

EXEGETICAL BRIEF
Colossians 2:11-13
In Baptism God Works Faith and Makes Us Alive, Joining Us to Christ

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In baptism those who once were dead in sin have been buried with Christ. In baptism they have been raised with Christ and made alive with him. The agent of such marvelous deeds? None other than God himself. In baptism he powerfully works saving faith and joins his people to Christ for time and eternity.

Christians proclaim the truths of the previous paragraph because Holy Scripture proclaims them. For our preaching, teaching, and counseling we turn to several Spirit-given passages for such encouragements. Perhaps nowhere are they more evident than right at the middle of Colossians 2.

In the opening passage of his epistle Paul gives thanks to the Father for his readers' faith in Christ Jesus. From early on he makes it clear that their believing was not by their own thinking or choosing. It was rather the gospel itself which came to them, bore fruit, and grew, and it was the Father who qualified them for a share in what the saints inherit. What the Colossians first received from Epaphras lacked nothing, he says, because trustworthy Epaphras proclaimed Christ. "At one time you were alienated and hostile in your thinking, engaged in evil deeds," the apostle writes, "but now God has reconciled you by (Christ's) physical body through death so as to present you holy and unblemished and blameless in his presence" (Col 1:21-22).

Paul points out that he too is a servant of Christ Jesus and that because of that he is in chains. Nevertheless he rejoices in his hard labor, all the while "striving in keeping with (God's) activity that works in me in a powerful way, *ἀγωνιζόμενος κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐνεργουμένην ἐν ἐμοὶ ἐν δυνάμει*" (1:29). The power and strength to believe and serve are God's, Paul indicates. Real knowledge comes from God. So does the wisdom to carry it through. Such themes resonate throughout the epistle. They reach a climax at Colossians 2:9-10. Paul has urged his dear readers to continue to live in Christ and to be watchful lest someone would kidnap them with philosophy and empty deception that's in keeping with human tradition. Now the apostle explains why: "Because in him resides all the fullness of the Deity bodily, and you have been filled in him who is the head over every ruler and authority."

At this point Paul could rightly have pointed out that his readers' "having been filled in Christ" (*ἐν αὐτῷ πεπληρωμένοι*) first took place when the gospel was preached in their midst. Instead he chooses to focus on God's life-giving work through the means of baptism. This is the only time in Colossians that he mentions this sacrament, making for a memorable and pleasing surprise. Colossians 2:11-13 could well be rendered as follows:

11 In him you also were circumcised with a circumcision not done by hand -- in the stripping off of the body of sinful flesh, in the circumcision done by Christ -- 12 when you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith produced by the working of God, who raised him from the dead. Indeed, as for you, when you were dead in your transgressions and in the un-circumcision of your flesh, he made you alive with him, having forgiven us all our transgressions.

Apparently the church at Colosse consisted largely of Gentiles. Prior to Epaphras' arrival these pagans had not been circumcised. Yet neither Epaphras nor Paul called for that rite. In Christian baptism, after all, something far superior had occurred. Rather than having a piece of flesh removed, "the body of the flesh" (τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός) was stripped off. Their entire sinful nature was cut away, we might say, but not with a knife held in the hand. This took place rather "in the circumcision done by Christ" (ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ).

Certainly τοῦ Χριστοῦ could be rendered "of Christ." Inevitably, however, the reader must decide how the writer intends this genitive to be understood. Might τοῦ Χριστοῦ be an objective genitive? No, this is not a reference to what was done to the child Jesus on the eighth day of his life; nothing in this setting supports that understanding. Yet quite frequently this "circumcision of Christ" is considered a reference to his death. (For instance, see the footnote at Col 2:11 in the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*.) Such an interpretation is defended by recent Bible commentators such as Douglas Moo, Peter O'Brien, and James Dunn. Apparently each regards this metaphor as having its genesis back at Colossians 1:21. What this argument overlooks, however, is that in this epistle, in particular, Paul combats the docetic idea that the flesh of Christ lacked true reality. Why then would he suggest that Christ's fleshly body was stripped away at the cross? What it also bypasses is that in this entire passage the uncircumcised Colossians are the subject of περιετμήθητε as well as the antecedent of συνταφέντες. It's rather the Gentiles, then, who received this "not by hand" circumcision. It's Christ who was the agent and not the receiver of this blessing. The alert interpreter will treat τοῦ Χριστοῦ as a subjective genitive.

