

Colossians 2:9

“For in Christ all the fulness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fulness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.”

Some time ago, I was browsing the adverts in a Christian newspaper when I stumbled across a job vacancy

- ‘Pre-millennialist church seeks pastor,’ it said – which might leave some of you perplexed already
- But is a particular view of the last times about the future coming of Jesus in glory and a 1000 years after
- Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, a vicar who said he did not believe in God was allowed to continue to preach
- As far as some people were concerned he was a good vicar, what did believing or not believing in God matter
- It’s a situation not unknown in a variety of denominations in Great Britain today

Involve Methodists in any kind of controversy about Christian belief and practice

- and someone is certain to pop up with some vague reference to John Wesley’s sermon on the *Catholic Spirit*
- a particularly common qualification for making reference to this sermon is never to have read it
- but in the sermon, Wesley (an Anglican priest and accidental founder of the modern Methodist movement)
- distinguishes doctrines and opinions, issues that still face us more than 200 years later
- we are still debating matters of denomination, forms of church government
- in short, should churches have a higher order of ministers; that is bishops?
- forms of prayer, posture and manner when receiving the Lord’s Supper
- in short, should we pray using a book and kneel at the Lord’s table, or not?
- or the manner of administering baptism or the age of those to be baptised
- in short, should we sprinkle or immerse, infants or adult believers in baptism?
- For Wesley, these are ‘opinions’, we cannot agree on them, but we don’t fall out about them

Wesley taught that there are some doctrines which are not negotiable, including original sin, the deity of Christ

- the atonement, justification by faith alone, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity
- and in saying that some things were not negotiable, he was following in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul
- who wrote to the Colossians saying:

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.

(Colossians 2:8)

The words, 'see to it' have the sense of 'take care', 'beware', 'watch out' – great issues are at stake

- what seems to have been happening at Colossae is that some visitors have arrived in the congregation
- they are teaching that they have a fuller knowledge of God than the Colossians
- and in such matters it is possible to be deceived but what are they saying about Christ?
- A real controversy about belief nearly always comes down to the person of Jesus
- 'Who is Jesus?' was the great question of New Testament times
- Our response to this question is what distinguishes Christians from world religions, cults and new faiths
- Jehovah's Witnesses claim that Jesus was the first and highest being created by God
- Mormons claim that Jesus attained to the pinnacle of intelligence to rank him as a god
- Christian Scientists claim that Jesus is the human man and Christ the divine idea
- Spiritists claim that Jesus was nothing more than a medium of high order
- The religion of Hare Krishna teaches Jesus was not God but a follower of Krishna
- Some of these will accept that Jesus was a prophet, others will make no mention of Jesus at all
- but in a cosmopolitan world of many competing religious ideas (not the 21st century but New Testament times)
- Paul made the absolutely staggering claim, 'in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form'

I FULNESS IN CHRIST

We need to be careful in our understanding of ‘fulness’,

- it does not simply mean that Jesus had the full *attributes* of deity, impressive as that would be
- it means that Jesus had the full *essence* of deity – an awesome statement – Jesus is not simply godly, but God
- This unique belief marks Christians out from every other kind of believer
- it focuses on Jesus, his unshared supremacy
- what makes a person a Christian? It is what we believe about and how we trust in Jesus Christ
- It is first and foremost believing Jesus Christ: my Lord and my God
- Principalities, powers, the devil and demons accept that Jesus Christ is Lord and God
- But they neither trust him nor serve him as Lord and Saviour
- So it is believing that Jesus Christ is my Lord and my God and trusting him

The Christian believes that in Christ the fulness of Deity lives in bodily form but Paul continues

- ‘and you have been given fulness in Christ, who is the Head over every power and authority’
- that is the Christian has been given the fulness of Christ, not as a future attainment but something we have now
- what this means in effect is that the Christian does not need anything else
- other than the fulness of Jesus Christ, which the Christian already has
- there are always people who tell you that having become a Christian you need more
- nothing can be an addition to what the Christian already has in Christ
- that is not to say that the Christian is mature at the time of conversion
- like a new born baby we must go forward to maturity, and the new life goes forward to maturity by

II **FELLOWSHIP WITH CHRIST**

In him 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.

