

COLOSSIANS
The All Sufficiency of Christ

&

PHILEMON
Christian Relationships

A Commentary on Paul's Epistle
To the Colossians

&

To Philemon

Dr. Ian A. Fair

Dedicated to my
my wonderful
loving, and gracious, wife,
June,
who for more than 70 years
has been my constant companion, encourager, and advisor.
in marriage, family matters, mission work, ministry, academia, and
teaching.

“Without you and your help I would most likely have been lost
somewhere in Africa!”

Soli Deo gloria

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Theological Foreword:

Jesus is the Fulness of Divinity!

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; ¹⁶ for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Col 1:15-20

This text expresses the very heart and foundation of the Christian Faith!

“For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell.”

It also expresses the heart of Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians!

Jesus himself had observed, “*unless you believe that **I am he** [God] you will die in your sins.*”¹

John’s record of Jesus’ claim is theological dynamite!

John opened his Gospel with the astonishing claim that Jesus, *as the Word of God, was and is God, fully divine*, or more profoundly significant, YHWH himself in the flesh:

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God; ³ all things were made through him,

¹ John 8:24.

and without him was not anything made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men.²

Jesus' claim at John 8:24, "*I am he*," deserves some attention here, especially as Paul builds his theology in Colossians on the *full divinity of Jesus*.

Our English translation of Jesus' claim, John 8:24, usually reads "*I am he*," but the Greek reading is much stronger, for ἐγὼ εἰμι, *egō eimi*, *I am*, is the Greek Septuagint Old Testament equivalent of the Hebrew Aramaic term which *God* used to describe himself to Israel at Isa 43:10.³ For Jesus to use this term

² John 1:1–4.

³ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, pp. 130 f. "There appears to be little doubt ... that ἐγὼ εἰμι is an OT revelation formula. It is especially common in ... Isaiah, and Isa 43:10 is of particular significance for the present passage: "You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe and understand that *I am He*" ... rendered in the LXX as ἐγὼ εἰμι. The phrase is equivalent to "I am the Lord," which occurs in the sentence that follows (Isa 43:11). Schnackenburg points out the excellence of the connection between Isa 43:10 and v 24: "Jesus is in a lawsuit with the 'world' (vv 14–18), and in him God testifies that he is the eschatological helper and savior who turns darkness into light and wants to bring every human being into the light of life (8:12). The Jews should put themselves on God's side, accept his testimony and believe that in Jesus God says his 'It is I.' Then they too would win a share in God's eschatological salvation".

Further, C. H. Dodd, *Interpretation*, 93–96, pointed out that "I am He" ... gave rise to a peculiar variation, "*I and He*," ... which was treated as the name of God, and interpreted as expressing the close association, almost identification, of God with his people. This name was used at the Feast of Tabernacles by the priests when they chanted the Hosanna from Ps 118:25; instead of "I am Yahweh," they sang "I and He," ... It is significant that the absolute ἐγὼ εἰμι should occur twice in this paragraph: in the context of the feast and in the related "I am" of v 58. It certainly indicates the unity of Jesus as Revealer and Redeemer with God the Father; it conceivably could also carry the further implication of Jesus as the representative of God's people binding them to the Father (so Bruce, 193). Cf also Newman, Barclay, *et al*, *Handbook on the Gospel of John*, United Bible Society, 1980, p. 273, "On the meaning of the phrase *I Am Who I am*, see 4:26. In this passage, as in some others in John's Gospel, the statement "I Am" is used absolutely, without a predicate. In such instances this expression identifies Jesus with God. The Greek order of this last

to describe himself in the Jewish mind was absolute blasphemy, but it lay at the very heart of Jesus' claim to be YHWH on earth; God present with his people, *fully divine, equal in every respect to YHWH.*

This is the astonishing key theme of Paul's Epistle to the Colossians! Jesus is in every sense God! It would have been astonishing to the Jews of the Synagogue (in other words, blasphemy), to the Jewish converts to Christy, and to the new Gentile Christians to whom Paul was writing.

sentence is the reverse of the order in *TEV* ("for if you do not believe that 'I Am,' you will die in your sins").

Preface

In this concise powerful epistle the Apostle Paul wrote to the small church in Colossae claiming in the face of challenges from syncretistic Jewish and platonic mystery religions that Jesus is in every sense the true center of everything. He was Lord of the heavens and the earth, and as such also the absolute center of the Christian faith! The young church and new Christians in Colossae were daily confronted by aggressive and challenging attacks from a pagan culture with multiple philosophical themes that in some respects sounded reasonable, but Paul knew that ultimately these challenges would draw the new Christians away from the true center of the Christians faith unless he laid the firm foundation of the full divinity of Jesus as YHWH.

Paul's strident claim that Jesus, and only Jesus, was the full divine presence of God on earth was a dramatic and cosmic life changing assertion, and profound affirmation for the new Christians in their religious struggles with the syncretistic Jewish and pagan philosophers.

Christians in every age and region face a steady challenge from a world of religious and philosophical thinking which too often results in a syncretistic form of faith. At times these views are hostile and need careful confrontation. At other times, the challenge was and is more subtle and melodious. Although Paul did not aggressively confront these religious and philosophical views in Colossians as he had Judaism in Galatians, he carefully outlined and discussed the dangers of any syncretistic faith that shifts the focus away from Jesus as the center and foundation of the Christian faith.

Centuries later, Oscar Cullmann produced a similar cultural and religious challenge asserting in the context of 19th century liberal theology that Jesus was the *mid-point* of religious faith. The term mid-point infers that Jesus was the *pivotal point* around which all Christian theology and faith hinged. The theology of Christ is the leverage point that gives religion its power to change

the world! The following comments illustrate the striking nature and impact of Cullmann's *mid-point* theology.

At the close of the liberal 19th century denigration of the role of history in theology, Cullmann addressed the popular positions of many of his contemporary theologians such as C. H. Dodd and Albert Schweitzer, which commonly identified theological history as "*redemptive history*" or "*inaugurated eschatology*". Cullmann stridently argued that Jesus Christ was the *mid-point* of *sacred history* which informs both general and religious history, and which in turn runs lineally from creation to consummation. He stressed the objective reality of *sacred history and Jesus' role in historical faith* against the existentialist interpretation of Rudolf Bultmann's existential theology, and Carl Barth, whose neo-orthodox theology disallowed history a primary role in theology. Both Bultmann and Barth represented much of German 19th century post-liberal theological views of the *role of history in faith*.

Cullmann's *mid-point* theology *set faith in Jesus back into a critical role in not only sacred history, but all historical thinking*.

This is where and how the Apostle Paul was placing Jesus in the context of religious thinking of his late 1st century religious opponents of Asia. Faith in the full divinity of Jesus as a real historical person is the critical hinge, the *mid-point* in redemptive theology.

As Paul had stated in Ephesians that the all-sufficiency and preeminence of Jesus is crucial to the Christian faith, so in Colossians he maintained that other world views do not direct the believer to YHWH as the divine center of life. It is only in Jesus, believed in as the fulness of divinity dwelling fully in human/divine form, that faith in the divine creative power of the ages delivers the real meaning of life.

However, in all probability, the letter to Colossae was also intended to accompany a brief letter to a dear friend of Paul's in Colossae, Philemon, encouraging him to forgive a runaway slave, Onesimus, who had journeyed to Rome, or Ephesus as some prefer, to lose himself in a world of slaves. In Rome, Onesimus for some unstated reason, had found Paul and had been converted to

Jesus by Paul. Forgiving Onesimus was not the full meaning of Paul's request to Philemon! Paul was asking Philemon to receive Onesimus back *no longer as a slave, but now as a brother in Christ*. That would have been culturally social dynamite in the Colossian and Asian Roman world! Christianity was radically different from any religious faith found in Colossae, or Asia!

Colossians and Philemon are two letters that are possibly the shortest of Paul's letters to his disciples, especially in Asia and the region of Ephesus. Yet, in their own context of 1st century life in that part of the world, their impact must have been little short of a cosmic and theological earthquake! The alarming claim that Jesus is fully God, possessing the fulness of divinity in human form, was cosmic seismic activity in every sense! Absurd to both the Jewish and pagan theological and philosophical thinking, but pivotal to the Christian faith!

It is most likely that most of the Christians in Colossae knew some things about Jesus, but their faith needed a clear and strong foundation and focal point to withstand the cultural challenges of the Asian philosophical and religious world.

Theologically the Colossians had been baptized into Christ (Col 2:12), but they obviously had not yet fully understood the theological import of Jesus being their divine deliverer from the alien mysteries of the pagan culture, and that Jesus was God himself, fully divine and filled with all the divinity and power that could be imagined!

In a culture saturated by Greek neo-platonic philosophy and mystery religions with different god's almost one for every day of the week, Paul explained that this Jesus in whom they believed and whom they worshipped was none other than the one eternal YHWH and God in heaven who had created the world and everything "in the beginning".

Likewise, Paul was aware of a form of syncretistic Judaism that had been shaped by a platonistic form of gnosticism that had brought into the worship of angels, pagan festivals, and new moon ceremonies. We could call this a form of *incipient Jewish*

gnosticism flavored by some pagan forms of mysticism. We will discuss this challenging concept at the exegesis of Col 2:16ff.¹

The Christians in that region of Asia had not yet received John's magisterial Gospel in which he claimed that Jesus had been in the beginning with God, was with God, sharing his divine, nature, and the one who had with YHWH actively created everything in the beginning².

Approximately 30 years before John wrote his Gospel, Paul had already made the bold claim at Col 1:15-19 and 2:8-10 that set the tone for the message of Colossians:

*Col 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. ¹⁹For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*³

*Col 2:8 See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. ⁹For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰and you have come to fulness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.*⁴

¹ Cf. Ralph P. Martin for an excellent discussion of this syncretistic culture in, *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*, pp. 82ff.

² John 1:1-3, cf. also Heb 1:1-3.

³ Col 1:15-20.

⁴ Col 2:8-10.

Paul's epistle to the Colossians, along with John 1:1-3 and other texts like Heb 1:3 and 1 Cor 8:6, have from the beginning of Christianity laid at the very heart and foundation of the Christian faith.

Without understanding that there are no other gods besides Jesus, that he is the divine incarnation of YHWH, the Colossian Christian's and our hope for salvation would be doomed to failure. Note Peter's statement to the Sanhedrin at Acts 4:1off, *be it known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you well.*¹¹ *This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner.*¹² *And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*

Chapter 1: Brief Overview of Colossians

Colossians is one of four Pauline Epistles which are commonly known as the Prison Epistles. It was a pastoral letter encouraging Christians to center their faith in Jesus Christ. Many of the new Christians in both Asia and Colossae were recent converts from a syncretistic Jewish and pagan background. There was a danger that the new Christians may have incorporated some of their pagan or Jewish religious practices into their Christian faith in Jesus. Even today, the danger of Christo-pagan practices are found in many forms of religious celebration throughout the world.

There are two points in the above paragraph that are widely debated by scholars; i) the Pauline authorship of some of the four Epistles, and ii) the prison from which these Epistle were written.¹

First, in our study we will adopt the position that all four prison epistles were written by the Apostle Paul from a prison in the city of Rome, with an open mind regarding Ephesus being a possibility.

