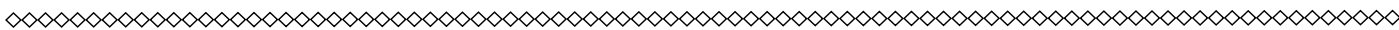




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many.

Sermon Brief
Text: Col. 2:20-3:17
Title: Living in Christ
Lorin L. Cranford

Seeking to faith-
fully proclaim
the whole coun-
cil of God in
scripture!



INTRODUCTION

Spiritual life is a fascinating study. What does it mean for a person to exist spiritually? Modern society has all kinds of peculiar ideas about spiritual existence.¹ Hinduism and Buddhism see it as a mystical experience. Western culture represents a melting pot of varying ideas with a little of this and a little of that. The end product is normally a screwballish set of concepts with little sense and certainly no validity to them.

What does the Bible say about spiritual life? To be certain the perspectives undergo a shift from the Old Testament to the New Testament. In the New Covenant of Christianity spiritual existence depends exclusively on one's relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Jesus put it very plainly in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Spiritual life depends on being connected to Jesus. Period! No other approach has validity. All other forms of supposed spiritual life are false counterfeit versions of the real thing. This is the clear declaration of the Bible.

Thus to exist spiritually one must come to Jesus as Lord and Savior. In Him alone you can find spiritual life. But what is that life? Here is where the richness of the biblical teaching is deep and extensive. Many word pictures are used in the New Testament to depict various aspects of this life that comes out of faith commitment to Christ. Today, I want to focus on but one of these pictures: living in Christ. Spiritual union with Christ is a major theme of the writings of the apostle Paul. Once he came to know Christ in saving faith, he began a life-long discovery of all that such commitment means.

For the apostle Paul, a major depiction of his spiritual experience was the metaphor of "dying and rising" with Christ. From his Damascus Road Experience (Acts 9:1-19) onward, Paul realized that accept-ability before God was based on being in union with Jesus Christ. Not on one's personal spiritual achievements. The accomplishments of Christ in His sacrificial death and resurrection could be transferred to sinful humankind through faith commitment to Christ. In this transfer the believer not only becomes righteous before God, he/she also enters into a profound, mystical union with the living resurrected Christ by a personal dying and rising, parallel to that of Christ. Essentially this entails a dying to self and this sinful world. This is followed by a rising, the resurrection of new spiritual existence that is focused on the ways of God as exemplified by the life that Christ lived while on earth. This dying and rising, however, occurs in the same moment of faith commitment as "two sides of the same coin" of faith. Baptism signifies this commitment in profound symbolic ways. But life-style and behavior are the areas where the depths of this faith commitment surface in observable ways in the believer's life. One's spiritual compass now points unswervingly toward Christ as the guiding light for living and serving. Col. 2:20-3:17 zeros in on this central emphasis of Christian experience. Hear Paul's words to the Colossian believers in the late 50s of the first century:

2/20 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, 21 "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch"? 22 All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.

3.1 So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, 3 for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

5 Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. 7 These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life.

8 But now you must get rid of all such things — anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices 10 and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. 11 In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against

¹A Google search on the internet turns up over 21,000 hits on the topic 'spiritual life.'

another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.²

These words were written by Paul in the late 50s of the first Christian century to believers in the city of Colossae and the surrounding region. Paul had never visited the church personally, but its existence had come out of his ministry at Ephesus through the spreading of the gospel eastward from that coastal city in the Roman province of Asia. He writes to these believers along with the letter of Philemon who also lived in the city as well.

The passage is a moving affirmation of spiritual life in Christ. The thought arrangement is quite interesting for our passage. Around the two key metaphors of 'dying with Christ' and 'rising with Christ' Paul sets forth fundamental obligations for Christian living. Because we died with Christ, we are under certain obligations. And because we have been raised with Christ we have other obligations. The arrangement of these emphases is clear. In the dying metaphor the emphases come in 2:20-23 and 3:5-11; in the rising metaphor the focus comes in 3:1-4 and 3:12-17. We will take them together in this manner.

