

Hands On: A Faith to Handle, Taste, and Touch

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[This sermon was presented at the Virginia Mennonite Conference Assembly in the late 1990s during a session in which the Bible studies were on Colossians. It is an exegetical sermon focused on Colossians 2:1-23. Its broad theme is that of receiving and appreciating the good creation that we have been given through Christ.]

“I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments. . . . 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. . . . Therefore, do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. . . . Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking. . . . 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, Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch? (Colossians 2: 4, 8a, 16, 20-21, NRSV)

It happens countless times in the life of every child. Just when you have found something beautiful or fascinating or just plain fun to pick up and explore with your hands or, better yet, to taste with your tongue, there comes this urgent command on the part of an anxious parent or teacher: “Don’t touch it! That’s just to look at!” or “Don’t pick that up! You might drop it; and then it would break!” or “Don’t put that in your mouth! That’s dirty! That was on the ground!” It is not fair. And it is no fun either. Just when the real discoveries of life are about to be made by the world-class, two-year old “scientist,” the experiments are suddenly cut short by the supposed “wisdom” of some adult authority figure who always “knows what is best for you.”

I should know. I have my own tale of an aborted experiment, possibly the very earliest memory I still carry with me. I was not yet two years old. And I had not yet learned to walk. But I was very proficient at scooting around the house in a little foot-propelled walker. I could get around just fine, thank you. And one day, as I was tooling around the house in my walker, I made a marvelous discovery. In the kitchen there was a cupboard with doors just at my level. And when I opened those doors, I found a world of sweetness that I could not resist. There sat a dish with molasses in it, just waiting for me to help myself. (I am positive my sweet tooth came directly with my genes!) And so I dipped in and did what came natural—that is, until one of the many adults in my world caught me in the act and put a very quick stop to my one-and-a-half-year-old taste test. And ever after, those doors were firmly closed, with a rubber band as I recall, so that I couldn’t repeat my experiment. So much for that discovery! The message I received: Do not stick your fingers into the molasses dish and do not taste the molasses!

At age one-and-a-half I surely knew nothing about the Christians in Colossae. Nor could they ever in their entire lives have known anything at all about me. But oddly enough, in a human sort

of way, we had a lot in common, the Colossian Christians and I. As we learn from chapter two of Colossians, they were getting the same “Don't touch, don't taste” messages from some of the authority figures in their world that I was getting in mine. In fact, these “Don't touch, don't taste” messages appear to lie at the very heart of Paul's overall message to the Christians in Colossae. But they do not function in the way we might expect them to. Let us take a closer look at Colossians 2.

The first thing that we discover is that Paul is deeply concerned about the Colossian Christians and their fellow Christians in Laodicea and other nearby places. “I want you to know,” he writes, “how much I am struggling for you and for those in Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face.” This is no minor concern and no casual statement on Paul's part. The language he uses here might just as well read, “I want you to know how much I am agonizing over you” This is a very serious matter in Paul's eyes.

And what is it that Paul is in such agony about? The answer to this question lies in a whole series of warnings and challenges that run throughout chapter two. Let's take a closer look at them:

I am saying this so that
no one may deceive you with plausible arguments. . . .
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. . . .
Therefore, do not let anyone condemn you
in matters of food and drink
or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths.
Do not let anyone disqualify you,
insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels,
dwelling on visions,
puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking,
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,
Do not handle,
Do not taste,
Do not touch?

If we take this series of warnings and challenges and shake it down into a single, central message, I think it would read something like this: “Somebody is trying to sell you a bad bill of goods! It looks great on the surface. It is a very plausible scheme. It sets forth an extensive checklist of rules and regulations. And if you follow them, this is supposed to prove that you have “arrived” in your Christian life and are spiritually “superior” to the others around you. But in fact it is a nothing more than a scam! Do not let yourselves get taken in!”

The tricky thing about this scheme is precisely that it looks good in so many ways. A lot of the things that it talks about are things that good Jews (and presumably good Jewish-Christians as well) would appear to care about: food, drink, festivals, new moons, and sabbaths. It is impossible for us, from our present day vantage point to know exactly what all was meant by

these references. But they surely sound like things that belong to a faithful lifestyle for persons brought up in a Jewish world, even if those persons have become followers of Jesus the Messiah.

