

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Your Circumcision in Christ" (Colossians 2:8-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 7/31/2011

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## **Today: A Shift in Our Focus**

In this part of our series of messages on Colossians chapter two, we have been focusing on the section where the Apostle Paul confronts the problem of legalism in the church. I want to direct your attention to that passage once again. Paul begins dealing with this issue at verse eleven, but I want to begin reading a few verses earlier, at verse eight, and you'll understand why in a few moments.

If you're able to do so as you are listening today, I hope you will turn with me in your own copy of God's Word to this passage, Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eight:

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all

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trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.

So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. (Colossians 2:8-17)

Now we have devoted several messages to the task of gaining a better understanding of the problem of legalism in the church in our time. And for that reason, we have surveyed some of the major manifestations of the evil of legalism in today's church.

Today I want to move forward in our study to a more detailed exposition of the passage we are considering. And as we do that, we are going to see a connection between what Paul says about the threat of worldly philosophy at the beginning of Colossians chapter two, and what he now has to say about the threat of legalism beginning at verse eleven.

### **Why This Approach?**

Now, this may seem like a backward approach. We started with the negative aspects. We started by identifying some of the manifestations of the evil of legalism in our time. And only now are we really coming to an exposition of the passage

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itself. You may be wondering why I chose to approach this section of Colossians chapter two in this way.

Well, the reason is that I believe it was helpful for us to identify the problem of legalism in our time, in order to better focus on God's solution to the problem of legalism. And I trust that as we now move on, you will see that it has been helpful for you to better understand present-day manifestations of the problem, in order to better appreciate the cure.

Many Christians today do not have these things clearly in their minds. They don't understand that there are three distinct elements to the Old Testament law. They don't understand that the ceremonial law of the Old Testament has been made totally obsolete by Christ. They don't understand that the Jewish civil law of the Old Testament is no longer in force, except to the extent that the moral truths that are the foundation of that law remain in force because they are rooted in the Moral Law of God. God's Moral law is still in force for all men in all times and all places, and always will be. Many Christians today do not understand these things about the Old Testament law.

And likewise, many Christians today don't think in terms of the things they see around them as manifestations of legalism. They don't think of the cults like the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Seventh Day Adventists as manifestations of legalism. They don't think of Messianic Judaism as legalism. They don't think of Christian Reconstructionism as legalism. They don't think of the growing ritualism that we

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find in churches today, as a problem that is rooted in legalism. The number one characteristic of all these false teachings is legalism.

But now that we have that clearly in our minds, I believe we can now move on, in contrast with all of that, to gain an even better understanding of two things:

First, we can now gain a better understanding of the reason why the life of the believer in Christ must be a life that is lived in absolute contrast to any form of legalism.

Second, we can now gain a better understanding of the reason why the doctrine and message of the church of Christ must be a doctrine and message that is in absolute contrast to any form of legalism.

### **An Expanded Translation**

Now in order for us to begin to see these things, I want to give you an expanded translation of part of the passage we just read. I’m going to begin at Colossians chapter two, verse eight, and I hope that you will follow along in your own Bible if you can, so that you will see how this expanded translation from the Greek opens up the meaning of these verses for us. And so now let me begin at verse eight:

Paul says, “See to it that no one will carry you away captive through philosophy and empty deception, by the tradition of men, by the rudiments of the world, and not by Christ,”

Verse nine – “because in Him resides all the fullness of the Godhead bodily,”

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Verse ten – “and you are in Him, having been filled, who is the Head of all rule and authority,”

Verse eleven – “in whom you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by stripping off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,”

And verse twelve – “having been entombed together with Him in the immersion in which you also were raised together with Him through the faith of the working of God who raised Him from the dead.”

We have already spent considerable time in past messages on verses eight, nine, and ten. Today I want to call your attention especially to verses eleven and twelve, where Paul begins to deal with the evil of legalism in the life and thinking of the individual Christian, and in the life and thinking of the church as a body.