BODY

I. Dying with Christ, 2:20-23; 3:5-11

2.20 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, 21 "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch"? 22 All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence....

3.5 Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. 7 These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life.

3.8 But now you must get rid of all such things — anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices 10 and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. 11 In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

2.20 Εἰ ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ ἀπὸ τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου, τί ὡς ζῶντες ἐν κόσμῳ δογματίζεσθε; 2.21 Μὴ ἄψη μηδὲ γεύση μηδὲ θίγης, 2.22 ἃ ἔστιν πάντα εἰς φθορὰν τῇ ἀποχρήσει,

²GNT: 2.20 Εἰ ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ ἀπὸ τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου, τί ὡς ζῶντες ἐν κόσμῳ δογματίζεσθε; 2.21 Μὴ ἄψη μηδὲ γεύση μηδὲ θίγης, 2.22 ἃ ἔστιν πάντα εἰς φθορὰν τῇ ἀποχρήσει, κατὰ τὰ ἐντάλματα καὶ διδασκαλίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων, 2.23 ἅτινά ἐστιν λόγον μὲν ἔχοντα σοφίας ἐν ἐθελοθησκία καὶ ταπεινοφροσύνη καὶ ἀφειδία σώματος, οὐκ ἐν τιμῇ τιμῇ πρὸς πλησμονὴν τῆς σαρκός.

3.1 Εἰ οὖν συνηγέρθητε τῷ Χριστῷ, τὰ ἄνω ζητεῖτε, οὗ ὁ Χριστός ἐστιν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ θεοῦ καθήμενος· 3.2 τὰ ἄνω φρονεῖτε, μὴ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς. 3.3 ἀπεθάνετε γάρ καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν κέκρυπται σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ ἐν τῷ θεῷ· 3.4 ὅταν ὁ Χριστὸς φανερωθῇ, ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν, τότε καὶ ὑμεῖς σὺν αὐτῷ φανερωθήσεσθε ἐν δόξῃ.

3.5 Νεκρώσατε οὖν τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, πορνείαν ἀκαθαρσίαν πάθος ἐπιθυμίαν κακὴν, καὶ τὴν πλεονεξίαν, ἣτις ἐστὶν εἰδωλολατρία, 3.6 δι' ἃ ἔρχεται ἡ ὀργὴ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπὶ τοὺς υἱοὺς τῆς ἀπειθείας. 3.7 ἐν οἷς καὶ ὑμεῖς περιεπατήσατέ ποτε, ὅτε ἐζήτε ἐν τούτοις· 3.8 νυνὶ δὲ ἀπόθεσθε καὶ ὑμεῖς τὰ πάντα, ὀργὴν, θυμὸν, κακίαν, βλασφημίαν, αἰσχρολογίαν ἐκ τοῦ στόματος ὑμῶν· 3.9 μὴ ψεύδεσθε εἰς ἀλλήλους, ἀπεκδυσάμενοι τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον σὺν ταῖς πράξεσιν αὐτοῦ 3.10 καὶ ἐνδυσάμενοι τὸν νέον τὸν ἀνακαινούμενον εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν κατ' εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν, 3.11 ὅπου οὐκ ἔστι Ἕλλην καὶ Ἰουδαῖος, περιτομὴ καὶ ἀκροβυστία, βάρβαρος, Σκύθης, δούλος, ἐλεύθερος, ἀλλὰ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν Χριστός.