Considerable discussion has taken place over the last century regarding the Pauline authorship of Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. Several scholars writing in the early 20th century questioned the Pauline authorship on the basis of linguistic, ecclesiological, and theological “inconsistencies” between these three epistles and what they consider to be “authentic” Pauline epistles, Corinthians and Romans. A common view is that these three epistles, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, were written after Paul’s death by a Pauline school of disciples who wrote the epistles in Paul’s name either to honor Paul or to give credit and authority to Paul’s ministry! Some discussion is given to a supposed view of accepted pseudepigraphy in the early church.

¹ For scholarly discussion on these points, cf. Marcus Barth, R.V.G. Dunn, Peter O’Brien, F. F. Bruce, Douglas Moo, Gordon Fee, Michael Bird, David Garland, Ralph Martin, G. K. Beard, *et al* in the bibliography listed above.

Recent scholarship, based careful analysis of all relevant facts, has challenged these views of pseudepigraphy as being poorly supported. Few recognized scholars today adopt the view of pseudepigraphy.

Many contemporary internationally recognized scholars support the Pauline authorship of all four epistles, emphasizing Paul's theological acumen and the theological depth of the author, drawing attention to the different theological issues addressed by Paul in these epistles.²

We note also that several prominent scholars acknowledge that the imprisonment could have been in either Rome or Ephesus, with N. T. Wright and G. K. Beal favoring Ephesus. However, it appears from a survey of scholarly opinion that the consensus favors the traditional view of Rome, which is the approach we will adopt in this commentary.

Second, the recipients of the letter to the Colossians were mostly Phrygian and Greek Gentile believers in Colossae, with some Jewish converts also among the congregation. They were members of one or two house churches, the central one meeting in Philemon's house, but some meeting in Nympha's house.

Third, the occasion for Paul's writing the letter was most likely news conveyed by Epaphras, a co-worker of Paul's, bringing news to Paul of the challenges faced by the churches in the region of Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea. It may have been Epaphras who had planted the churches in Colossae and neighboring cities of Hierapolis and Laodicea.

Fourth, in view of the missionary activity of certain philosophers and teachers among their pagan neighbors who proclaimed a syncretistic Jewish Gnostic mindset, Paul wrote to the church in Colossae stressing that Jesus Christ, and only Jesus

² For detailed discussion of the authorship of Colossae cf. Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians*, pp. 98ff; N. T. Wright, *Colossians*, pp. 31ff; Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians*, pp 114ff; F. F. Bruce, *Colossians*, pp 28ff; Douglas J. Moo, *Colossians*, pp. 28ff. 2008; David Garland, *Colossians*; Clinton Arnold, *Ephesians*, G. K. Beale, *Colossians*.

Christ, was the center and foundation of the Christian faith and hope. Scholars have differed slightly as to the identity of the pagan philosophers, but most recognize the Jewish, platonistic, gnostic, and mystery religious nature of their challenges. Some have questioned whether there were active opponents, but the nature of Paul's response indicates some form of serious challenge to the Colossian Christians.

As Paul had stressed in his Ephesian epistle, *Jesus Christ is all sufficient and absolutely supreme in the spiritual world*. Furthermore, Paul had stressed in his Ephesian letter that Jesus was fully divine in every sense or claim to divinity. Jesus had pre-existed creation and was the source of all created things. *In his death on the cross and resurrection Jesus had defeated all spiritual powers and had secured eternal life and security for all believers*, cf. Eph 1:15-23.

In Colossae, as in each of his prison epistles, Paul stressed that a life of faithful dedication to Jesus, and consequent ethical living, were the best witness Christians had in support of the truthfulness of their faith.

The City and Population of Colossae

It is obvious from historical accounts that there had been an early and sizable community in Colossae as early as ca. 600 BCE. The region was originally populated by ancient Phrygians and Greeks, centuries before Paul visited the area.

By the time of the Roman occupation of Phrygia, ca 100 BCE, there was already a reasonably sized community of Jews in Colossae with an active Synagogue. Some have estimated that possibly between 1,000 and 2,000 Jews had lived in Colossae at some point.

Peter O'Brien records that:

... according to Josephus (*Ant.* 12.147–53), Antiochus III brought two thousand Jewish families from Babylon and Mesopotamia and settled them in Lydia and Phrygia.³

³ O'Brien, *Colossians*, p. xxvii. Historical records reveal that this took place ca 220 BCE.

According to numerous historical records there was probably a fairly large Jewish population in the other cities of the region of the Lycus valley. Some have estimated that to be as high as 7,500 Jews in the total district.

On the complex cosmopolitan religious makeup of Colossae O'Brien observes:

... the Colossae of Paul's day seems to have been a cosmopolitan city in which differing cultural and religious elements mingled.⁴

The early records of the region indicate that in its early years Colossae had been a wealthy commercial city. The fertile Lycus served a rich agricultural community.

The financial success of the cities of the Lycus valley supported a wealthy textile industry. Colossae became famous for the distinguishing purple color of its wool, which became known as *colossinus*.

The commercial basis of the region was also strengthened by Colossae being at the crossroad of two major thoroughfares, one running west to east, the other south to north.

The lack of inscriptions and archaeological artifacts at Colossae today, and its neighboring city Hierapolis, do not reveal enough information for scholars to identify the real nature of Colossae at the time Paul wrote to them. The city by the time of Paul had shrunk to more of a localized village community than a large commercial city.

Some coins discovered in the region provide some religious information regarding the worship of the Artemis and Zeus being prominent. There is some indication that Egyptian deities Isis and Sarapis were worshipped.⁵

⁴ O'Brien, *op. cit.*, p. xxvii.

⁵ Arnold, "Colossae", *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 1089. Cf. also James D. G. Dunn. *Colossians*, Kindle Locations 309ff.

Map of Colossae in Relation to Rome

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An alternate journey direction could have been East from Rome across the Adriatic Sea toward Macedonia, along the Egnatian Highway, Thessalonica/Philippi, then South toward Ephesus/Colossae. Whichever route was taken it would have been approximately 1,000 miles.

As observed above, the city of Colossae was situated on a major road running from the west to the east, making early Colossae an important commercial region. Later, a major road running from the south through Laodicea to Pergamum, the Roman capital of the Province of Asia, diverted traffic from Colossae through Laodicea, reducing the importance and population of Colossae.⁶

In the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* Clinton Arnold adds that by the time of Paul the city had been greatly diminished in size and importance.

Colossae was still an important city during the Roman imperial period, as evidenced by inscriptional data and some extant coins showing the usual public officials ... Based on Strabo's inclusion of Colossae in a list of small towns ... some scholars have contended that by the 1st-century a.d. Colossae had greatly diminished in size and importance. D. Magie has correctly observed, however, that there is a gap (lacuna) in Strabo's text after *polismata* and it should therefore not be inferred that this description applies to Colossae. Nevertheless, Colossae was increasingly overshadowed by its neighbors, particularly Laodicea,

⁶ Walter Elwell, ed., "Colossae", *Baker Encyclopaedia of the Bible*, vol 1, p. 496.

which became the most prominent city of this valley by the Roman imperial period.⁷

The Church in Colossae

Luke records in Acts Luke that while Paul was in Asia, ca. CE 53, he lived for approximately 2-3 years in Ephesus, and while there preached throughout the Roman Province of Asia (Acts 10:10), “*all Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jew and Greeks.*”

It is assumed that one or more converts from Ephesus had carried the Gospel to Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea, for there is no mention in the New Testament that Paul personally visited the city of Colossae. Such a person may have been Epaphras, Col 4:12. It is apparent from Luke’s discussion of Paul’s ministry in the region of Asia that the Colossians were not converted through the personal ministry of Paul himself. Yet Paul’s epistle to the Colossians indicates that a close filial relationship developed between the congregation and Paul. It is most likely that many Asian Christian communities were established during that period of Paul’s evangelistic activity while in Ephesus ca. CE. 52–55. While the evangelistic Ephesian ministry was directed by Paul, other faithful believers would also have been active in the ministry.

As Peter O’Brien has observed, the spread of the Gospel message and new congregations being planted;

... fell within the sphere of Paul’s apostolic ministry to Gentiles and Paul had constantly maintained warm personal contacts with them.⁸

We should remember that the churches planted by the early Christian missionaries were house churches. Due to the size of the houses most of these churches were small family oriented churches. These grew by the evangelistic conversion of neighbors, but due to the size of the house these groups remained small house

⁷ Arnold, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, pp. 1089f. Cf. also Michael F. Bird, *Colossians and Philemon*, Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2009.

⁸ O’Brien, *op. cit.* pp. xxvii–xxviii.

churches, possibly resulting in several house churches being established in a village or city.

In his study of the Corinthian church, Jerome Murphey O'Connor, in an excellent analysis of 1st century Roman and Greek houses, has observed that most churches in the 1st century were small house churches capable of accommodating approximately 50 to 65 members in a worship service.⁹ We can safely assume from this information that the church in Colossae was small and able to accommodate approximately 50 members in a worship service.

David Garland supports this conclusion regarding the small size of the Colossian houses which supports the point we are making that the Colossian church was a small house church, but nevertheless significant enough for Paul to write this profoundly weighty letter regarding the issues they were facing. Note Garland's observation regarding a small, possibly insignificant Colossian church, and the impact of its message! He succinctly observes:

Colossians was written to a negligible Phrygian Christian community almost two thousand years ago, and yet it still speaks relevantly today.¹⁰

James Dunn draws attention to the fact that there may have been more than one house church in Colossae, as well as some in Laodicea, but it seems that the major concern in Colossians and Philemon circled around the Philemon house group.

We have no way of knowing how large the church in Colossae was by the time the letter was written to it. But if "the saints and faithful brothers" (Col. 1:2) are not to be simply identified with the church in the house of Philemon (Phm. 2) and/or with the church in the house of Nympha, we have to assume the existence of more than one house church in Colossae (see on 4:15). The same deduction from 4:15 can be made with regard to the churches in Laodicea.

⁹ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "House Churches and the Eucharist", *Keys to First Corinthians*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, Kindle Location 2566.

¹⁰ David, *Colossians*. Kindle Location 419.

The lack of mention of Hierapolis in 4:15 presumably implies that Epaphras's [sic] mission there (4:13) had not been so successful; any believers who lived in Hierapolis may simply have made the double journey to Laodicea to attend gatherings there. In that case we have to envisage the Christians in the Lycus valley meeting in [sic] or as at least four small (house) churches.¹¹

What we learn from Paul's epistle to the Colossian congregation was that they were a tight knit congregation with whom Paul had somehow established close relationships. Note the warm gracious terms of his opening paragraphs to the congregation:

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

² To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colossae:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

³ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love which you have for all the saints, ⁵ because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel ⁶ which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—so among yourselves, from the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth, ⁷ as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf⁸ and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.¹²

... ^{4:7}Tychicus will tell you all about my affairs; he is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸ I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your

¹¹ James Dunn. *Colossians*, Kindle Locations 362-366.

¹² Col 1:1–8.

hearts, ⁹ and with him Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of yourselves. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.