And that is not all. The list also mentions “visions” and “self-abasement” (or “humility”). In the Jewish world that Paul knows, both the world of the Hebrew scriptures and the world of his own present day, “visions” are the vital channel by which God communicates with prophets. But even more importantly Paul’s own life has been radically changed, irreversibly transformed by means of a vision he himself has had of the Risen Jesus. And in one of his letters to the Corinthians Paul claims other visions as well, spectacular visions in which he has been caught up to the “third heaven” and has heard “things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.” “Visions” are by no means a bad thing in the world of Paul and the Colossians. And, as we see elsewhere throughout the New Testament, “self-abasement” or “humility” is a genuine Christian virtue in its own right.

So what is the problem here? If this list contains so many good things to do, then why is Paul in such agony over the Colossians? Well, one answer is that there is more on the list. Woven into the scheme right along with things that appear to be good Jewish practice are things that clearly sound somewhat more questionable: philosophy and empty deceit, human tradition, the worship of angels, pride based on human ways of thinking. Here again we do not know what all the specific ideas or practices are in focus here; but when these items are factored in, the list as a whole begins to sound rather more suspect.

And this is not all. What is even more telling about Paul’s warnings to the Colossians is his reference to the “elemental spirits of the universe.” This reference to “elemental spirits” points in the first place to the four basic “elements”—earth, water, air, and fire—which, according to the thinking of Paul’s day, are the building blocks of the universe. In Paul’s day these four elements are considered such important “beginning points” for the universe that they have more or less taken on the character and the authority of gods in and of themselves. So Paul’s reference here to the “elemental spirits of the universe” is a way of talking about “other gods who rule the universe.” But even beyond any specific connection with the “gods” of earth, water, air, and fire the reference to the “elemental spirits of the universe” also points more broadly to the basic principles which govern human life in the world, or as Walter Wink puts it, “the whole bundle of practices and beliefs that provide one’s basic orientation to life” 1. It is ultimately these elemental “gods” and the entire package of beliefs and life practices which they bring with them that cause Paul’s agony concerning the Colossians.

And if we now put the whole list of warnings together and read it in the light of Paul’s reference to the “elemental spirits of the universe,” we begin to see the real cause for Paul’s concern. Far from being a simple list of (more or less) good things to do, this list now reveals itself as a complex web of beliefs and practices which dictate and dominate the lives of those who would live by it. There can be no question that this is the case. Take a look for yourselves at the powerfully negative verbs that Paul uses to describe the life lived under these “elemental spirits.” People who live under the power of these “spirits” are deceived, taken captive, condemned, and disqualified. What is more, they are subjected to all manner of regulations, regulations that say, “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”

And here is the cruelest irony of them all. These powers which dictate and dominate people’s lives are viewed as the “elemental spirits of the universe;” but in fact their ultimate achievement

is to alienate people from the natural world around them and prohibit them from touching, tasting, and handling the myriad glories of that world. The Colossian Christians—many of them, at least—are Jewish Christians, persons who have cut their eye-teeth on the Hebrew scriptures. These Christians know that God created the heavens and the earth and everything on the earth and in the seas. And these Christians know that God proclaimed all this created matter to be “good.” The world around them is God’s good creation. The Colossian Christians know this. And here is someone trying to cut them off from God’s good world! This is the source of Paul’s agony.

And to all of this Paul says “NO” as strongly and passionately as he can. This is not the path to spiritual maturity. This is not even the road to salvation! And why not? Well, Paul says, on the one hand there is a negative reason. It just does not work. “All these regulations refer to things that perish with use. They are simply human commands and teachings. 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.” Denying the natural world and neglecting one’s own body in order to carry out all these rules and regulations looks good on the surface. But it is not going to get you where you want to go. Rules and regulations have no power at all to bring about genuine personal transformation. Human nature will win out every single time. That is the rock-bottom truth of the matter.