3.12 Ἐνδύσασθε οὖν, ὡς ἐκλεκτοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ, ἅγιοι καὶ ἠγαπημένοι, σπλάγχνα οἰκτιρμοῦ χρηστότητα ταπεινοφροσύνην πραύτητα μακροθυμίαν, 3.13 ἀνεχόμενοι ἀλλήλων καὶ χαριζόμενοι ἑαυτοῖς ἕαν τις πρὸς τινα ἔχη μομφήν· καθὼς καὶ ὁ κύριος ἐχαρίσατο ὑμῖν, οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς· 3.14 ἐπὶ πᾶσιν δὲ τούτοις τὴν ἀγάπην, ἧ ἔστιν σύνδεσμος τῆς τελειότητος. 3.15 καὶ ἡ εἰρήνη τοῦ Χριστοῦ βραβεύετω ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν, εἰς ἣν καὶ ἐκλήθητε ἐν ἐνὶ σώματι· καὶ εὐχάριστοι γίνεσθε. 3.16 ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐνοικεῖτω ἐν ὑμῖν πλουσίως, ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ διδάσκοντες καὶ νουθετοῦντες ἑαυτοὺς, ψαλμοῖς ὕμνοις ψόδαῖς πνευματικαῖς ἐν τῇ χάριτι ᾄδοντες ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν τῷ θεῷ· 3.17 καὶ πᾶν ὅ τι ἔαν ποιῆτε ἐν λόγῳ ἢ ἐν ἔργῳ, πάντα ἐν ὀνόματι κυρίου Ἰησοῦ, εὐχαριστοῦντες τῷ θεῷ πατρὶ δι' αὐτοῦ.

κατὰ τὰ ἐντάλματα καὶ διδασκαλίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων, 2.23 ἄτινά ἐστιν λόγον μὲν ἔχοντα σοφίας ἐν ἑθελθησικῇ καὶ ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ ἀφειδία σώματος, οὐκ ἐν τιμῇ τιμῇ πρὸς πλησμονὴν τῆς σαρκός....

3.5 Νεκρώσατε οὖν τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, πορνείαν ἀκαθαρσίαν πάθος ἐπιθυμίαν κακὴν, καὶ τὴν πλεονεξίαν, ἣτις ἐστὶν εἰδωλολατρία, 3.6 δι' ἧς ἔρχεται ἡ ὀργὴ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπὶ τοὺς υἱοὺς τῆς ἀπειθείας. 3.7 ἐν οἷς καὶ ὑμεῖς περιεπατήσατέ ποτε, ὅτε ἐζήτε ἐν τούτοις. 3.8 νυνὶ δὲ ἀπόθεσθε καὶ ὑμεῖς τὰ πάντα, ὀργὴν, θυμὸν, κακίαν, βλασφημίαν, αἰσχρολογίαν ἐκ τοῦ στόματος ὑμῶν. 3.9 μὴ ψεύδεσθε εἰς ἀλλήλους, ἀπεκδυσάμενοι τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον σὺν ταῖς πράξεσιν αὐτοῦ 3.10 καὶ ἐνδυσάμενοι τὸν νέον τὸν ἀνακαινούμενον εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν κατ' εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν, 3.11 ὅπου οὐκ ἔστι Ἕλλην καὶ Ἰουδαῖος, περιτομὴ καὶ ἀκροβυστία, βάρβαρος, Σκύθης, δούλος, ἐλεύθερος, ἀλλὰ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν Χριστός.

The first segment, 2:20-23, underscores the dying with Christ motif. The “if” clause in which the phrase occurs (2:20a) expands the idea in two directions. The “death” assumed to have been experienced by the Colossians (1st class conditional pro-tasis with Aorist tense verb), is both a dying “with Christ” (σὺν Χριστῷ) and a dying “from the elements of the world” (ἀπὸ τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου). The first segment identifies the believer’s spiritual death with the physical death of Christ on the cross. Paul had earlier framed this idea in Gal. 2:19b-20: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (NRSV). Just as physical death means separation from the physical world, spiritual death is intended to bring about much of the same. The exclusive way an individual can experience this authentically is through spiritual union with the crucified Christ. Christ placed his commitment to the Father’s will above physical survival. The believer makes the Father’s will his top priority as well. But this union is much deeper than shared priorities. A mystical spiritual union or bonding between Christ and the believer occurs in the moment of faith surrender. The presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit comes about in the life of the believer.