### **The Connection Between Worldly Philosophy and Legalism**

Verses eleven and twelve are part of a long sentence in the Greek. The sentence begins at verse eight and extends all the way to verse fifteen. These two verses, eleven and twelve, are in the middle of that long statement, and they form both a transition and a connection between two things:

First, Paul is telling us in these verses that worldly philosophy takes up a position that denies Christ and is opposed to Christ. But in addition to that, in taking up this battle position against Christ, worldly philosophy also takes up a battle position

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against the believer in Christ and the church of Christ. That is because worldly philosophy, by denying who Christ is, also denies who we are as believers, who we are as the ones who are in Christ.

Worldly philosophy denies your position as a believer in Christ. Our identification with Christ in His death and resurrection is so close, so intimate, that for the worldly philosophers to deny who Christ is, is to deny who *you* are because you are in Christ. The two things are inseparable. You deny who Christ is and what He has done, and you automatically also deny who the believer in Christ is, and what Christ has done for the believer. So that is the first point.

The second point in this transitional part of Paul's great statement is this: Legalism takes up the same kind of battle position as worldly philosophy. Legalism also takes up a position that denies Christ and is opposed to Christ. And in taking up that battle position against Christ, legalism also takes up a battle position against the believer and the church.

That is because legalism also is, at its essence, a denial of who Jesus Christ is and what He has done. And so, therefore, legalism is also a denial of who we are as believers in Christ. Our identification with Christ in His death and resurrection is so close, so intimate, that for the legalist to deny who Christ is, is to deny who *you* are because you are in Christ. The two things are inseparable. You deny who Christ is and what He has done, and you automatically also deny the glorious position of the believer in Christ.

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## **Your Position in Christ**

And what is that position? We have it in verse ten: "You are complete in Him." Now, we saw in a previous message that the word that is translated "complete" in verse ten is a Greek word that has to do with fullness. It is the verb form of the same word that Paul uses in verse nine when he says that in Jesus Christ dwells all the fullness of the Godhead in a body. Paul is saying that in Jesus dwells not just some aspect of God, not just some glimmer of God, but the entire fullness of the Godhead. Jesus Christ is fully God.

And so Paul then uses the verb form of that same word in the very next phrase, where he says, "and in Him you [believers] are complete." An expanded translation of the phrase in the Greek would read like this: "And you are in Him, having been filled full, once and for all, with the present result that you are in a state of fullness" in Christ.

Just as the fullness of God has made His home within the physical body of Jesus Christ, we partake of that fullness because we are in Christ. It is an accomplished fact. It has been done once for all. Worldly philosophy denies that. Legalism denies that. But the truth is, according to these verses, that this is something that God through Christ has done for us. It is not something that we did for ourselves, or that we could do for ourselves. And this fullness, this completeness, which we have because we are in Christ, means that everything that we need, for this life and for the life to come, we have in abundance in Christ. We have a salvation that is absolutely

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perfect and complete. As Jesus shouted from the cross, "It is finished!" Fully accomplished! Paid in full!

If you are a believer in Christ, this is true of you, true right now, and true forever. Because you are in Christ, you possess the fullness of all that is in Christ. Satan will try to rob you of your confidence in that fullness by introducing worldly philosophy into your mind, and into the thinking of the church. Satan will try to rob you of your confidence in that great fact by introducing the bondage of legalism into your mind and into your way of life, and into the thinking and practice of the church. Do not let that happen, Paul says. You must be on your guard against these things. You must stand your ground. You must put up, and keep up, a strong battle position against these things.

And where is that strong battle position? That strong battle position is in Christ. That strong battle position is in God's Word. As David said in Second Samuel chapter twenty-two:

The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; the God of my strength, in whom I will trust; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge...I will call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised; so shall I be saved from my enemies. (2 Samuel 22:2-4)

Don't try to stand anywhere else or upon anyone else. No false doctrine. No false teacher. Christ alone. God's Word alone. Always, and forever.