But on the other hand, Paul says, there is also a positive reason, a far more crucial one. This world-denying path blazed by the “elemental spirits of the universe” is not the road to salvation, let alone the path to spiritual maturity, for the simple reason that Christ himself fills both of those roles. Christ is the “substance,” the sturdy “reality” compared to which all those rules and regulations are merely a pale and insubstantial “shadow.” Christ is the “mystery of God . . . in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Christ is the one “in whom all the fullness of deity dwells bodily.” And what is most crucial of all, Christ is the one in whom and through whom the “elemental spirits of the universe” themselves have been “disarmed” and robbed of their ultimate power.

This is the reason for Paul’s urgent appeal to the Colossians not to be taken in by “plausible arguments.” These so-called powers, these “elemental spirits of the universe,” have already, even now, right in the middle of history, been overcome through Christ. They are no longer genuine powers, if indeed they ever were. And as a result they have no genuine claim, now or ever, over the allegiances of the Colossian Christians. This is the bottom line and this is the Gospel Truth. How has this come about? By what means does Christ claim victory over these powers, these “elemental spirits of the universe”? Paul offers us a two-fold answer to this question. The first answer takes us back to chapter one and to the soaring Christ-hymn that Paul sings to the Colossians:

[Christ] is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation.
For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,
things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers;
all things have been created through him and for him.

He himself is before all things;
and in him all things hold together. (1:15-17)

Christ can claim victory over the “powers” out there, the “elemental spirits of the universe,” precisely because he existed before them and he himself was the agent of their creation. And because of this, Paul can conclude in chapter two that Christ is now the “head” of “every ruler and authority.” Whoever and whatever the “elemental spirits of the universe” might be, they all owe their own existence and their own allegiance to Christ, the “image of the invisible [Creator] God,” the “firstborn of all creation,” and the one “through whom and for whom all things have been created.” This is good news for the Colossians.

But there is more good news coming. Christ can claim victory over the “elemental spirits of the universe” not only because of the life-giving role he plays in the creation of all things but also, ironically, because of the life-giving role he plays through his own death. Listen once again to Paul’s words:

And when you were dead
in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh
God made you alive together with him,
when he forgave us all our trespasses,
erasing the record that stood against us
with its legal demands
He set this aside,
nailing it to the cross.
He disarmed the rulers and authorities
and made a public example of them,
triumphing over them in [the cross].

And here is the greatest irony of them all and the greatest good news as well. The “rulers and authorities,” whether earthly powers or cosmic ones, must surely have thought that they had won the day, when they managed to condemn Jesus and nail him to a cross. Not so. In an unprecedented, upside-down, totally non-conventional act of divine subversion, God snatches the victory and the power right out of their hands just when they are about to begin the celebration. The death of Jesus, Paul assures us, is God’s own act to disarm the “elemental spirits of the universe,” all those “rulers and authorities” that claim ultimate power over humankind, to expose them publicly as defeated powers, and to lead them in God’s own triumphal procession toward God’s own ultimate purposes.

And what are God’s ultimate purposes? If we look back to the end of the Christ-hymn in chapter one, Paul tells us exactly what they are:

[Christ] is the head of the body, the church.
He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,
so that he might come to have first place in everything.
For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell;
and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,
whether on earth or in heaven,
by making peace through the blood of his cross.

God has no lesser purposes than the reconciliation of all creation, “all things, whether on earth or in heaven.” Humankind and all the rest of God’s good creation as well, have experienced, each in their own way, the effects of the Fall—the pain, the brokenness, the anguish, the death of alienation from God and from each other. Humankind and all of God’s creation are in need of restoration, of redemption, of reconciliation with each other and with God. And all this—the restoration, the redemption, the reconciliation of the whole created order—all this is God’s ultimate purpose. All this is what God has intended and what God has accomplished through the death of Christ. This is the victory that God is now celebrating.