¹⁰ Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, receive him), ¹¹ and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. ¹² Epaphras, who is one of yourselves, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always remembering you earnestly in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. ¹³ For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. ¹⁴ Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you. ¹⁵ Give my greetings to the brethren at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. ¹⁶ And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea. ¹⁷ And say to Archippus, “See that you fulfil the ministry which you have received in the Lord.” ¹³

The Religions of Asia Minor and Colossae

Nestled in a prosperous cosmopolitan and fertile region it is only reasonable to understand the religious and philosophical fiber of the region as a conglomeration of national, ethnic, and cultural views. The synthesis of several of the major religious viewpoints contributed to the assortment of religious ideas the Christians in Colossae and the surrounding communities faced. Whereas the polytheistic and syncretistic-philosophic culture of the age was acceptable to the region, for Christians this would only challenge

¹³ Col 4:7–17.

the dominant theistic Jesus-centered mindset of the faith that Paul expressed.¹⁴

Scholars have “identified” several syncretistic philosophic and religious views present in the Asian culture ca. the 1st century CE.

The So-called Colossian Heresy

Several scholars have attempted to identify a Colossian Heresy in the region of Colossae, but most scholars see this as an overreach or overamplification of the philosophical ingredients identified in Colossae.

Judaism

Likewise, several researchers¹⁵ focus more on Judaism as the issue lying behind the disturbing doctrine faced by the Colossian Christian. There were obviously several Jewish leanings in the issues the Christians were facing, but identifying Judaism as the central issue is likewise overstating the challenge faced by the Colossians. Most evangelical scholars, however, believe Dunn has overplayed his case. However, there are certainly several Jewish ingredients to the problems faced by the Colossians, most likely arising from their synagogue neighbors, but it is possibly that some form of Jewish Mysticism may lie at the root of the Jewishness of the issues touched on in Colossians.

The Mystery Religions

The ancient mystery religions were obviously a major feature of Ephesian, Colossian, and Asian religious practice. Mystery religions were concerned with esoteric inclinations including drunken experiences which were assumed to introduce one to a special relationship with divine and spiritual powers, as in the wine Cult of Dionysius.

Through mystical trances and experiences induced by a variety of means and practices the individual could escape the

¹⁴ For reference to this discussion cf. Michel F. Bird, Douglas J. Moo, F. F. Bruce, N. T. Wright, R. P. Martin, Gordon Fee, in the biography provided for this study.

¹⁵ J. D. G. Dunn, *Colossians*.

confines of the physical world, enter the spiritual world, and gain access to the divine.

Gnosticism

Gnostic views varied but most held to some forms of special enlightenment knowledge, sometimes identified by the term *gnosis*. These views are commonly referenced in the modern era as Gnosticism, although in the 1st century they existed only in an incipient form. These views were becoming a major feature of Asian philosophical and religious practices. *Gnosis* is the Greek word for *knowledge*. Gnosticism was a quasi-platonic philosophical view that stressed spiritual enlightenment through possession of a *special form of intuitive knowledge* that was considered necessary for overcoming the spiritual powers that surrounded the physical and cosmic realms surrounding the life of the physical world.

Without this special esoteric knowledge, which was not learned but could only be received by special spiritual endowment, one could not escape the powers of the spiritual world.

This early type of Gnosticism was a form of Platonism which held that the physical world was evil and not permanent. The physical world was corrupt. In contrast with the physical world the spiritual world was permanent and pure. By special *intuitive knowledge (gnosis)* one was enabled to escape the spiritual powers of the physical world and those spiritual forces (known as *demiurges*, sometimes *demigods*) that reigned over the physical world.

This mood was already by 50-60 CE becoming a problem faced by Christians. Scholars refer to this early form of gnosticism as *incipient gnosticism*. By the 2nd century CE gnosticism became a major divisive threat to Christianity. One form of gnosticism was initiated by Marcion, a Christian in Rome. Marcion was born at Sinope in Pontus, the son of a bishop. He traveled to Rome ca 135 CE and became a member of the church there, and soon became a prominent theologian in Rome. Developing some eccentric theological views, he eventually taught that the god of the Old Testament was not the true God. Here he was obviously influenced

by current gnostic views such as Valentinian dualism. Marcion held that The true God was a higher God than YHWH and could only be identified with Jesus Christ. He rejected the theology of the Old Testament and wrote a work called the *Antitheses* to show the differences between the god of the Old Testament and the true God. He established churches of his own to rival the orthodox Church for the next two centuries. Marcion's Bible was primarily the New Testament from which he excised any books that favored Judaism and the Old Testament, for example, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John. The Church Fathers such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian denounced Marcion as a heretic, and he was excommunicated by the church of Rome around 144 CE.¹⁶

To get a sense of some Gnostic concepts, the chart below diagrams the Gnostic cosmology. The word cosmology refers to the discussion of the cosmos including both the spiritual and the physical world; how they originated and are controlled. We might today speak today of the *universe*, how it came into being and how it is controlled. Gnosticism argued that a physical world which is essentially evil and transitory could not have been created by a good loving god since according to the Platonic world view the physical world is for all intents and purposes evil.

As mentioned above, one radical Gnostic view held that a renegade disobedient son of the ultimate good god had placed in the physical world an evil spirit which corrupted everything that touched it. Therefore, if Jehovah (*Ialdabaoth* in their terminology) created everything physical he could not be a *pure good god full of light*. Full blown Gnosticism of the 2nd century CE, as in Marcionism, rejected Judaism and everything Jewish, notably the Old Testament since it proclaimed a message regarding Jehovah who in the Gnostic minds was an inferior God. This however was more of a later 2nd century challenge to the Christians but the root of this heresy was developing at the time of Paul and his ministry.

¹⁶ Adapted from www.theopedia.com/marcion, cf. the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, and most religious encyclopedia.

The syncretistic philosophy encountered by the Christians in the Asian region might best be defined as a Jewish form of *gnosis* that had synchronized Platonistic gnostic concepts with some Jewish perceptions. We encounter Jewish-gnostic synthesis more in Colossians than in Ephesians.

The Christian answer to this false philosophical synthesis was that the eternally good God, Jehovah, is in fact the pure light who created everything. Representing this pure god of light and life, Jesus, Jehovah's son, came into the world to bring the redeeming light of the world (John 8:5; 9:5). Christians argued that everything these early incipient quasi-religious philosophies were looking for was already found fully in Jesus. In fact, it was in Jesus, the light of the world, that Christians argued one could find enlightened and the true guide to the divine true God of light. In the Colossian and Ephesian quasi-Jewish-gnostic context note John's powerful claim about Jesus. He is the divine word of God, the one God who created everything, John 1:1-5:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God; ³ all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Observe also Jesus' answer when Thomas asked where Jesus was going when Jesus spoke of leaving the disciples just before his ascension. John 14:5, 6:

"Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. ⁷ If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him."

The Christian response to the synthetic religious philosophical alternatives to faith in Jesus, and the evil spiritual forces encountered in the physical world was that it was Satan who had entered in and corrupted the world, not Jehovah, and Jesus the son

of the pure God had come to redeem the world. Christians argued that Jesus in his death and resurrection had conquered the spiritual powers of evil and the destructive power of Satan and had provided all the spiritual power one needed for true spiritual eternal life.

This Paul stressed in his epistle to the Ephesians, Eph 3:14-21, which incidentally was also received by the Colossian and Laodicean churches!

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

Some Gnostic Concepts

Some gnostic views identified by scholars who have researched the field suggest that the broad field of gnostic thinking have claimed that the gnostic view of the *ultimate god* is *pure light, pure spirit*, thus ruling out Jehovah who created the physical world! The pure god could not have created a corrupt world. Lesser god's exist who are not pure light but who are descendants of the pure god. This impure god is thus considered by some of the gnostic persuasion to be Jehovah, or "*Ialdaboth*". Jehovah, a descendant of the pure god was the impure god who created the evil physical world. Real enlightenment or *gnosis* is the intuitive knowledge, a special esoteric knowledge, attainable only by a select few enlightened souls. It was held that physical man needs

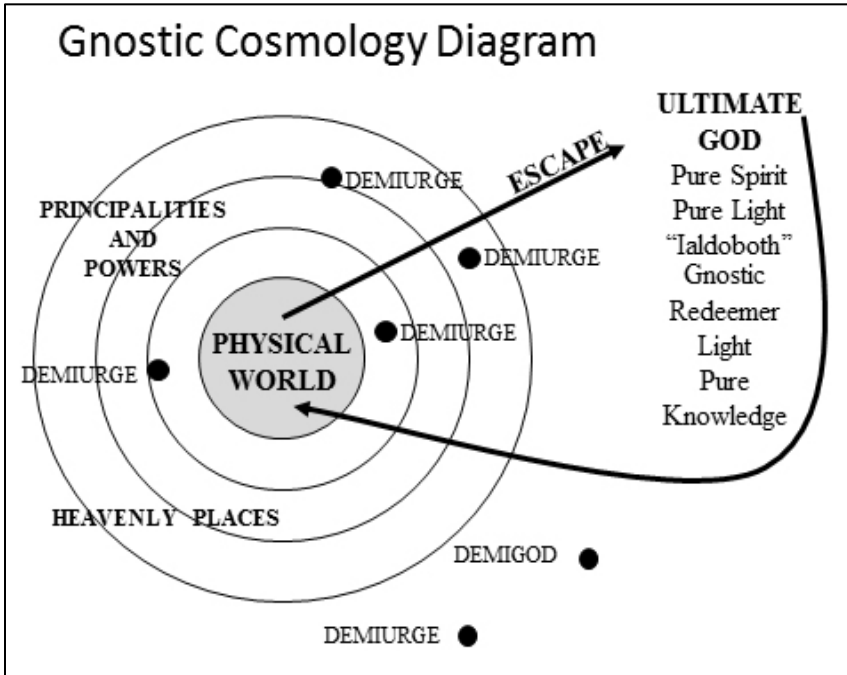
pure spiritual esoteric knowledge which is not the normal human knowledge of this world. Physical man needs this special intuitive knowledge to escape the spiritual powers of this world. This special intuitive knowledge comes directly from the pure god of light, possibly through some enlightened spiritual “redeemer” force.

This form of gnostic mysticism required special intuitive spiritual knowledge not learned from human resources such as general knowledge. Gnostic mysticism involved a secret working and intersection of a true Redeemer of Light into human experience. The purported “Gnostic Redeemer” provided this secret intuitive knowledge.

In addition, it was held that evil spiritual powers pervaded the world and the heavens and controlled the cosmos. They are referred to in some circles as the *principalities* and *powers* of the spiritual world. They roamed the *heavenly places*. The pagan philosophers of the age proclaimed that man needed the special intuitive knowledge of gnosis to escape from these spiritual powers (sometimes identified as *demiurges*). The term *stoicheion* was a technical term used to describe these special elemental, foundational powers of the universe.

Gnostic Diagram by Ian A. Fair

In conclusion, most contemporary scholars of this philosophy in Asia at the time Paul faced them believe that there was not one simple Colossian heresy or false teaching challenging the Christians. The danger was in including some of their past pagan Phrygian, Greek, and Jewish views into their understanding of the Christian faith. This needed serious challenge. Paul's argument was that all the Colossians had been seeking in their various pagan and quasi-Jewish philosophical or religious backgrounds had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who was in reality God in person redeem-



ing the world from all spiritual powers.