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## **The Nature of the Circumcision & Baptism in Verses 11-12**

Now I want to explain some further points about verses eleven and twelve that are very, very important. The first is the nature of the circumcision of which Paul speaks in verse eleven. The second is the nature of the baptism of which Paul speaks in verse twelve. Both the circumcision of which Paul speaks in verse eleven and the baptism of which Paul speaks in verse twelve have one important thing in common: they are not physical, they are spiritual.

Let me say that again because it is extremely important. This is absolutely vital to the proper understanding of these verses: The circumcision of which Paul speaks in verse eleven, and the baptism of which Paul speaks in verse twelve, have one important thing in common: they are not physical, they are spiritual.

Paul makes this absolutely clear when he speaks about circumcision in verse eleven. Let me read verse eleven once again: "In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision *made without hands*, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ."

Note the words, "the body of the sins of the flesh." What does the flesh signify in Scripture? The flesh signifies the old nature. The flesh signifies these corrupt bodies in which we presently dwell. Paul says, literally, that the body of the sins of the flesh has been "stripped off" by the work of God in Christ.

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Paul says the same thing in Romans chapter six, verse six. He says: "Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with [Christ], [so] that the body of sin might be done away with [literally, that the body of sin might be annulled], [so] that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin" (Romans 6:6-7). The power of the sinful nature was broken. The power of our old nature was literally stripped of its control over us. We are no longer slaves to sin.

How was this accomplished? Paul tells us here in Colossians 2:11. It was accomplished "by the circumcision of Christ." It is, Paul says, "a circumcision made without hands." In other words it is a *spiritual* circumcision that every believer receives through Christ at conversion. And so Paul says, in Romans chapter six, beginning at verse twelve,

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. (Romans 6:12-14)

We need to be careful to understand that the old nature is not eradicated when we become Christians. First John chapter one, verse eight tells us that "if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." But by the work of Christ the *power* of sin has been broken, and we have God's promise that we will also be

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delivered from the very *presence* of sin when we see Christ and live with Him forever.

That is the spiritual nature of the circumcision of which Paul speaks here in verse eleven. And as we are going to see as we move into Colossians chapter three, because we have been circumcised by this circumcision made without hands – the circumcision that comes through Christ – because of this, the grace of sanctification, the putting off sin in our daily lives, is now the focus of our new life in Christ.

And so this brings us to verse twelve. And here Paul also makes it clear that the baptism of which he is speaking is not a physical baptism, just as the circumcision of which he spoke in verse eleven was not a physical circumcision. Let me read verse twelve once again. Paul says that you as a believer have been “buried with Christ in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”

And let me remind you again of our expanded translation from the Greek. Paul says that you “have been [literally] entombed together with Christ in the immersion in which you also were raised together [from the tomb] with Him through the faith of the working of God who raised Him from the dead.”

The Apostle Paul gives us the same thought in Romans chapter six, beginning at verse three. He says, “Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him

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through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”

Let me give you an expanded translation of these verses also: “Do you not know that so many of us as were placed in Jesus Christ, were placed into His death? Therefore we were entombed with Him by this placement into His death, so that just as Christ was raised from among the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should conduct our lives in keeping with that new life that has been imparted to us.”

If you are a believer in Christ, your identification with Christ in His *death* has broken the power of indwelling sin. And your identification with Christ in His *resurrection* has given you a new nature. The Apostle Peter tells us the same thing in Second Peter chapter one, beginning at verse two:

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.  
(2 Peter 1:2-4)

That, dear friend, is your position in Christ if you are a believer in Him. And it has not been brought about through the Law or through legalism. It has not been brought about through physical circumcision or physical baptism. It has been brought about

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by the death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. “And you are complete in Him.” Stand firm in Him, and in Him stand firm against anyone who tells you that you must, in any way, add law-keeping to the finished work of Christ.

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