

From Death to Life.
Colossians 2 v 11 – 13a

People are obsessed with ‘externals’. How we look and what other people think about us. Our clothes. Our hairstyle. What car we drive. Who our friends are.

And church circles are often quite similar. Are you conservative evangelical, social liberal or charismatic? NIV or King James? Suit and tie or open neck shirt? And because others can be so judgemental we worry if we will be accepted and fit in. And sadly then, instead of living in freedom and joy, many Christians end up living inhibited lives of prejudice and fear.

This is nothing new. Such attitudes were prevalent in the 1st century church too. Some church members in the Colossian congregation to which Paul had written were from a Jewish background. They had been brought up with certain traditional ritual requirements which they regarded as sacred, and as Jesus was after all the Jewish Messiah, they naturally assumed that Gentile converts to Christianity ought to submit to these rituals too. And some were very dogmatic about this, insisting that non-Jewish men who became Christians should submit to the outward Jewish ritual of circumcision before they could be welcomed into the fellowship of God’s people.

In our reading tonight, the Spirit-inspired Apostle Paul insists that these external things are completely secondary, not necessary for salvation or fellowship. What really matters is what God Himself has done and is doing internally in a person’s heart and mind.

“In [Christ]” he says, “you also were circumcised”, not physically or ritually but “with the circumcision done by Christ”.

In other words if we have become Christians, from whatever background, we already have everything we need “in Him”. God

more than accepts us, He loves us. He regards us as circumcised spiritually, set apart as His, members of His covenant people.

God has brought us from a condition of spiritual “death” in which we were enslaved to sin and worldly thoughts, emotions, values and all kinds of such external limitations, to a new condition of spiritual life and freedom. Instead of languishing, bound and condemned by our old sinful nature we are being given a new internal Christlike guideline and motivation by the Holy Spirit living in us.

“When you were dead in your sins,” outcast and headed for inevitable punishment, “God made you alive with Christ”, writes Paul.

Why worry about what other flawed human beings think about us? Why succumb to human pressure or trends when what really matters is what God thinks and what He has done and is doing to make us alive and acceptable to Him and fruitful in His service? Aren't these the things that really matter? That really make the essential difference?!

Yes, our old sinful nature will try and get in on us again as long as we live in this fallen world, making us think and act like before, when we were unredeemed, spiritually dead people. But now in Christ we have been made alive, renewed in Spirit, we don't have to give in to that old nature. It no longer has authority over us. We have been granted freedom in Christ to say ‘no’ to temptation, and to think of life and ourselves differently as those loved and blessed by God.

This transformation is pictured in the sacrament of baptism. Baptism is recommended for Christians and their families but is not actually essential for salvation. The ‘dying thief’ was never baptised but he was promised paradise by Christ. So it's not something we are to regard dogmatically like the Jewish believers in Colosse did with circumcision, but it is a powerful picture of what God is bringing about in people who trust in Christ.

Baptism identifies us with Jesus. The most obvious symbolism is of washing and new life – our sins are cleansed and we are made alive to God and promised eternal heavenly resurrection life because of the atonement made on the cross for us by Christ. But as someone for a few seconds goes under the water of baptism (be it a little or a lot of water) it also pictures Christ's death and burial and resurrection. Paul here says that our baptism pictures how when we became Christians our old life was considered finished and buried and by God's power we have been made children of resurrection like our Saviour.

God has brought us to a new kind of living, as we continue in a close relationship with Jesus. We are being enabled daily to regard our old way of going as dead and gone, or as we say these days – 'done and dusted'. We are encouraged to think of ourselves as risen with our Master to live a new, clean, positive, godly life in His almighty power!

As it says in v 6 of Colossians 2: - just as we received Christ Jesus as Lord, we must continue to live in Him, rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith through the teaching of scripture and overflow with thankfulness.

Because of what God has done through Christ, because of the fundamental change in status and awareness that He has brought about in our lives we are no longer bound by human traditions and slavery to external judgement. Rather we are free to live comfortably and gratefully in the assurance of His grace and love and choose the path of righteousness and service every day.

This we can do, as those saved and made alive by God. This we must do as those prompted by love to follow our Saviour Jesus.

To Him be glory and praise!

Amen