The believer’s death is “from the elements of the world.” This somewhat puzzling reference has a variety of possible meanings. The most common understandings are reflected in the following translations. Note the NASB: “the elementary principles of the world.” Conversely, note the NRSV and the NLT: “the elemental spirits of the universe” (NRSV) and “the evil powers of this world” (NLT). Our modern interpretative tendency is to force a choice among these very legitimate meanings of the Greek phrase; translation necessity pretty much forces this choice. In the four uses of the term *stoicheia* (τὰ στοιχεῖα) in Paul’s writings (Gal. 4:3, 9 and Col. 2:8, 20), the *stoicheia* are a part of this evil world, and stand opposed to Christ. In one’s pre-Christian experience, they enslave and rob one of the blessings of God. Ultimately they are weak and beggarly (τὰ ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα) in comparison to Christ. The idea of a believer returning to them after conversion is inconceivable to Paul (Gal. 4:9). In Gal. 4, they are identified with “observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years.” In Col. 2:8, the Colossians are warned: “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.” Human tradition is a synonym for *stoicheia*. Paul saw in *stoicheia* aspects of this evil world taking shape in religious expression contrary to Christ and His teachings. Additionally, elements of supernatural evil are associated with them as well.

His piercing question to the believers at Colossae was, Given your death to them and release from their enslaving power, why would you even consider moving back under their control? “Why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’?” These questions point toward religious teachings that seek acceptability before God through rigid rules and regulations that perhaps grow out of Jewish interpretation of the OT holiness code, in particular the dietary code, but may also have roots in non-Jewish religious traditions. Paul further characterizes them: “22 All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.” (NRSV). This “self-help” religious orientation provided no spiritual resources for holy living. Being based on “human tradition” rather than divine revelation it focused on the externals rather than dealt with the deep spiritual issues of sinfulness. The result: a religion of false piety that was worthless. It looked good with its stress on severe self-restraint, but this was a deception.

Although the precise historical origin and a historical label for these teachings continue to elude Bible scholars, the essentials of this tradition as defined by 2:20-23 are clear. When God’s ways are mysterious and perhaps difficult to understand, human ingenuity can devise a counterfeit religion that is easier to define and that impresses others more readily. In Paul’s continued discussion, one comes to understand that severe bodily treatment replaces the strict demand for holy behavior and living. Thus “self-indulgence” (πλησμονὴν

σαρκός) now runs rampant under the guise of being true piety to God.

The challenge to those who are “dead with Christ” is instead to “Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly” (3:5-11). This twisted version of Christianity being taught at Colossae is helpless to address the carnal side of human existence. In fact, it winds up promoting carnality. But authentic participation in the death of Christ becomes the way to address this issue. The mysterious spiritual union with Christ in the death experience lays the foundation for successfully saying no to the temptations of the flesh.

The “therefore” (οὖν) links 3:5-11 to 3:1-4, but especially to 2:20-23. The ability to turn one’s back on the pull of the carnal flesh grows out of this ‘dying/rising’ experience with Christ.

Paul lists some of these temptations: “fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)” [πορνείαν ἀκαθαρσίαν πάθος ἐπιθυμίαν κακὴν, καὶ τὴν πλεονεξίαν, ἧτις ἐστὶν εἰδωλολατρία]. These focus on destructive attitudes and treatment of other people. What is idolatry is not certain. It could be just greed or the entire list of vices.

God’s wrath will come on those practicing these vices. The Colossians once lived this way. This language points to a non-Jewish orientation of the initial readers of this letter. But now in their Christian commitment such vices can no longer be tolerated.

But more expressions of the flesh are listed in vv. 8-9: “8 But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices” (NRSV).

“Put to death our earthly members” (v. 5; Νεκρώσατε τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς) now becomes “you must get rid of all such things” (v. 8; ἀπόθεσθε καὶ ὑμεῖς τὰ πάντα).