Note the following powerful statement from Col 1:9-21:

And so, from the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and

understanding, ¹⁰ to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. ¹¹ May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; ¹⁶ for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Chapter 2: Content Outline of Colossians¹

A Typical Pauline Epistolary Structure as Seen in Colossians

It is held by most scholars that Paul and other early church leaders in the early years of Christianity adopted the traditional Graeco-Roman letter writing style as a structure for their letters. This structure was built around a Salutation & Greeting, a Laudation-Praise paragraph², the Body of the Epistle, and a Conclusion.

Careful study of Paul's letters reveals that he *adapted* this style in his letters to his churches and individuals, notably in his epistles to the Romans and Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philippians. The following is a simple Pauline structure which we will follow in our study of Colossians.

Salutation: Col 1:1-2

As was Paul's practice in his usual salutation and greeting paragraphs we find praise, a prayer for grace and peace, confident encouraging reference to the members of the church as saints and faithful brethren, and a Pauline apostolic self-authentication. In addition, in Colossians, Paul included Timothy, his travelling companion and ministry assistant, in his greeting.

¹ For a similar analysis of Colossians cf. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, "Colossians", pp. 359ff.

² The term *laudatio* which we will use describing this important paragraph in Paul's letters refers basically to a statement of praise and a prayer for the saints. *Laudatio* derives from the Latin *laudatio* meaning *to praise*. In this paragraph we find Paul praising the people being addressed for their faithfulness, and offering prayers for their Christian witness. Wrapped up in this *laudatio* we can identify Paul's primary theological concern for which Paul is writing and praying.

Laudation and Prayer: Col 1:3-14

Col 1:3-8: Paul gives thanks for the saints in Colossae.

He reminded them of their faith in Jesus, which point is the heart of his epistle. With false teaching surrounding, them he mentioned the “*word of truth*” which is the foundation of their faith.

Col 1:9-14: In this prayer Paul prays that the Colossians may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will which bears positive fruit.

He prayed that they would be strengthened with power according to God’s glorious might.

In a high point to this prayer Paul reminded them that God had already fully transferred them into the kingdom of His son, Jesus, where they had redemption and the forgiveness of sins.

This suggests that for Paul the kingdom of Jesus had already been established and begun! We spoke of the kingdom and eschatological age having already being inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus (Matt 12:28), being in progress (Col 1:13), and to be finalized at his second coming (cf. 1 Cor 15:20ff). In fact, Paul’s whole chapter of 1 Cor 15, on the resurrection of Jesus, is extremely important to Paul’s gospel message of Jesus, and of Paul’s message to the Colossians! Note 1 Cor 15:20ff:

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷ “For God has put all things in subjection under his feet.”

The Body of Colossians: Col 1:15-4:6

In the Pauline epistles the body, or the bulk of the main message is broken into two sections; 1) Theology & Doctrine, 2) Practical ethical material regarding living the Christian life based on the theological message. This practical material is known as the Paraneisis of the letters.

Doctrine and Theology: Col 1:15-3:4

Although this section is primarily theological, but because of the significance of the theology Paul was discussing, he occasionally mixed in some paranetic practical material when he felt it important to do so. Paul is never committed to exclusively discussion theological material in one solid block, but as in Romans and Ephesians, he often mixed in paranetic material to make a point. The astute scholar will look for rhetorical paranetic keys such as words like *therefore* and *but* to identify paranetic material.

Col 1:15-20: Discusses the Full Divinity of Christ.

This pericope is so majestic and significant that I am quoting it in full below, with underlining for emphasis. Note the emphasis on the full divinity of Jesus, his supremacy, and his all-sufficiency. Many scholars believe that this pericope may have been an early Christian hymn or baptismal confession. That is quite possible, but it is not beyond Paul's own mind and development:

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; ¹⁶ for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

You simply must read that text again and let it sink in! I cannot think of other Scriptures that are more important to the Christian faith.

Col 1:24-29: False doctrine leads to an estrangement from God.

As in Eph 2:11ff Paul reminded the Colossian Christians that outside of Christ they were estranged and separated from God. They had now, in Christ, been reconciled to God in Christ's body (symbolic of his death and resurrection). They did not need any other fancy esoteric doctrine claiming to contain mystic and secret knowledge (Gnosticism) to know God and be in a right relationship with pure light and divinity.

In Christ all of the mysteries that have been hidden from man have now been revealed. This mystery is Christians being in Christ (by faith and baptism; Rom 6:1-11 and as we will shortly see, Col 2:12, 13) and Christ in them. This is their hope of sharing the glory of God!

Col 1:28, 29: Jesus, the power of the Gospel message.

I cannot think of any text more relevant to ministers and their ministry of either evangelism or building up the faith of believers than this text.

²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me.

Col 2:1-7: Paul's Concern for the Colossians possessing the correct form of knowledge concerning Christ.

Paul explained that he strove for the Colossians in his prayers that they might be knit together in love and enjoy all the riches of *assured understanding* of the knowledge of the mystery of Christ. He expressed this in the pervading context of the Gnostic emphasis on special knowledge. Paul stated that the Colossians already had all of the special knowledge of Christ that they needed.

Col 2:9-15: The All Sufficiency of Christ.

In his death and resurrection Jesus had defeated all of the world and cosmic spirit powers, especially those who controlled the supposed “heavenly places”. The Colossians needed no more knowledge or power than the knowledge of, and faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Jesus and the real knowledge of Jesus was all sufficient in their struggles with the demonic spirits!

The following text, Col 2:9-15, lies at the very heart of the Colossian theology:

For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily,¹⁰ and you have come to fulness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ;¹² and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.¹³ And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,¹⁴ having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross.¹⁵ He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him.

Col 2:16-23: Asceticism and False Ritual Condemned.

Some false teachers were teaching submission to laws relating to food etc. as signs of spiritual maturity, as well as some form of the worship of angels. Paul condemned such as being only shadows of the real substance, which real substance is found in Christ, and they were already in Christ. Such ascetic practices might sound religious but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh.

Col 3:1-4: The True Center of the Christian Life.

This brief pericope serves as a transitional hinge to the paranetic material that followed. Christians who had been raised with Christ, that is in baptism, Col 2:12f and Rom 6:1-14. The

Colossians had already been baptized into Christ's death and raised with him to a new life. Now they needed to think of spiritual matters relating to Christ rather than to the futile false doctrines and things of this world, for they have died to this sinful world.

Paranesis: Practical Application of the Theology - The Christian life: Col 3:5-4:6

Col 3:5-17: The Transformed Walk in Life.

Paul explained in clear practical terms things that Christians need to “put to death in their lives”, and things they need to concentrate on and in which they needed to clothe themselves! Christians lives are transformed by the knowledge of Christ and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

Col 3:18-4:1: The Christian Family.

As in Eph 5:21-6:9 Paul had discussed the kind of Christian life Christians should strive for in their families. He repeated this for the Colossians. Most likely this was in view of the returning Colossian Christian slave, Onesimus, who had run away from Philemon. Cf. Paul's accompanying letter to Philemon.

Col 4:2-6: Christian Prayer and Conduct.

Paul concluded his paranetic material by encouraging the Christians to continue to pray steadfastly, and to conduct themselves wisely toward outsiders.

Conclusion: Col 4:7-18

Col 4:7-18: We have here Mention of Paul's Co-workers, and Closing Greetings.

As was his epistolary style, Paul mentioned several of his co-workers and sent greetings to the church in Colossae as well as the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis. Note also the reference to house churches which were common forms of churches in the early church.

Chapter 3: Greeting and Salutation

Col 1:1, 2. Paul's Apostolic Greeting.

¹ *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,* ² *To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.*

Beal adds these interesting comments regarding Paul's traditional epistolary greetings:

As we will see, Paul adapts this variant fourfold Hellenistic letter convention, especially by injecting Christian theology into it. For example, the opening address in Colossians of "Paul" is expanded to "an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God," a typical expression added in various ways in Paul's other letters. This is an adaptation of the Hellenistic letter, in which the letter replaces the writer's presence. Yet as we will see in the case of Paul, the letter represents not merely Paul's presence but also his apostolic authority over the recipients. This apostolic authority actually entails that the letter carries with it the authority of God and Christ, whom Paul represents in each letter, including that of the one sent to the Colossians. The second part of the ancient letter was a generic greeting, which Paul replaces with the theologically charged "grace and peace," typically followed by "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," which indicates further that behind Paul's letter-writing stand God and Christ. Colossians follows this pattern, though it has only "from God our Father," for some reason omitting "and from the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul never structures the parts of his epistles as merely formal, stylistic formulas, but as we have already begun to see, he packs his letters with theological substance and means every word he says. He cares deeply about the people to whom he writes his epistles, and there is much feeling expressed in his letters, including his introductory greetings. This is certainly true of his Letter to the Colossians. The main point of verses 1–2 is in verse 2,

which states the goal of the letter: that God would give “grace and peace” to the recipients, which they will need to stand against the false teaching and to persevere and grow in their faith, which the remainder of the epistle will make clear.¹

Col 1:1. *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.* We have already discussed the authorship of Colossians and concluded that although there are some who question Pauline authorship the evidence cited by them is shaky, at best. One major stumbling block to those who question the Pauline authorship is the issue of pseudonymity. There is no reasonable evidence that the early church would have accepted pseudonymous authorship in its discussion of canonical authorship.²

As was his common practice, Paul introduces himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, thus supporting the authenticity of his full apostleship and message, and the radical claims to come that Jesus was fully divine!

Paul insists that he had been *called by Jesus Christ according to God’s eternal purpose*. He had been *chosen, commissioned, and sent out* by none other than Jesus, the Christ of God.

Although Paul would have been known by many of the Christians in the Asian region, there would certainly have been several who had not met him, or who would have learned much about him and his early life experience.

The term *apostle, ἀπόστολος, apóstolos*, was in common Greek terminology understood in a wide range of meanings. Primarily it meant a messenger, one sent out with a message, but this could include *one authorized to convey a specific message*. In modern parlance this word could be rendered *missionary*, one sent out by a church to evangelize for Christ.

Zodhiates explains that ἀπόστολος, *apóstolos* meant:

... to send. Used as a substantive, one sent, apostle, ambassador ... The messenger or ambassador (Phil. 2:25)

¹ Beale, *Colossians*, pp. 54ff..

² Beale, *Colossians*, pp. 33ff.

can never be greater than the one who sends him (John 13:16; Septuagint 1 Kgs. 14:6). The Lord chose the term *apóstoloi* to indicate the distinctive relation of the Twelve Apostles *whom He chose to be His witnesses* ... Therefore, it designates the office as instituted by Christ to witness of Him before the world (John 17:18). *It also designates the authority which those called to this office possess* ... It was the distinctive name of the Twelve Apostles originally (Matt. 10:2; Luke 6:13; 9:10; 22:14; Rev. 21:14) or the eleven later, with whom Paul himself was reckoned, as he says in 1 Cor. 15:7, 9; Acts 1:26. *Paul justified his being counted as an apostle by the fact that he had been called to the office by Christ Himself.*³

The word *Christ* does not refer to Jesus' name, but his *title*. To the Greek or Gentile, Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ, *Christus Iēsous* would have been understood as *Jesus the Christ*, or *Jesus, the anointed one*, Jesus, the one anointed by God for the office of priest and king. To the Jew it would have read *Jesus the anointed Messiah of God*. Shortly, at Col 1:15 ff, Paul elaborates on the full significance of this title to both the Greek and the Jew. Jesus was anointed by the almighty God to be his *messiah/christos* representative on earth. Paul continues to clarify this by boldly stating that Jesus is the image of the true God, not some false gnostic or mystery god!⁴

The brief expression *by the will of God* is easily passed over, but it emphasizes to any new converts that Paul was called and commissioned by the Almighty God to be an apostle of Jesus. Cf. Gal 1:11ff, *et al.*

*For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel.*¹² *For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ.*¹³ *For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it;*¹⁴ *and I advanced in*

³ Zodhiates, *ἀπόστολος*, *apóstolos*, *emphasis mine*, IAF.