So when were these Gentiles at Colosse circumcised by Christ? Has Paul conceded a point to the Judaizers? Hardly. This περιτομή τοῦ Χριστοῦ occurred, Paul writes, "when you were buried with him in baptism" (συνταφέντες αὐτῷ ἐν τῷ βαπτισμῷ). Paul made a similar assertion in his epistle to the Romans. "Or don't you know," he asks, "that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore through baptism we were buried with him into his death" (Ro 6:3-4a). Baptism means sinners have been buried with Christ, and burial with Christ means that their sinful nature with all its deeds and desires has been put to death.

Christ died and was buried; so too the baptized. Christ was raised to life by the Father; so too the baptized. "Baptism is the grave of the old man and the birth of the new" (J.B. Lightfoot). As the apostle moves to the latter point, there are two possible ways to understand the relative clause that follows τῷ βαπτισμῷ. The words ἐν ᾧ καὶ συνηγέρθητε could be rendered "in *whom* you also were raised with him." Perhaps Paul is returning to the "in Christ" refrain that echoes throughout Colossians, even as recently as the beginning of verse 11. Given the object of the verb's συν- prefix, however, would the apostle in one short phrase be reminding the Colossians that their spiritual resurrection was *both* "in Christ" *and* "with Christ" at the same time? That seems unlikely. Far better to regard the pronoun as a reference to the nearest possible antecedent, τῷ βαπτισμῷ. The phrase ἐν ᾧ καὶ συνηγέρθητε is then rendered, "in *which* you also were raised with him."

Once again we note a striking similarity to Paul's words to the Romans.

4 Therefore we were buried with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in a new way of life. 5 For if we have been joined with Him in the likeness of His death, we will certainly

also be in the likeness of His resurrection. ... 8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him, 9 because we know that Christ, having been raised from the dead, will not die again. (Ro 6:4,5,8, HCSB)

Faith plays a significant part in this baptismal resurrection with Christ; Paul tells his readers that it occurred διὰ τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ θεοῦ. Yet what does the apostle mean by this phrase? One doesn't need to look far to observe two contrasting explanations. Most English translations of the past 100 years have rendered τῆς ἐνεργείας as an objective genitive: "through faith in the working of God" (ASV, RSV, NASB, HCSB, NIV2011); "through faith in the power of God" (NIV1984); "through faith in the powerful working of God" (ESV). Recent commentators contend that when πίστις is followed by a genitive noun, as here, the genitive noun (Christ, his blood, God, etc.) always identifies the object of faith. Many conclude that this passage makes faith in God's power to raise the dead a prerequisite of baptism. Whether it is done with water or is understood in an entirely metaphorical sense, they contend, baptism here is merely incidental to what Paul is asserting, that it is faith that matters most, since it is faith that brings about this resurrection. As one popular paraphrase of Scripture puts it,

For you were buried with Christ when you were baptized. And with him you were raised to new life *because you trusted the mighty power of God* (italics mine), who raised Christ from the dead. (Col 2:12, *New Living Translation*)

Yet what is unique here at Colossians 2:12 is that the genitive following διὰ τῆς πίστεως is not God's person or even one of his attributes. The noun τῆς ἐνεργείας speaks rather of God's effective activity or working. That alone sets this phrase apart from the usual occurrence of the faith-followed-by-a-genitive construction. At the same time several other matters must be taken into consideration. Thus far in this epistle the apostle has been presenting God, working in and through Christ, as the effective power and source for faith and salvation. He does the same in his other writings.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works (οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων), so that no one may boast (Eph 2:8-9, English Standard Version).

