a reason, and Christ became one of us for exactly that same reason: to lead us in ruling over "all things." When Adam and Eve sinned, the first symptom of "missing the mark" was shame for their wonderful physical bodies God created. [Thomas Merton, in No Man Is an Island, says, "This is the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—disgust with the things we have misused and hatred of ourselves for misusing them."] Yet our nature as spirit-body beings was specifically meant to be the way God would bring together both the spiritual and physical realms under one governing leadership. In the beginning, Satan used "gnosis" or "knowledge" to get us off track. He is still trying to do that, and this is one of the reasons for the letter to the Colossians.

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I. A Warning About Two Enemies of Christian Faith, v.6-11

A. Colossians confronts two religious ideas Jewish legalism and Greek Gnosticism, which have an opposite focus.

1. Gnosticism placed an emphasis on the spirit that made our physical body essentially a worthless burden.

2. Jewish legalism placed an emphasis on the physical body that overshadowed the importance of our spiritual nature.

B. These were dangerous to Christian faith because one seemed so spiritually correct and the other seemed so religiously correct, but Paul warns in v.8, See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

1. The image here is that of a foreign army making slaves of a conquered people. Paul wants to prevent that possibility by showing us where we stand: HOM.idea.

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II. The Meaning of Circumcision (cutting off the male foreskin)

A. Christian shyness in discussing our genitals is a bad habit left over from the body taboo Satan introduced through "knowledge" back in Eden. [Body shame is not a Christian virtue. It comes from Gnostic ideas that infiltrated the early church. "We shouldn't talk about those nasty parts of our bodies." RIGHT! There are none! But silence fails our children. Instead of their gaining a godly view of the body, all they get is the pornographic view that prevails in modern America.] To reject this God-dishonoring distortion I must speak about any and all body parts openly and honestly.

B. Circumcision was a sign of faith in future salvation [God promised Abraham that his physical offspring would bless the whole world. To symbolize this, God gave an explicit sign that connected this promise with procreation. The glans penis is naturally hidden by a foreskin, except during erection before intercourse. With the foreskin circumcised, the glans penis is perpetually naked. This sign was commonly visible in Bible times, because there was no social shame in the routine practice of outdoor bathing.] The naked glans penis was a constant visible reminder to Jewish people that their hope was connected to sexual intercourse. But when the offspring that brought that hope finally came, God changed the symbol.

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TRANS: Secret spiritual knowledge identified Gnostic faith, but an openly visible physical sign identified Jewish faith. Circumcision was a mark of putting off a pagan lifestyle and putting faith in the Lord. In the same way baptism became a new way to mark the Christian believer.
III. The Meaning of Baptism, v.11-12

A. Christianity gave new meanings both to circumcision and to baptism. [As a sign of repentance, John the Baptist had used the familiar Jewish mikveh, a ritual nude bath required of converts to Judaism. It showed that their uncleanness was washed away, and that they were now as nakedly innocent as Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden.]

B. After Christ's resurrection, the mikveh bath took on new meaning, absorbing the old significance of circumcision—v.11-12. In him [in Christ] you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

1. The mikveh now signified more than repentance or cleansing:
   a. In circumcision the penis was stripped of foreskin. In baptism the believer was stripped of clothing. Both were now seen as a stripping off of our old self for putting on a new life in Christ.
   b. Also, going into and coming out of the water naked, identified us with Christ's naked death on the Cross and His resurrection from the grave, so that, as He left the earthly womb of the tomb with His gravedothes left behind, we rise from the water as naked newborns ready for a new life.

2. (Read v.13-15) Christ's physical body on the Cross shows the emptiness of Gnostic philosophy; His fulfilling the ritual Law of Moses by that Cross shows the emptiness of Jewish legalism.
   a. Listen to an early church father explaining the mikveh bath [Cyril of Jerusalem: "As soon as you came into the inner part of the baptistry, you put off your clothes, which is an emblem of putting off the old self with its deeds; and being thus stripped, you stood naked, imitating Christ, who was naked on the cross, who by his nakedness spoiled principalities and powers, publicly triumphing over them in the cross."]
   b. A Reformed theologian, R. J. Rushdoony tried to explain these early concepts regarding the use of the nude baptism: "Men were born naked; hence, they were reborn naked in baptism. No works of the unregenerate man could be carried into heaven; therefore, the candidate symbolically stripped himself of all clothing to indicate that he had nothing save God's grace... This practice of naked baptism indicates how seriously the Biblical symbolism was taken by the early church...."

CONCLUSION: What we lost through sin, we've regained through Christ. In Christ we are in direct relationship to the fullness of God.