(Colossians 2:11-12)

There is no point pretending that these verses are not tricky; a very controversial issue in NT times

- was whether converts who were uncircumcised, needed to go through the ritual of circumcision
- for some people salvation was ‘Jesus and circumcision’; the sign of circumcision given to Abraham
- was the cutting away of a small piece of flesh and symbolised cutting away the sinful human nature
- at its best circumcision was only ever intended to be an outward sign of the promise
- a promise that had to be fulfilled by inward experience
- So Paul maintains that the believers are circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature
- circumcision was an outward sign of the grace of God, his promises, his covenant
- but the purification which was signified is not effected by circumcision of the flesh
- but by circumcision of the heart, the circumcision of Christ; Paul continues then to speak of baptism
- like circumcision baptism also has both a literal and figurative meaning
- its literal meaning is to dip or immerse in water but its figurative meaning is to be ‘identified with’
- at conversion the believer was spiritually baptised, ‘having been buried and raised’ – all in the past
- through faith in the power of God, who raised him (Christ) from the dead
- this is not salvation by water but by Christ, for by faith the believer shares in his dying and rising
- the believer has **FULNESS IN CHRIST, FELLOWSHIP WITH CHRIST** and

III **FREEDOM THROUGH CHRIST**

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

(Colossians 2:13-15)

Here Paul outlines the grim nature of the situation before the Christians came to Christ

- one of the reasons that Christians do not have the passion for mission and evangelism as we should
- is that we fail to appreciate the grimness of life without Christ - there is no salvation if we do not need saving
- we need saving because we were dead in our sins, spiritually dead to God in a mortal body, dying by the day

But the wonder of the gospel is this: the gospel is not about self-improvement but about divine transformation

- he made you alive, he forgave all your sins; the work of the Spirit is signified, not conveyed, by baptism
- any more than it would have been conveyed by circumcision
- by grace Christ identifies with the believer, by faith the believer identifies with Christ
- the burial of Christ is important because it verifies his death, in dying to self the believer shares with Christ
- the resurrection of Christ is important because it brings hope, that we who died with him will also be raised
- no amount of water could cause the believer to die with Christ or to be raised with him
- but by grace, through faith, the believer has shared with Christ in his death
- this faith is in the power of God who raised Jesus from the dead

Paul appears to be saying that the written code (the law) with its regulations

- left us in its debt – the balance was weighed against us, every time we sinned the debt mounted up
- so much so that the accumulated debts became too great to measure
- but Jesus gathered all the sins/debts together and carried them to the cross
- redeeming believers from the curse of the law having become the curse for us
- there is more than a possibility that what Paul has in mind is the custom
- of pinning to the cross the crime for which the criminal was executed
- for Jesus, this was not any description of what he had done, only who he was, ‘King of the Jews’ (Messiah)
- all the debts that cried out against us are nailed to the cross

No hymn-writer ever put it better than American Presbyterian preacher and evangelist, Philip Bliss, when he wrote:

My sin, oh! The bliss of this glorious thought
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to his cross: and I bear it no more
Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! O my soul.

The Roman triumphal procession was proof of the great victories

- the picture, familiar in the Roman world, is that of a triumphant general, leading a parade of victory
- the conqueror, riding at the front in his chariot, leads through the city, parading the spoils of battle
- behind trails a wretched company of vanquished kings, officers and soldiers
- Christ, in this picture, is the conquering general, the powers and authorities are the vanquished enemies
- And are now paraded before the entire universe – if the cross appears to be a symbol of death and defeat
- Paul presents it as Christ’s chariot of victory; wherever the power appears to lie; it really lies with Jesus