And the powers, the “elemental spirits of the universe”? Well, it is all over for them. They have been had. Big time. It does not get any worse than this. Just when they think they have won the battle, they discover that they have lost the war. The victory is God’s victory, it is Christ’s victory. And just as importantly, it is also victory for the Colossian Christians. Because they have placed their faith in Christ, they too are heirs to the victory which God has claimed over the “powers” through the death of Christ. Because they have walked together with Christ all the way from death to life, now Christ’s victory over the “powers” is theirs as well. Listen as Paul recites for the Colossians their salvation history, that which God has done for them through the death of Christ:

You have participated in the death of Christ through “spiritual circumcision,” by “putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ.” You have been “buried with Christ in baptism.” As a result you have “also been raised with Christ through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.” You have been “made alive together with Christ” by God who has “forgiven us all our trespasses.” And the final word, the bottom line for the Colossians? You “have come to fullness in Christ.” Christ is the one “in whom the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” Christ is the one “who is the head of every ruler and authority.” And you are heirs to all this! This is your inheritance in Christ!

There can be no question left. The Colossians have no need, now or ever, to subject themselves to the “elemental spirits of the universe” or to live under the domination of an unending list of rules and regulations that alienate them from God’s good creation. Not only have these “elemental spirits” been utterly defeated through the death of Christ. But by the same token and through the same means, God has gifted the Colossians with life and fullness far beyond anything the “elemental spirits of the universe” could possibly have to offer.

This is the great good news that Paul has for the Christians of Colossae, and this is the driving passion behind all of Paul’s words. But this is not the end of Paul’s message. Paul has not brought the Colossians to this spiritual mountaintop so they can build tabernacles and spend the rest of their days in this rarified atmosphere. Paul has brought them here to widen their vision, so they can see the true shape of realities in God’s world. Paul has also brought them here to renew their energies, so they will have the courage and the stamina to head back into that world and to live out the lives to which God is calling them. Paul may well be a visionary; but he is also a practical man. And Paul’s bottom-line concern is the most practical question of all: How are the Colossian Christians to get on with the business of living in the real, everyday world? How are they to respond to all those “plausible arguments” out there and all those rules and regulations that say “do not taste, do not touch, do not handle”?

Paul has a simple message for the Colossians in this regard. Let us listen to his words, drawn from verses 6 and 7 and verse 19:

As you therefore
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 . . .
holding fast to the head,
from whom the whole body,
nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews,
grows with a growth that is from God.

The message is not hard to decipher. On the one hand Paul says, “Keep yourselves firmly grounded in Christ. You have received Christ Jesus as Lord. You have been taught in the faith which has Christ as its foundation. Now keep your roots deep in the soil of Christ’s love for you and Christ’s death on your behalf. Only in this way can you face the challenges of the day and separate truth from falsehood.” And on the other hand Paul says, “You are a body, the body of Christ, the body to which Christ is the head. Live as that body. You belong to each other and you belong to Christ. Let yourselves be nourished by the gifts of God’s good creation. Handle, taste, and touch with joy and reverence all that which God has created to be good. Above all, share with each other the bread and the cup, those life-giving gifts of Christ’s body and blood. Let yourselves be held together by the love and forgiveness which Christ has given you and which Christ enables you to offer to each other. Only in this way can you hope to experience the growth that is from God.”

This, then, is Paul’s word to the Colossians. But it is also God’s word to us. Did you notice as we went along? This message is ours as well. To be sure, we live in a different world from the Colossians. We speak a different language. We practice different customs. But all the same Paul’s message to the Colossians speaks to us much as it did to them. We too live in a world where we are bombarded constantly by all kinds of messages, messages that we too have to evaluate for truth and falsehood. We too live in a world with all kinds of “powers” that dominate our lives and shape our perspectives. And we too live in a world where we find ourselves more and more alienated from God’s good creation. We may never have been there. But we know Colossae very well.

So Paul’s word to the Colossians is indeed Paul’s word to us: “Keep yourselves firmly grounded in Christ, in Christ’s love for you, in Christ’s death on your behalf. Remember that you are the body of Christ, that you belong to each other and that you belong to Christ. Live joyfully and reverently in the good world that God has created. ‘Handle, taste, and touch’ with courage and confidence the myriad gifts which God has given you to enjoy. And above all else, share with thanksgiving the bread and the cup, the greatest gift of all, the gift of life which is yours through the death of Christ.” This is Paul’s word to us. May God give us ears to hear, minds to understand, hearts to be receptive, and the grace to be faithful. Amen.

1. Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers*. P. 76.