⁴ Cf. Bird, *Colossians*, Kindle location 927ff.

Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.

¹⁵ But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, ¹⁶ was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood, ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia; and again I returned to Damascus.

Paul included Timothy as a co-greeter in his epistle as *Timothy our brother*. This may imply that Timothy may have had a hand in the writing of the epistle, or simply that Timothy was known to the Colossians which may be the reason for the expression *our brother*.

Beale adds:

The greeting is not only from Paul but also from Timothy (so also in the greeting sections of 2 Cor. 1: 1; Phil. 1: 1; 1 Thess. 1: 1; 2 Thess. 1: 1; Philem. 1). The mention of Timothy here and in the other introductions indicates, at least, that he is one of Paul's "fellow workers" in the ministry (Rom. 16: 21; 1 Thess. 3: 2; cf. 1 Cor. 16: 10), but it may also imply that he is Paul's secretary (it is less likely that this implies multiple authorship). Paul and other NT writers used secretaries in other letters (he dictated Romans to Tertius: Rom. 16: 22; Peter used Silvanus as a secretary: 1 Pet. 5: 12). Besides being a "fellow worker," Timothy accompanied Paul in his travels (Acts 16: 1–20: 4; Phil. 2: 19; 1 Thess. 3: 6), preached alongside him (2 Cor. 1: 19), and represented Paul's teachings to others (1 Cor. 4: 17) ... This also indicates that Paul is the true author, even if writing through a secretary ... In addition, the initial mention of Paul himself as an apostle before the comment about Timothy, who is not

called an “apostle,” suggests that the letter ultimately represents Paul’s own apostolic authority.⁵

Col 1:2. *To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.*

Note how Paul addressed the Christians in Colossae as *saints*, a loaded term! The term *saints* derives from the Greek ἅγιος, *hágios*, which Zodhiates defines as *holy, set apart, sanctified, consecrated ...* It has a common root, *hág-*, meaning *chaste, pure*. Its fundamental idea is *separation, consecration, devotion to the service of Deity, sharing in God’s purity and abstaining from earth’s defilement*.⁶

Possibly the best description would mean *one who has been sanctified, saved, cleansed, set apart for God’s service and thus totally different from the world*. Paul described sanctification in various places in various ways as something worked by God based on trusting in God’s grace, believing in Jesus, obedience to the gospel, cleansing by the blood of Jesus, and the working of the Holy Spirit, and dedicated to God’s service. (2 Thess 2:13ff; Tit 3:3-7).

Paul described the Colossian saints as *faithful brethren in Christ*. They were *in Christ* by having been *baptized into Christ* (Col 2:10-12, 3:1-3.) and were thus living their lives within the sphere and spirit of Christ.

Paul greeted the Colossians with his traditional greeting, *Grace to you and peace from God our Father*. Grace from χάρις, *cháris*;

Zodhiates observes regarding *cháris* that it derives from *chairō ... to rejoice*. Thus *grace*, produces joy, pleasure, gratification, favor, acceptance, for a kindness granted ... a benefit, thanks, gratitude. *It refers to a favor done without expectation of return*; the absolutely free expression of the loving kindness of

⁵ Beale, *Colossians*, Kindle locations 1429ff.

⁶ Zodhiates, ἅγιος, *hágios*.

God to men finding *its only motive in the bounty and benevolence of the Giver; unearned and unmerited favor.*⁷

Paul added the thought of *peace*, not physical peace as in a war, but *spiritual emotional peace* as in understanding the grace and forgiveness of God. The Greek εἰρήνη, *eirēnē* ... Peace, the opposite of war and dissension (Luke 14:32; Acts 12:20; Rev. 6:4). Peace among individuals, harmony (Matt. 10:34; Luke 12:51; Acts 7:26; Rom. 14:19) ... *Metaphorically peace of mind, tranquility, arising from reconciliation with God and a sense of a divine favor.*⁸

Beale observes regarding the background Paul's expression *grace and peace*,

The introductory "grace" and "peace" may have its broader background in the OT and early Judaism, though there not "grace" (χάρις, *charis*) but "mercy" (ἔλεος, *eleos*) and "peace" are found: e.g., Isa. 54: 10; Ps. 85: 11 (84: 11 LXX); Tob. 7: 12; compare also the Shemoneh Esreh; Jer. 16: 5 ... Jub. 22.9; 2 Bar. 78.2 (see Beale 1999a: 204– 23). However, Paul and other NT writers see "mercy" to be generally synonymous with "grace" (e.g., 1 Tim. 1: 2; 2 Tim. 1: 2; 2 John 3; cf. Jude 2). Note also Paul's conclusion of "mercy" and "peace" in Gal. 6: 16.⁹

The warmth of Paul's salutation and greeting certainly sets the tone for the challenges Paul would shortly set before the Christians in his bold claim that Jesus as *the image of the invisible God*, Col 1:15ff, in other words, as we will shortly ponder, *Jesus is in every sense, God himself!*

⁷ Adapted from Zodhiates, χάρις *charis*.

⁸ Zodhiates, εἰρήνη, *eirēnē*

⁹ Beale, *Colossians*, Kindle locations 1576-1581.

Chapter 4: *Laudatio* Prayer and Theology: Col 1:3-14

The purpose of the *Laudatio* prayer section of ancient letters, and notably in those of the Apostle Paul, was to lay out the chief concerns of the writer in both laudatory style and prayer. From this we can identify the principle theological message of the epistle that will be developed in the body of the epistle. Note Paul's laudation and prayer in Col 1:3-14.

³ *We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,* ⁴ *because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love which you have for all the saints,* ⁵ *because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel* ⁶ *which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—so among yourselves, from the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth,* ⁷ *as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf*⁸ *and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.*

⁹ *And so, from the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,* ¹⁰ *to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.* ¹¹ *May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy,* ¹² *giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.* ¹³ *He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son,* ¹⁴ *in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

Thanksgiving For the Colossian Saints

Col 1:3 and 9.

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you ... ⁹we have not ceased to pray for you ...

Paul's emphasis on prayer and thanksgiving addressed to God the Father forms the basis of a positive beginning to his epistle! Paul wanted the Colossians to know that they held a special place in his life and ministry. He was not only an Apostle of Jesus Christ, emphasizing his ministry in the business of the gospel and the church, but also his deep concern for them as individuals.

Col 1:4, 5. Paul explains why he prayed so earnestly for the Colossians:

because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love which you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel ⁶which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—so among yourselves, from the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth, ⁷as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf ⁸and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

Paul had heard from others of the Colossians' *faith in Christ Jesus*. Paul commends them because their faith was centered in Christ and not some esoteric mysterious knowledge. Faith in Jesus penetrates deeper than some personal existential esoteric experience, for it is empowered in the redeeming grace, mercy, and love of God. In fact, the center of Paul's gospel message was grounded in something real and historical established in the death and resurrection of Jesus, which itself was grounded in the grace, mercy, and sacrificial love of God the Father, and his Son, Jesus, and on Paul's own sacrificial love and working in Asia.

Note Paul's comment on his own ministry, which he shortly would explain in some detail at Col 1:24ff:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church,²⁵ of which I became a minister according to the divine office which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known,²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints.²⁷ To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ.²⁹ For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me.

John in his letter to the Ephesians and Colossians in 1 John 4:7-12 observed that we learn to love because God “for first loved us.” Paul in 2 Cor 5:14 referred to the *love of Christ*, which being in the genitive case can and should have a double meaning, referring to the love which *Christ had for us* that produces *our love for Christ* and one another. Paul picked up on this important theme stressing in these opening remarks to the Colossians that this kind of *love* for all the saints which we learn for God and Christ, and which was eschewed in their love, culminates in a *hope* of a rich future inheritance, which Paul, using their own philosophical language, describes as in the *heavenly places*.

We get a feeling as we read through this epistle that Paul is contrasting himself and his message with those who were promoting their philosophies without any real deep concern for the Colossian Christians. Their goal was somewhat evangelistic and more focused on rituals and special knowledge as a means of redemption from the *powers of darkness* than on what God in Christ has done for them. *In Christ* God the eternal Father had already transferred the Colossians out of the *powers of darkness* (Col 1:13) into the *kingdom of Christ and the real light* where they have *hope* in an inheritance with the saints of light (Col 1:12), and enjoy *redemption* and the *forgiveness* of sins. Note the powerful

language and message at Col 1:12, 13, which we will shortly explore more deeply below:

May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Note how Paul in the text at Col 1: 3-8 refers to a threefold favored theological expression of his, *faith*, *love*, and *hope*, three major ingredients of Paul's paranetic theology!

³ *We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love which you have for all the saints, ⁵ because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel ⁶ which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—so among yourselves, from the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth, ⁷ as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf⁸ and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.*

Note this theme also in Cf. 1 Thess 1:1,2:

We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Perhaps the best known reference to this triad is found in 1 Cor 13:1-13:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have

not love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; ⁵ it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect...
¹³ So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Col 1:5, 6. Paul builds on his previous comments regarding his prayers for the Colossians:

⁵ *because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel*
⁶ *which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—so among yourselves, from the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth ...*

Contrasting some of the Phrygian and Greek philosophical teachings regarding a mysterious esoteric knowledge, Paul spoke of *the word of truth, the Gospel* which according to Paul's basic theological teaching refers to the *truth about Jesus* which was a common gospel theme as seen in his epistles to the Corinthians, 1 Cor 15:1-6:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep,

The foundational principle of the Christian message is fixed in the reality of *the word of truth*, that is, or the message of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection which could be substantiated by the testimony of hundreds of believers who had personally witnessed it

(1 Cor 15:1-8 above), and not in some mysterious secret esoteric knowledge which could be known only by some select quasi-Jewish gnostic initiates.

Col 1:6-8. The gospel of Jesus had been bearing fruit all over the Ephesian world, and beyond. It would have been encouraging to the Colossian to know that they were not the only persons to have followed Jesus in contrast to strange doctrines:

⁶ which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—so among yourselves, from the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth, ⁷ as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf ⁸ and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

Paul stressed the thought that the message they had heard was a message of grace and truth that God redeems those who trust and obey the message of Jesus' atoning death and resurrection, the message that was made public for all by Epaphras' preaching. Note Paul's striking comment at Rom 1:16, 17:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."

Paul anchored the faith of the Colossians by reminding them of the ministry of Epaphras, their local church missionary and minister, who had brought them *the word of truth, the gospel*, which they had believed and obeyed.