The language of getting undressed / getting dressed surfaces in vv. 9b-11 as the depiction of putting to death and being renewed. The dying / rising metaphor is now defined through this new metaphor. The use of the Greek Aorist tense participles for this clothing metaphor is significant. The NRSV handles this complex Greek structure well in its expression: “seeing that **you have stripped off** the old self with its practices and **have clothed your-selves** with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.” The structure points the getting undressed / getting dressed experience back to the moment of dying / rising with Christ. That is, the moment of faith commitment to Christ, which is conversion. The getting undressed side means that “dying with Christ” equals “stripping off the old self with its practices.” The “old self with its practices” (v. 9b; τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον σὺν ταῖς πράξεσιν αὐτοῦ) is “the earthly members” (v. 5; τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς). In the faith commitment, a commitment was made to abandon the non-Christian way of living. This commitment must be followed by stripping out of our lives those things reflecting that old life style. But with the clothing metaphor, the thought is carried a step deeper. In conversion we not only abandoned that life-style. We died to the carnal, fleshly nature that the life-style was based on. How? By dying with Christ! In this wonderfully mysterious union with Christ on the cross a profound death took place. It reached to the very core of our being. Now Paul’s admonitions of “putting to death” and “getting rid of” push us to live out daily the death we experienced in conversion.

The positive side of the clothing metaphor, getting dressed, surfaces in vv. 10-11, and stands as a transition into the final section of our passage, 3:12-17: “10 and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. 11 In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!” (NRSV).

The ‘rising with Christ’ becomes now “getting dressed.” The new self was born in conversion and represents a new existence. In Paul’s language, the new self undergoes continuous renewal: “the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator” (v. 10b; τὸν νέον τὸν ἀνακαινούμενον εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν κατ’ εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν). The key to renewal is deeper spiritual understanding, i.e., spiritual maturity. But this understanding is defined by the parameters of God who created this new self. The experiential side of understanding is stressed here. That is, we can’t learn this from pure intellectual expansion. This understanding is gained through living out our faith commitment.

Just how radical this is Paul states in v. 11: “In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!” (NRSV). The new person created in the “rising with Christ”, which is “getting dressed,” sets aside ethnic, racial, social barriers. The emerging person from the ashes of the old carnal self is saturated with Christ’s presence. Everything is focused on Christ and flows through Christ. For those Colossians with Jewish background, the idea that their Jewish heritage did not somehow give them advantage before God would have been challenging to accept. Jewish mystical streams in the ancient world depended on that Jewishness for its argument of credibility. The non-Jewish mystical streams, especially the mystic cults operating in this general region, argued the superiority of their access to patron deities inside their own ritual practices. Any influences originating from either or from both these backgrounds are rejected by the apostle. The mystical union with

Christ is all that is needed to effect a radical transformation of human existence.

What is the connection of all this to us today? Enormous is the reply. We live in a world increasingly filled with supposed “spiritual” ways of religious expression. The impact of religious mysticism stemming from Hinduism and Buddhism and saturating the New Age movement over the past couple of decades has made “religion” popular in all levels of American life. Movie stars freely talk about being “spiritual” although their lifestyle is immoral and corrupt. Politicians must project some kind of religious image to the voting public in order to be elected. Many see in a “civil religion” the key to social and moral renewal in our country. That is, an unhealthy mixing of elements of nationalism with elements of Christianity. Increasingly, differing branches of Christianity define their religious experience largely as a set of rules governing public behavior. Of course, it’s “my set of rules” that are correct, not necessarily yours.

The impact of all this? Authentic Christianity gradually disappears, and is replaced by these forgeries. Baptists are not immune to these tendencies. Our disposition is toward the Jewish legalistic side of distortion, the “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” side.

The solution to anemic Christianity is a rediscovery of Paul’s insight into what constitutes authentic Christianity. We don’t need to be able to rationally explain every facet of Christian experience. Mysticism has legitimacy inside our faith commitment. But the continuous renewal that Paul describes does mean that we gain spiritual maturity sufficient to detect the real from the counterfeit. This is “head knowledge” but even more it stems from our own deepening spiritual experience. We discover both the amazing perspective and the overwhelming emotional experience of what “dying with Christ” means. Our materialistic culture is negated. Our old carnal self-centered person is put to death. The strangle hold of this world over our lives is broken. We have been striped completely naked before the God who sees us inside and out. Everything is laid bare before God in surrender of our very essence to Him. Only out of the ashes of this self death can the brand new person created in Christ emerge.