For it is God who works (ὁ ἐνεργῶν) in you, both to will and to work (ἐνεργεῖν) for his good pleasure (Php 2:13, ESV).

From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able (τὰ δυνάμενά) to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim 3:15, NIV2011).

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is God's power (δύναμις) for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek (Ro 1:16, HCSB).

Here at Colossians 2:12 the interpreter stands on solid Scriptural ground when he takes τῆς ἐνεργείας as a subjective genitive ("by God's in-working") or as a genitive of source ("from God's effective work") or as a genitive of producer ("produced by the working of God"). With the following verse Paul confirms this interpretation: "Indeed when you were dead in your transgressions and the un-circumcision of your flesh, he made you alive." Aside from the emphasis

on God as the mighty agent of baptismal vivification, there is more than one play on words here. Prior to the arrival of Epaphras and the gospel of Christ Jesus, Paul's Colossian readers were dead. They were capable only of transgressing. They were uncircumcised, both physically and spiritually. Certainly they had no ability whatsoever to put their faith in God's power. But through the gospel in Word and sacrament God did his "effective working" (ἐνέργεια) in their hearts and in Paul's as well. "He made you alive with Christ when he forgave us all our transgressions."

There appears to be only one recent Bible translation that presents the interpretation of διὰ τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ θεοῦ that Colossians 2:13 supports so convincingly. *God's Word Translation* (GW) is a revision of William F. Beck's *An American Translation*. GW renders διὰ τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ θεοῦ as "through faith in the power of God," but in the accompanying footnote it also suggests "through faith produced by God." Over 100 years ago this sense of διὰ τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ θεοῦ was seen more widely. Published in 1903, the *Weymouth New Testament* has, "through faith produced within you by God." For centuries the *Authorized Version* (KJV) announced that this baptismal resurrection occurs "through the faith of the operation of God." In addition, generation after generation of German-speaking believers would have read and heard Luther's outstanding translation, which speaks of this baptismal resurrection as being "durch den Glauben den Gott wirkt."

The Holy Spirit's assurances at Colossians 2:11-13 equip the church to confess the Christian faith boldly and especially to speak correctly about baptism and faith -- as follows, for instance.

- For Abraham and his descendants circumcision was a comforting expression of the gospel promise, but circumcision's power and grace have been far exceeded by the power and grace of Christian baptism.
- The baptism of infants was anticipated by the circumcision of infants. It is true that none of the inspired writers specifies the age at which someone is to be baptized. But since the power to produce the faith that grasps baptismal graces resides in almighty God and not in human beings, there is no reason to postpone the baptism of a child. "People were also bringing babies (τὰ βρέφη) to Jesus for him to place his hands on them... Let the little children (τὰ παῖδια) come to me," Jesus said, "and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Luke 15:15a,16, NIV2011).
- Human beings do believe, but not because they have chosen to direct their faith at the power of God. Faith rather is the result of God's working in their hearts through the gospel. Yes, the grace for believing is God's, and so is the power for doing so.
- In baptism almighty God works faith in Christ, creating it and sustaining it. This is no less a marvel than when he works faith in Christ through the gospel that is preached.
- In baptism God joins individuals to Christ, burying them with Christ and raising them with Christ and making them alive with Christ. Since all the fullness of God dwells in Christ and since the baptized are joined to him, there is no divine gift or blessing that they lack. "You have been filled in him" (Colossians 2:10).
- In baptism God grants the forgiveness of all transgressions.

- In baptism God grants new life.

The Savior's Great Commission, recorded in Matthew 28:16-20, directs and moves the church to make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching. His apostle's blessed words of Colossians 2:11-13 direct and move the church to do the same, to the glory of God.