Note Paul's similar message to the Jews at Romans 10:6-16

⁶ But the righteousness based on faith says, Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?" (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷ or "Who will descend into the abyss?" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸ But what does it say? The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach); ⁹ because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in

your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ *For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved.* ¹¹ *The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.”* ¹² *For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him.* ¹³ *For, “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

¹⁴ *But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?* ¹⁵ *And how can men preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!”*

The Baker Bible Encyclopedia speaks of Paul’s high regard for Epaphras;

Epaphras, a native of Colossae, was responsible for the city’s evangelization, as well as that of Laodicea and Hierapolis. Through him Paul learned of the progress of the Colossian church and thus wrote his letter to the Colossians. Paul’s high regard for Epaphras was evidenced by his use of such terms as “beloved fellow servant,” “faithful minister of Christ” (Col 1:7), and “servant of Christ” (4:12), a title of esteem Paul bestowed only on one other person (Timothy in Phil 1:1). Epaphras was in prison with Paul at the time the letter to Philemon was written (Phlm 23).¹

Paul’s Apostolic Prayer

Col 1:9-14. ⁹ *And so, from the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,* ¹⁰ *to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.*

¹ “Epaphras”, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 1, p. 703.

¹¹ May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Note the recurring themes in this *laudatio*; knowledge of God's will, spiritual wisdom and understanding, knowledge of God. Obviously Paul was concerned that the Colossians were hearing forms of philosophical teaching that focussed on knowledge; esoteric secretive intuitive knowledge. He wanted to shift their attention to the true tested knowledge contained in the gospel message relating to Christ.

Knowing *the truth of Christ*, the truth concerning Christ, that he was fully divine, or the truth which came from Christ, was paramount to Paul's message to the Colossians. From his vast experience with Pharisaic Judaism and Greek philosophical² views Paul argued that such syncretistic teachings emphasizing cultural asceticism, synthesized with certain aspects of Jewish Law, which highlighted special holy days, and which encouraged self-abasement and the worship of angels (Col 2:16ff) could not be compared with, or substituted for, the freedom available in the true faith concerning Christ, and the knowledge of the full divinity of Christ which Paul had personally experienced beginning on the road to Damascus (Acts 9).

Paul's rich personal experiences and understanding would form the powerful and central thesis of the first major theological point in the body of the epistle as expressed in his *thesis* at Col 1:15ff; Jesus is the exact image, the precise form of the full indwelling of God, in person.

² Growing up in Tarsus, the home of a highly advanced Hellenistic university, and his years studying under the great Jewish philosopher and teacher Gamaliel, had prepared Saul of Tarsus admirably for the daunting task of preaching Christ to the Gentiles, for which God had called him.

Beale astutely observes that at this point Paul was drawing on his vast understanding of Old Testament theology and the occurrence of *knowledge*, *wisdom*, and *understanding* in the Jewish tradition. Beale asks;

What is the source of the “knowledge,” “wisdom,” and “understanding” of God? Paul would say it is the word of God in Scripture and nothing else. The fact that Paul derives his view of Spirit-given wisdom and understanding from Exod. 31 and 35 and implicitly 1 Kings 7, as well as possibly Isa. 11, further shows that his source for apprehending such things is Scripture. The greater focus in Colossians is that Christ is the ultimate source of wisdom (Col. 2: 3) and thus the source of the divine word through his Spirit (see Col. 3: 16, where Christ, the Spirit, and word are inextricably linked).³

We consequently see Paul shifting the attention of the Colossians away from the numerous sources of special knowledge present in the synchronistic or pseudo Jewish teachings facing the Colossian Christians. He would soon, Col 1:15ff, make his bold statement that since Jesus is the exact image of God, the fulness of divinity, everything the false teacher were offering was already theirs in Christ.

Col 1:9. *And so, from the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding ...* Paul uses a specific technical word for *knowledge*, ἐπίγνωσις, *epignōsis*, implying the *full knowledge* of God’s will. Zodiates observes, “It is more intense. than *gnōsis* ... *knowledge* because it expresses a more thorough participation in the acquiring of knowledge on the part of the learner.”⁴ Paul’s point was that the *full knowledge of spiritual wisdom* was revealed by God and his Holy Spirit in the knowledge of the gospel message of Christ. Paul developed this further at Col 3:16 where he encouraged the Colossians to *let the*

³ Beale, *Colossians.*, kindle locations 2484-2490.

⁴ Zodiates, ἐπίγνωσις, *epignōsis*.

word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Col 1:10. The result of this *full knowledge* and spiritual wisdom is a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

Col 1:11, 12. Paul prayed that the Colossians would be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. One cannot escape Paul's majestic argument, reflected in eph 3:14ff, that God promised that the Christians of the Asian region would be filled by the indwelling Spirit with power to live a life worthy of God, Eph 3:14ff;

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God. ²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

Col 1:13, 14. He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Paul reaches back to the last thought of Col 1:12 and the promised inheritance in light in Christ into which all Christians are brought by the Spirit of God. We should remember that one of the “synthesized Jewish gnostic”

points was that the ultimate pure god of light, who through his special agency would secretly impart to the believer the light of redemption that enabled them to escape from the demonic spiritual powers that held them as prisoners of the physical world.

Col 1:13. Paul pointed out that in Christ Christians are already *transferred by God from darkness into the kingdom of his beloved Son, Jesus*. This observation is significant for it is one of the few passages, approximately 12 in all, in which Paul speaks in his 13 epistles of *the kingdom of Christ and God*. This should not imply that the kingdom was of no concern of Paul's theology. Paul's major concern in his ministry was establishing communities of believers in Christ of which he often spoke of as *the church or the body of Christ*. The word *church* appears over 31 times in Paul's epistles, the kingdom only 12, or 13 times. Nevertheless, Paul was comfortable setting the Christian faith powerfully in the greater context of God's kingdom.⁵

Paul speaks of the kingdom of Christ as already in existence in his lifetime. For Paul, and Jesus, the kingdom is not simply some future hope to be fulfilled so time in the future. It was for Paul and the New Testament *an already present reality*. Jesus himself had proclaimed that the kingdom was already present in his personal ministry *since* it was by the Spirit of God that he had cast out demons, Matt 12:28;

But if [since⁶] it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

Furthermore, Paul's expression reads *He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his*

⁵ Cf. the discussion of kingdom in Paul in Moo, *Colossians*, p. 104f, Beale, *Colossians*, Kindle location 1124.

⁶ Matt 12:28, εἰ δὲ ἐν πνεύματι θεοῦ ἐγὼ ἐκβάλλω is a *first class* conditional phrase implying *certainty*, not *possibility*. Furthermore, the expression *has come* derives from an aorist active indicative verb ἔφθασεν which appropriately reads *has come*, not *will come*. The aorist is a simple statement of fact, most often action in the past. Cf. Dana and Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, pp. 50ff.

beloved Son, ¹⁴ *in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.* The Greek ἐρρύσατο, *errusato, delivered*, is a verb in the aorist tense which emphasizes a past action and present reality. Likewise μετέστησεν, *metestēsen, transformed, transferred*, is an aorist verb implying a past action and a presents reality.

The mention of the kingdom as a present reality opens the door to significant discussion of Paul's including the kingdom as present yet with a future fulfillment at the end of time. This is best understood as an example of *inaugurated eschatology* which stresses both the *present reality and future hope* of the kingdom. We stress in this concept of *inaugurated eschatology* that the kingdom of God, prophesied in the Old Testament as a promise from the past which became a present reality in the ministry of Jesus and the church/kingdom age, and which still has a future fulfillment at Jesus *parousia* coming. In other words the kingdom was prophesied by the prophets, inaugurated by Jesus and his kingdom ministry, and is present in the life of the Christians in the church/kingdom age, but with a future fulfillment at Jesus *parousia*, or coming.⁷

Most evangelical or conservative scholars⁸ recognize that Paul's mention of the Colossians having been *transferred or delivered from a realm of darkness into the safety of God's kingdom reign* draws on the Exodus typology in which God delivered Israel from a kingdom of darkness into a kingdom of freedom from slavery. These images of God's saving action are impressive and resonated well with the Colossians' deliverance from the darkness of their pagan world and the light of their new life in the kingdom of Christ!

⁷ Cf.. Beale, *Colossians*, Kindle location 2722f; Moo, *Colossians*, pp. 104f.

⁸ Cf. Moo, *Colossians*, pp. 104ff; Bird, *Colossians*, Kindle locations 1124ff; Beale, *Colossians*, Kindle locations 2726f, *et al* on Col 1:13.

Chapter 5: The Theological Body Introduced: Col 1:15-2:23

In the Pauline epistolary style the body or bulk of the message is broken into two sections; 1) Theology & Doctrine, 2) Parenthesis or practical ethical material regarding living the Christian life based on the theological message.

Although this section is primarily theological, yet because of the significance of the theology Paul was discussing, he occasionally mixed in some paranetic practical material when he felt it important to do so. Paul was seldom committed to exclusively discussing theological material in one solid block as occasionally in Romans and Ephesians, but often mixed in paranetic material at certain strategic points for emphasis. The astute scholar will look for rhetorical keys such as words like *therefore* and *but* to identify such paranetic material.

Doctrine and Theology: Col 1:15-3:4

Col 1:15-20: Discusses the Full Divinity of Christ.

This pericope is so majestic and significant that I am quoting it below in full, with underlining for emphasis. Note the emphasis on the full divinity of Jesus, his supremacy, and his all-sufficiency.

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; ¹⁶ for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

I cannot think of too many Scriptures that are more important to the Christian faith than this one!

Col 1:15a. Paul opened this great paragraph with a striking high Christological claim, *He (the Christ) is the image of the invisible God.*

This statement must have been a stunning and challenging one to those Gentiles who had been drawn to the *monotheism* of the Jewish faith in contrast to the *polytheism* of their pagan background! Paul set the spectacular claim for full divinity of Christ against the monolithic monotheism of the Jewish confession, the *Shema*¹ of Deut 6:4, *The Lord our God is one Lord, YHWH!*

Every Jew would have known this text by memory since childhood, and every Gentile familiar with the Synagogue would have heard it recited every day in the synagogue.

This remarkable statement of the absolute full divinity of the Christ must have likewise been challenging to the Jewish Christians converts. Although now Christians, who had only recently been converted to Christ from of the Synagogue, it must have been challenging! Hear Israel's beloved *Shema* that would have formed the foundation of any Synagogue service!

¹ *Shema, The Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* notes regarding the *Shema* that it was the primary confession of Israel to the sovereignty of there being *one Lord and God*. It was given to Israel in contrast to the many gods of Egypt and the peoples of Canaan. It is expressed in Deut 4: 4–9 the whole of this foundational biblical truth, there is one God ... Within the *Shema* is found both a fundamental doctrinal truth and a resultant obligation. There is an urgency connected to the teaching: the word *sh'ma* demands that the hearer respond with his total being to the fact and demands of this essential revelation ... Although the *Shema* teaches that God is a unity within himself, its primary thrust affirms the absolute uniqueness of Yahweh: there simply are no gods in addition to him. Jesus reiterated this when he said, "He is one, and there is none other but he" (Mk 12:32). The OT infers ... that no heathen god could be compared to Yahweh; there were simply no gods like the Lord (Ex 15:11). This being the case, man is obligated to love the sole deity with all of his heart, soul, and strength (Dt 6:5). Moses clearly taught that to acknowledge other deities is both a grievous sin against the Lord and a denial of the unique covenant of redemption (4:23, 24; 17:2–5).