And all this has transpired through becoming one with Christ in His death on the cross. As Paul characterized it with his Greek expression in Gal. 2:20, “I have climbed up on the cross of Christ and have so merged myself with his suffering that I have died with Him.” This is at least a part of what Paul said earlier in Colossians 1:24, when he declared that his sufferings were filling up what was lacking in the sufferings of Christ. Our suffering for Christ merges us with the suffering Savior in a profound bond. The element of dying becomes common to both Christ and us in a wonderful, yet mysterious manner.

Such mysticism stands unbelievably superior to the shallow, empty claims of spirituality and mystical religious experience found in our world today. Reclaiming this is the key to spiritual renewal among believers in our world.

II. Rising with Christ, 3:1-4; 3:12-17

3.1 So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, 3 for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory....

3.12 As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

3.1 Εἰ οὖν συνηγέρθητε τῷ Χριστῷ, τὰ ἄνω ζητεῖτε, οὗ ὁ Χριστός ἐστιν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ θεοῦ καθήμενος· 3.2 τὰ ἄνω φρονεῖτε, μὴ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς. 3.3 ἀπεθάνετε γάρ καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν κέκρυπται σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ ἐν τῷ θεῷ· 3.4 ὅταν ὁ Χριστὸς φανερωθῆ, ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν, τότε καὶ ὑμεῖς σὺν αὐτῷ φανερωθήσεσθε ἐν δόξῃ....

3.12 Ἐνδύσασθε οὖν, ὡς ἐκλεκτοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ, ἅγιοι καὶ ἠγαπημένοι, σπλάγχνα οἰκτιρμοῦ χρηστότητα ταπεινοφροσύνην πραύτητα μακροθυμίαν, 3.13 ἀνεχόμενοι ἀλλήλων καὶ χαριζόμενοι ἑαυτοῖς ἂν τις πρὸς τινα ἔχη μομφήν· καθὼς καὶ ὁ κύριος ἐχαρίσατο ὑμῖν, οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς· 3.14 ἐπὶ πᾶσιν δὲ τούτοις τὴν ἀγάπην, ἧ ἔστιν σύνδεσμος τῆς τελειότητος. 3.15 καὶ ἡ εἰρήνη τοῦ Χριστοῦ βραβεύετω ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν, εἰς ἣν καὶ ἐκλήθητε ἐν ἐνὶ σώματι· καὶ εὐχάριστοι γίνεσθε. 3.16 ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐνοικεῖτω ἐν ὑμῖν πλουσίως, ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ διδάσκοντες καὶ νουθετοῦντες ἑαυτοὺς, ψαλμοῖς ὕμνοις ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς ἐν τῇ χάριτι ἄδοντες ἐν ταῖς

καρδίας ὑμῶν τῷ θεῷ· 3.17 καὶ πᾶν ὃ τι ἐὰν ποιῆτε ἐν λόγῳ ἢ ἐν ἔργῳ, πάντα ἐν ὀνόματι κυρίου Ἰησοῦ, εὐχαριστοῦντες τῷ θεῷ πατρὶ δι' αὐτοῦ.

This second set of passages emphasize the 'rising with Christ' motif. The first passage, 3:1-4, lays out the idea, and the second passage, 3:12-17, applies the idea to patterns of daily behavior.

The inferential conjunction "therefore" (οὖν) in verse one connects 3:1-4 to 2:20-23. Rising in Christ thus grows out of dying with Christ. One should not forget the basic reversal in this spiritual principle. In physical life we first live and then die. But in spiritual experience we must first die before we can live.

Paul's terminology links the resurrection of the believer, the first coming to life spiritually, to that of Christ on Easter Sunday. This sharing of resurrection experience is the language of Colossians and Ephesians. In addition to the use of synegeiro here (συνεγείρω), it is found in 2:12: "when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (NRSV). The Greek verb also shows up in Eph. 2:6: "and [God] raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (NRSV). Collectively, the concept stresses that we have **been** raised up with Christ. This is not something we accomplish; it is an action of God accomplished as a part of the faith commitment and signified by our baptism. The focal point of this metaphor is the realization of divine power in our lives accomplishing something that is clearly humanly impossible. Thus spiritual dying moves to coming to life spiritually in parallel to Christ's experience of crucifixion and resurrection. His experience was both physical and spiritual. In conversion our experience is just spiritual, but is life transforming, as Col. 2:12 clearly stresses.

