

How to Be a Christian
A sermon by David Roquemore
First Presbyterian Church, Newton
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Colossians 2: 6-19

Well, we hear a lot these days about “Christian values” and being a true Christian. We even hear that the Bible says that we are to run the government. Uh, no thank you!

Well, here in Colossians we get some reflection on what it means to be a believer, and indirectly, on some of these other questions and issues.

Paul starts off this text saying, “as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.”

I didn’t hear a thing in there about baptism, did you? About what age you should be? About which version of the Bible you “should” be reading? All I saw was about establishing yourself and being built up in the faith, in Jesus Christ. That is a kind of theme for what follows.

Next comes the verse that people, earnest friends, usually women, loved to quote at me whenever I said I was majoring in Philosophy. No matter how much I assured them that no one was taking me captive or confusing me, they doubted. The good news, you can read books if you maintain a distance between the text and your faith. Just because you read it doesn’t mean it is true.

A woman came up to me after a worship service and rather breathlessly said she had learned that the early church believed in reincarnation, but that the Catholic Church at one of the councils had declared it wrong and removed it from the faith. I had never heard even a whisper like this, and I asked where she learned this. She confided that she had read a book by Shirley MacLaine. I just had no words.

Now comes the good part. Paul says that in Christ “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” and in him, we too have come to fullness in him — which could mean what the ancient church meant by deification: we become by grace what he is by nature. God leads us to live in Christ until we become like him. He is the head of every ruler and authority, it notes. So it is Jesus who is ultimately in charge of all things, and not us! Some of our public officials might need to read this passage.

Paul goes on to say that we are circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, which he equates with our baptisms: we are buried with Christ in baptism, and so our old self, our old way of life, is dead. We are raised from the water by the one who raised Jesus from

the dead. And while we were dead, God made us alive by forgiving us our sins — all of that is nailed to the cross!

God did all of that for us, by grace. God's grace is deep and unfathomable. You can't find the limits to it, you can't find the bottom of it. You can't exhaust it. No matter what you do there is always more of it. That's the grace we live with, that we live in. That's the grace that leads us to 'abound in thanksgiving,' as Paul said back in verse seven.

We can remember this grace, keep it before us all the time. We should do that, because to do that means we remember Jesus in every encounter we have.

And so, he concludes, "don't let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink, or observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths." Some will insist we must do this or that, or keep to this or that rule, or something. Some will insist, for example, that since Jews worshiped on the seventh day, on Saturday, we should do the same! Others will say, well, the Jews had these festivals, so we should keep them ourselves.

No, Paul hints, we don't have to worry about all of that. All of that is a shadow, it is a glimpse of what is to come, but the substance, the meaning, belongs to Jesus. This is not to say that the liturgical seasons and its details are bad; far from it. They give us a guide to our faith, help us to remember the various things that Jesus did. In the liturgical life of the church we celebrate all that Jesus did for the world. And so it is a good thing. But we are not enslaved to it. The "liturgical police" are not going to come and arrest you if you wear the wrong color.

You may have heard a joke in which a man encounters a man who is about to jump off a bridge, committing suicide. The first man says, "don't do this! God doesn't want you to do this!" The other man says, "I believe in God!" They go on to discover they are both Christians, both Protestants, both Baptists, and on and on, until the first man discovers that the second man doesn't subscribe to exactly the same formulation of Baptist faith that he does, and throws him off the bridge!

No one is going to throw you off the bridge because you have some slight disagreement over a doctrinal matter. Even John Calvin noted that predestination doesn't determine everything: he said it doesn't matter which fork you use. Some things are *adiaphora*, indifferent things, on which a variety of opinions are just fine.

I would take that farther than Calvin: it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe in Jesus. You can have all the wacky ideas you want, but hold fast to the core of Christians faith!

Since the Reformation we have made Christianity mostly about what a person thinks. What do you believe? But it is really more a way of life than it is a list of what you must agree with.

So how do we live as Christians?

First, we have faith in Jesus. Now, not everyone is at the same place on their spiritual journey. Not everyone is going in the same path, and that's OK!

Years ago, a fellow pastor said to me that we Presbyterians tend to get everyone on the same page about what they believe, and then work from there. Someone had a different idea: get people doing the things that Jesus approves, and the faith will come. I have had my doubts about that, but overall, I think it may be true.

So we believe. Now let's put that faith into action. How? Feed the hungry. Welcome the stranger. Clothe the naked. Shelter the homeless. Maybe you do these already. Maybe you want to do more. There are ways: you can volunteer at somewhere like ECCCM, or the Corner Table. There is an initiative being put together with the Newton Police Dept. and some of these agencies to address together how to help the homeless. Or maybe you have another idea? All of these are ways we can put our faith into action.

Which is another way of saying, "live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him" as Paul put it at the beginning of the reading.

How else can we live as Christians? Well, how about loving one another. Loving the people we meet along life's way. Loving the ones we see who are not like us. As Dr. Allen used to put it, "remind yourself that Jesus would have died for that person even if you had never been born!" There's a humbling thought!

We can make and share peace. God's peace can come rule in our hearts, and we can share that peace. I knew a man who started every conversation with "peace be with you." It seemed weird at the time, but I think he was trying to share God's peace.

We can offer people mercy. So many people have been beat down by life's circumstances. Especially the poor! So to greet them with a smile and some kindness. To offer them the benefit of the doubt! To be merciful and kind would go a long way, not to make our way easier, but to share the kindness of Jesus with others — that is a way to be.

We have all had those neighbors — you know who I am talking about. The weird ones. The crabby ones. The ones who come out yelling at the kids when their ball crosses into the neighbor's yard. The ones who object to everything. We have all had these neighbors, and the tendency I think is to push back. If they are going to act like that, well, who cares! To heck with them! We don't need it!

But what if we can find it in our hearts to be nice to them? That is how we change the world, one crabby neighbor at a time.

Ah, but there's the rub. How do we "find it in our hearts" to be nice to them, to love those who are unloveable, to be what we are not?

We find that in our faith, by the power of the Spirit of God. If you read to the end of the chapter, you find another paragraph about obeying the regulations of the world, which

ends saying “they have an appearance of wisdom....but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.”

So much of what we do is to indulge our appetites and please ourselves. We have to get over ourselves and find a way to please Jesus. Following the lead of the Spirit would be a good way to do just that. The Spirit will give us the ability to love those who are demanding, who bother us with their requests, who seem to never be satisfied. The Spirit will give us the energy to keep going when we feel most defeated, when we just don't think we can take another step nor do another thing.

So the short version of this sermon is, you want to be a Christian? Do what Jesus did. Love the lepers and the untouchables, wherever you meet them. Don't worry so much about the details of who did what, nor of what you “have to know” to be a Christian. Just do what Jesus did. And God will bless you!

Thanks be to God! Amen.