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; ⁵ and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; ⁷ and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Every child of Israel had been shaped by the *Shema*, but now here in Paul’s message they were presented with the *image* of the *one God of Israel* in the unsettling thought of a *second divine being* in Jesus, the Son of Man, within the monolithic monotheism of Israel.²

The Jewish Christians had accepted with difficulty the challenging thought that Jesus was one with the one God of Israel, and that he had arrived in the flesh to carry out on earth the eternal redemptive principle of the one God, the Father of Israel. But a “trinitarian” concept of a monolithic God was, and still is, difficult to get one’s arms around! Yet, in the following thoughts Paul does not defend the incarnation of the divine Jesus in human form, but simply states it dramatically as a given fact! *In Jesus we have the fulness of deity dwelling in bodily form!*

Understanding the reality of someone being fully human and at the same time fully divine in one body and one person is, even today after 2,000 years of Christological debate and discussion among Christian scholars, still difficult for the human mind to

² Dr. Andrei Orlov, professor of biblical studies and theology at Marquette University as drawn attention to the fact that although traditional Judaism was committed to the monotheism of the *Shema*, Jewish Mysticism had early, even before the advent of the Christiana faith struggled with the concept of two powers in heaven. Cf. Andrei Orlov, *The Glory of the Invisible God: Two Powers in Heaven Traditions and early Christianity*.

absorb. Think how difficult it must have been for Jewish Christians to grasp, but accept it they did, for they had been convinced by Paul's powerful preaching of God's decisive working in Jesus' death and resurrection, to which he, Paul, along with many others had personally witnessed. Note Paul's comments along these lines to the Corinthian Christians at 1 Cor 1:1-7 form the basis of his redemptive message:

¹ Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, ² by which you are saved, if you hold it fast— unless you believed in vain.

³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

John 1:1-5 is perhaps for many Christians today the most widely known Christian text that states the full divinity of Jesus explicitly.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God; ³ all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

It is interesting that the Gospel of John³ referenced above was addressed to Gentile and Jewish Christians in Asia, specifically in Ephesus, *Colossae*, and Laodicea, *about 30 years after Paul's Colossian Epistle*. This indicates that *the full divinity of Jesus remained a pivotal emphasis, and question, in the life of the Christians in Asia for many years*, and one that still today lies at the very foundation and mystery of the Christian faith.

The theological message of the incarnation and full divinity in the human Jesus, addressed to these early Christians was in itself challenging! They had been raised in a pagan polytheistic culture since childhood and taught to synthesize their religious faith with Judaism, gnostic Platonic philosophies, Dionystic mystery religions, and the Roman national religion. Into this philosophical mix, Paul's straightforward claim that Jesus was uniquely and singularly fully divine must have been in itself a mind stretching challenge! Yet the simple statement that Jesus was the very image of full divinity dwelling in one person, although a theological challenge, must have been an encouraging prospect.

At this early stage of the Christian faith credal statements addressing the mystery of the three-fold God had not yet reached the point of the Trinitarian debates of the late 2nd and 3rd century CE creeds. The challenge of expressing the relationship between God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit had not yet become an official credal doctrine as it did in the later centuries. Of the formulation of these later trinitarian creeds J. N. D. Kelly observes:

The third century was, from a number of points of view, a critical epoch in the Church's history. One among the many problems which it had to grapple was the influx into its ranks of an ever-swelling multitude of converts from paganism. Every thoughtful observer must have been conscious of the grave threat to the integrity of the

³ The Gospel of John was an explanation of the gospel of Jesus to a Greek audience in Asia/Ephesus/Colossae CE. 90-92. Although the Gospel of John sets Jesus in Judea his audience or readership was initially intended for Christians in Asia, predominantly Greek readers!

Church's traditional teaching: the Gnostic crisis had demonstrated how easily it could be swamped by a flood of incomers with incomplete or crassly misguided notions of the authentic content of Christianity.⁴

From a careful study of Scripture and the New Testament Christians today acknowledge that the God/Jesus image is not a minor theological point, for it is referenced in numerous contexts and studies of early Christian literature, notably in the canonical New Testament. It is commonly held that God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit are expressions of the various redemptive ministries of the one God, YHWH, LORD! Cf. Matt 28:16ff:

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ And when they saw him they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

The context of this great instruction of Jesus to his disciples was without question theologically loaded, evangelistic, and missional. Jesus' commission enveloped not only the authority of the trinitarian godhead, but also the role of each in the redemptive work of heaven.

⁴ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, p. 100. Kelly traces the early developments of the creeds leading up to the Nicene Creed, ca 32 CE, and the contexts of their development. This is not the place to engage the challenging debate of Trinitarian forms and a solid understanding of Trinitarian belief. Paul assumes that his preaching of the "trinitarian" reality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit presented in his proclamation of the gospel was all that was necessary. However, as the simple message of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as preached in the gospel, and as eventually revealed in our Scriptures, was challenged by disparate philosophical eras, the Church has addressed these challenges in numerous ways.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews understood this principle well, for he asserted that Jesus, the Son, manifested the full glory of God, Heb 1:3:

¹ In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.

A few verses later he referred to Jesus as “O God”, Heb 1:8:

But of the Son he says, “Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever, the righteous scepter is the scepter of thy kingdom. ⁹ Thou hast loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, thy God, has anointed thee with the oil of gladness beyond thy comrades.”

The works, instruction, and words of Jesus carried the very words and authority of God the Father. The inspired preacher and writer of Hebrews claimed that the words of the Son were even more powerful than the beloved words of angels and Law of Moses! The preacher was even bold enough to refer to Jesus as the God who reigned from his divine throne!

Numerous other New Testament texts bear witness to the fact that the Apostolic church leaders considered Jesus to be fully God and fully man, and referred to him as such. The Apostle John in particular quoted several claims by Jesus to be God, cf. John 8:24 *et al.* Cf. also Paul at Tit 2:13; Phil 2:5ff, *et al.*

This study is not the place to explore fully the trinitarian view of the one God, and neither does Paul explain or defend this point. He simply states it as a given fact that anyone acquainted with the Old Testament and the Christian gospel message should accept!

An enormous degree of scholarly literature has developed in recent years regarding the nature of the “hymnic” form of Col 1:15ff, and the Adam-Christ imagery developed in the exegesis of this text. This discussion centers around the point that God in Christ completed what God in Adam had intended in the creation; a united reconciled relationship between God and man. Satan and

sin had destroyed the harmony of God's original creation through Adam's disobedience to God. The *image of God*, the *Imago Dei*, in man had been defaced, either damaged or destroyed depending on the theological persuasion of the scholars involved.⁵

Consequently, Paul argued that Jesus, the new Adam, had come to complete the harmony of God's original creation.

Note Beale on this:

The famous so-called poem of Col. 1: 15– 20 has been written on by commentators more than many other texts in the NT and certainly more than any other particular passage elsewhere in this epistle. Here we are able to give only a brief analysis of the recent interpretative history of this passage and some of the main lines of past interpretation. Many believe that Paul has adopted a preexisting hymn ...

Others are doubtful that such a hymn can be detected. If the conclusion of most scholars that Paul has alluded to such a preexisting hymn is correct, then Paul has adapted it to fit into the context of what he is writing ...

Since we do not have the context of the preexisting hymn against which to interpret Paul's use, we must remain doubtful about whether it really existed as a hymn and concentrate only on how Paul is using the wording in its context.⁶

An interesting point surfaces! It may be debated that the hymn was a preexistent hymn, but this does not deny the hymnic poetic style of the text, and the possibility that the thoughts brought into this pericope as a Pauline "hymn" were apparently already circulating among Christians at that time in some form of rhythmic structure.

⁵ From the early days of Christian scholarship in the late 2nd century, but peaking in the 15th century Protestant Restoration Movement in Europe, the debate regarding the extent to the damage to or loss of the *Imago Dei* became a high point in the Protestant reformation discussion and debate, namely in Jon Hus, Martin Luther, Desiderius Erasmus, Philip Melancthon, John Wycliffe, and others.

⁶ Beale, *Colossians*, Kindle location, 3278ff.

Furthermore, considerable discussion surrounds the retelling of the creation story with Adam *created in the image of God* at the first creation, and Jesus, *being in the image of God* inaugurating the new creation in God's final redemptive plan.

On the challenging Adam-Christ imagery Beale observes:

A number of commentators rightly understand that the reference to Christ as the "image of the invisible God" is, at least in part, an allusion to Gen. 1: 27: "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him" ... Paul's language here is virtually identical with his reference elsewhere to "man" being in "the image of God" (1 Cor. 11: 7, where clear allusion is made to Gen. 1: 27; e.g., on 1 Cor. 11: 7, see Fee 1987: 515). A clear link to Gen. 1: 26–27 in 1: 15a ... is also indicated by recognizing that precisely the same phrase "who is the image of God" occurs in 2 Cor. 4: 4, where it focuses on Christ in his incarnate and especially glorified state as the pristine image in which the first Adam should have been ... Paul either independently interprets the OT notion of the Adamic image along the same lines as does Judaism or he follows the interpretative trajectory begun in earlier Judaism. Either way, he sees that Christ was in the divine image of God before creation and that he is (ἐστίν, *estin*, referring to a timeless truth) still in the divine image throughout redemptive history and on into eternity ... Christ has come in human form and accomplished that which the first Adam did not (as apparent from Col. 1: 18). The incarnate Christ is the perfect ectypal image reflecting his preincarnate archetypal image.⁷

From this interesting yet somewhat enigmatic discussion we observe that although the full divinity of Jesus in the *image of God* may have been difficult for some Jews to accept, those who were living in the shadow of the *Shema* and the theological history of

⁷ Beale, *Colossians*, pp. 132ff, Col 1:15; Cf. Moo, *Colossians*, pp. 117f.

the *Tanak* would have understood the implications of the God-Adam-Christ allusions.

Moo and Beale set the Col 1:15ff pericope in the parallel context of the original creation where man was created in the image of God, and where the incarnate Christ came in *the same image of God* as was man in *the first creation* when man was initially created in the image of God. The incarnate Christ coming in *the second creation* is set in the redemptive and reconciling plan of God; the *restoration* of man into *the image of God, his creator*.⁸

Col 1:15a. Paul began this paragraph with the expression *He is the image of the invisible God*. The Greek expression *he is* derives from the Greek verb ἐστίν, *estin*, This is a third person singular present tense verb of εἶμί, *eimi*, meaning *he exists*. For Paul, Jesus existed as, and was the *visible representation of the invisible God*. Thus, he was the *image* of the *invisible* God. The Greek εἰκών, *eikón*, means *to be like, to resemble, a representation* thus, *eikón, image, always assumes a prototype*.⁹

Being in the *image of God* did not imply that Christ looked like God, or was like God as one might think of an American or British coin with the image of the King or Queen. *It means precisely that he was God!* The image of the Roman Emperor on the early Roman coins claimed that the emperor was the *divine emperor* who must be respected and worshipped as such.