What implication does this rising with Christ possess? The core admonition answers this question: "seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (NRSV). The new priority central to this new life is Heaven. The things associated with God's dwelling place where Christ is seated at the right hand of God's power should govern our life now. The spiritual power demonstrated in the resurrection of Christ is now channeled into the life of the believer effecting a spiritual resurrection. The believer, Paul urges, should now focus on those spiritual resources. The second pair of admonitions essentially repeats the first using different language: "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (NRSV). Both Greek verbs, "seek" (τὰ ἄνω ζητεῖτε) and "set your minds on" (τὰ ἄνω φρονεῖτε, μὴ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς) stress prioritizing our life and giving commitment to the heavenly things.

A rationale for this stance is provided in verses three and four: "3 for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory" (NRSV). In the dying with Christ, the true life we possess is not overtly visible. The impact of it is through our lifestyle, but the spiritual life we possess is not itself visible to others. But a day is coming when it becomes visible. At the second coming of Christ we will share in the divine glory in open manifestation. Again, Paul touches on a mystical aspect of Christian experience. Christian existence is only visible indirectly through its impact on our living. Our actual spiritual existence is invisible and can't be examined or made visible for others to observe. While the mystical traditions coming into the community of believers at Colossae claimed to offer genuine spiritual existence, those who possess it authentically will be revealed at the second coming of Christ. Paul's contention is that this comes only through participation in the resurrection of Christ both now and at the close of time.

What implications for Christian living does such a reality possess? 3:12-17 provides Paul's answer to this question. His answer revolves around the application of the clothing metaphor first set forth in vv. 10-11. To rise with Christ is to put on a new existence revolving around Christ. This has powerful implications about virtues we are to incorporate into our living. Three long, rather complex Greek sentences in vv. 12-17 set forth these implications:

First is vv. 12-14:

12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

This new life first reaches out to others in uplifting and edifying ways. The clothing of Christ, his qualities, are incorporated into our relationships with others.

Second comes v. 15:

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

Inside the body of believers the unifying peace of Christ draws believers together in harmony and thankfulness.

Third is vv. 16-17:

16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word

or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. In the community of faith, mutual encouragement and teaching is to take place as a part of this new life experience. Christ's words are to find lodging in the hearts of believers. Believers are to inform and exhort one another out of deep spiritual insight. Interestingly, a key way of communicating these words of Christ is through musical expression. This includes the OT psalms along with contemporary musical expressions developed in the Christian community. Some traces of this exist in poems pre-served in part by Paul in Phil. 2:6-11 and 1 Tim. 3:16. The last term, "spiritual songs" (ὧδαὶς πνευματικαῖς), hints at the use of "secular" musical material in the first century Greco-Roman world as the foundation for Christian music. Taken together the three references to musical compositions become inclusive of every appropriate musical expression as a means of communicating the truths of Christ inside the community of believers. Many Christian leaders down through the centuries have recognized and utilized the power of music to express their Christian beliefs. Namely, Martin Luther and John and Charles Wesley.

In the final analysis Paul concludes with the all encompassing "whatever you do, in word or deed." Everything spoken and done is to be in the authority, the name, of Christ. His indwelling presence infuses our words and actions with His resurrection power, thus making them effective and influential. All this is to be carried out in the context of thankfulness to God through Christ.

The connection to us? Obvious! Only in spiritual union with Christ where His spiritual presence and power infuses what we say and do can we live as new people anticipating the final revelation at the coming of our Lord. This spiritual presence is not a private matter. To the contrary, it is a corporate experience to be lived out in a community of believers who reinforce one another's commitment to Christ.

Who would want to trade this for a forgery?

CONCLUSION

Living in Christ. What a marvelous picture of spiritual life! We live in a wonderful spiritual union with the risen Christ through the presence of His Spirit in our lives. In that union we have the resources of God to help us through daily living. We also have extensive obligations to live according to a certain lifestyle. Spiritual life is both power and commitment.

Are you in Christ?