The expression *image of the invisible God* adds some additional interesting points! *Invisible* from ἀόρατος, *aóratos* ... *invisible*, implies something regarding the full reality not being seen with the physical eyes¹⁰. Here it adds the thought that *the Christ who was visible*, who had been seen and touched by the early disciples, and who had appeared as the resurrected Christ, *was in fact the same invisible God who had created man in this own image in the beginning* (Gen 1:16ff).

⁸ Moo, *Colossians*, pp 107ff, and Beale, *Colossians*, pp. 132ff.

⁹ Zodhiates, εἰκών.

¹⁰ Zodhiates, ἀόρατος.

Moo raises an interesting and informative question:

But why bring in this high Christology here? The Christology serves the greater purpose of the letter by setting forth Christ as the exclusive instrument through whom God created the universe (vv. 15-17) and through whom he is in the process of pacifying the universe (vv. 18-20) ... Whatever precise form the false teaching at Colossae took, it is at least clear that it was tending to question Christ's exclusive role in providing spiritual growth and security, and, thereby, his exclusive role in the universe at large (see, e.g., 2:9-10, 19). The false teachers, it appears, argued from cosmology to spirituality: because the universe was filled with spiritual powers of various sorts, ultimate spiritual "fullness" could be achieved only by taking them all into consideration (see esp. Paul's counterargument in 2:14-15). Thus Paul in the hymn places particular emphasis on the supremacy of Christ — in both creation and redemption — over the powers (vv. 16, 20).¹¹

Perhaps we can see Paul's point clearer if we permit this powerful statement of high Christology (1: 15-20) to be asserting that the supreme Christ, who is the image of God, is in fact God in human form who has delivered Christians from the powers of darkness and transferred them into his kingdom where we have redemption Col 1:12, 13.

It is he (Greek *estin*, verb, indicative mood active voice, singular 1:15), that is, *Christ is he* who was in the beginning in the image of God and who is in fact the same God who created everything in the beginning, John 1:1-4, and who is in the process of setting it all right again!¹² I repeat the point that I have

¹¹ Moo, *Colossians*, p. 111.

¹² I repeat and reemphasize that understanding the trinitarian nature of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in human form in Jesus can be confusing and needs to be seen in the full discussion of divinity explained in Scripture in different contexts.

previously made regarding N. T. Wright's interesting observation, *he is making us right again!*¹³

John expressed this meaningfully in his opening words to his gospel at John 1:1-4 and also at John 1:10-14:

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God; ³ all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

John 1:10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. ¹¹ He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.

The full impact of this was that *Jesus had existed in the image of God in his pre-incarnate being, he came in the image of God in his carnate being, and he exists eternally as in the image of God in his eschatological heavenly being!* There never was a “time” when Jesus was not in the image of God, *since he is God!*

Moo has some interesting thoughts to add to the supposed “hymn” and the expression *image*, *emphasizing that the incarnate Christ seen by Paul and the early disciples was in fact the invisible God himself in a visible form, the human Christ, who had come to restore the image of God in the redeemed:*

The hymn opens with two parallel depictions of the Son: image of God and firstborn over all creation. “Image” (Gk. *eikōn*) is basically something that looks like, or represents, something else. Its most common reference in biblical Greek is to objects that are designed to represent

¹³ Wright, *Justification, passim*.

other gods. “Image” is the name given to the statue that Nebuchadnezzar has erected in Daniel; and in Revelation, for instance, the word occurs ten times to refer to the “image” of the “beast” who seeks to displace God. Related to this usage is the application of the word to the stamped portrait of Caesar found on many first-century coins (e.g., Matt. 22:20 par. Mark 12:16 par. Luke 20:24). In relationship to God, as in v. 15, the most important text is, of course, the account of the creation of human beings:

Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image (eikōn), in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created human beings in his own image (eikōn), in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (Gen. 1:26-28).

“Image of God” has this general sense elsewhere in the Old Testament (Gen. 5:1) and in the New Testament (1 Cor. 11:7), and, most interesting for our purposes, in Colossians 3:10, where Paul says that the “new self” is “being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.”

Theologians have long debated just what this “image of God” in which humans were created might be. But this issue is only tangentially related to the question of what it means for Christ to be “the image of God.” In both texts where Paul asserts this about Christ (here and in 2 Cor. 4:4), the focus is on Christ’s revelation of God. He is the “image” in accordance with which human beings are formed.¹⁴

¹⁴ Moo, *Colossians*, pp. 116f.

We turn to a brief reference to the Gospel of John where John responded to the Jews who questioned who Jesus was and why he claimed to be God. John's repeated answer was "look at Jesus' works, are they not the works of God"? John presented Jesus' miracles as *signs*, σημεῖον, *sēmeíon*, of God's glory being present in and with Jesus. At John 2:11 John recorded Jesus' first miracle, the turning of water into wine. John introduced this miracle as a *sign* (σημεῖον, *sēmeíon*¹⁵) of who Jesus was:

This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

In the context of our discussion, John claimed, "if you want to see God and what he is doing, then look at Jesus, for he is God working in our midst"! Repeatedly in his Gospel John recorded the words of Jesus in which Jesus claimed that his works demonstrated that he and the Father are one, that the Father was in him and he was in the Father. Cf John 10:30ff:

³⁰ *I and the Father are one.*"

³¹ *The Jews took up stones again to stone him.* ³² *Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of these do you stone me?"* ³³ *The Jews answered him, "It is not for a good work that we stone you but for blasphemy; because you, being a man, make yourself God."* ³⁴ *Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'?"* ³⁵ *If he called*

¹⁵ *Zodhiates*, σημεῖον *sēmeíon*; sign, mark, token, miracle with a spiritual end and purpose. In the pl., miracles which lead to something out of and beyond themselves; finger-marks of God, valuable not so much for what they are as for what they indicate of the grace and power of the Doer (Mark 16:20) ... Particularly a sign by which something is designated, distinguished, known (Matt. 26:48; Rom. 4:11, circumcision as a sign [cf. Gen. 9:12, 13; 17:11]). Specifically a sign by which the character and truth of any person or thing is known, a token, proof (Luke 2:12; 2 Cor. 12:12; 2 Thess. 3:17; Sept.: 1 Sam. 14:10; 2 Kgs. 19:29; 20:8) ... A sign by which the divine power in majesty is made known, a supernatural event or act, a token, wonder, or miracle by which the power and presence of God is manifested, either directly or through the agency of those whom He sends (Sept.: Ex. 4:8, 17, 28, 30).

them gods to whom the word of God came (and scripture cannot be broken),³⁶ do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?'³⁷ If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me;³⁸ but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father."³⁹ Again they tried to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands.

Note Jesus comment to Thomas, John 14:7:

⁷ If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him."

In John's mind Jesus was in every sense the *image* of God! He was the exact *likeness* of God, he was the very *presence* of God working in the midst of the people, he was God in their midst, incarnate and human but fully God!

Throughout his ministry the Jews, and even his disciples, struggled with this enormous, mysterious, yet profound reality. *Jesus is God, has always been God, and will always be God!*

Returning to our discussion regarding Jesus being the *image* of God at Col 1:5, Bruce adds that although sinful man lost his godlike image through disobedience (following in the pattern of Adam), man is in Christ in the process of being *renewed in that image*. This is the point of Paul's argument regarding the pattern of the first Adam who sinned, and the second Adam, Christ, who knew no sin, cf Rom 5:12-21.

Bruce observes regarding Col 1:15:

No reader of the OT scriptures, on reading the words now before us, could fail to be reminded of the statement in Gen. 1:26-27 that God created man, as male and female, "in his own image." Defaced as the divine image in humanity may be by reason of sin, yet in the order of creation it remains true that humanity is "the image and glory of God" (1 Cor. 11:7).¹⁶

¹⁶ Bruce, *Colossians*, p. 58.

Picking up on his point, Bruce observed that in the Corinthian text, 1 Cor 11:7ff, Paul was discussing the appropriate role of men and women in the Sunday worship assembly, and in particular the cultural practice of head covering. Paul's complicated argument simply referred back to the original role of man created in the image of God. "*For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man.*"¹⁷

In related claims in several of his epistles, notably Rom 6:1-11; Eph 4:23, 14; Col 3:10; and 2 Cor 3:18, Tit 3:3-7, Paul stated that fallen man is in Christ being *born again*, and being *renewed into the image of his creator, into the image of God!*

Returning to our discussion of *Jesus in the image of God in full divinity*, we must set Paul's argument of Col 1:15a in the context of the pagan views of many lesser gods or spiritual beings, and Paul stressing the *preeminent, supremely all sufficient divine essence of Christ* over all other god's or spiritual beings.

For emphasis, Paul repeats this point of Christ's full divinity again at Col 1:19 and Col 2:9:

^{1:19} *For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell*
^{2:9} ¹⁰ *For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fulness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority."*

Col 1:15b-17. Christ is the invisible God made visible.

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

¹⁷ This is not the appropriate place to discuss the complicate issue of the role of men in the worship service. I mention it merely to point to the fact that Paul's argument is built on men being in the image of God! We should remember that Paul, a well-trained Jew and Pharisee would always see everything in the light of God's original creation and purpose.

Building on the high Christology of Jesus being in the image of God, Paul added that Jesus was in fact *the invisible God in visible form*.

To this he added another seemingly perplexing claim, the eternally preexistent Christ was *the first-born of all creation!* To the English reader of our Bible this is an oxymoronic claim! How can the eternal God in the form of Christ in the fullness¹⁸ of divinity be the first-born of all creation of which creation he himself was the initial creator, John 1:1-3?

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God; ³ all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.

We will below examine the meaning of the Greek word πρωτότοκος, *prōtōtokos*, *first-born*, used by Paul in in Col 1:15, and elsewhere in Old and New Testament texts, and notice the family contexts in which it is translated in English as *first-born*.

Zodhiates in a lengthy article explains the breadth of meaning in the Greek word πρωτότοκος, *prōtōtokos*:

πρωτότοκος *prōtōtokos*; noun from *prōtos* ... first, and *tiktō*, to bear, bring forth. Firstborn, preeminent.

... *Prōtōtokos* is applied to Christ in Luke 2:7, “And she brought forth her firstborn son.” Here the word carries none of the theological load which it bears elsewhere when used of Christ. (Comment by IAF, in some cases as this one, *Zodhiates overlooks the cultural and theological import that the one born first in a family carried all of the future and blessings of the family. Jesus being born first in Joseph’s and Mary’s family is not simply explaining that Jesus was born before the other children, but that he was the future and blessing of all their family, and that the*

¹⁸ The word fullness is spelled on occasion as fulness. Both spellings are correct and depend on the writer, translation, or context in which it is used or cited. Cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*.

future of God's family lay in Jesus. I understand that Jesus was not biologically Joseph's son). Jesus was the preeminent son born to Joseph and Mary.

Prōtōtokos is a theologically significant title used of Christ in ... NT passages ... The word *prōtōtokos* is also used in relation to God's creation referring to Christ's supremacy over it. Jesus Christ cannot be both creator and creature. In Col. 1:15 He is placed above His creation when He is called *prōtōtokos pásēs ktíseōs* ... "the firstborn of every creature," or better still, "the one preeminent over all creation" ... The next verse makes it adequately clear, "For by him were all things created," meaning that He Himself is not part of creation (cf. John 1:3). The meaning approximates that of the noun *arché* ... beginning, which means either objectively the first effect, the first created thing, or subjectively the first cause, the source of creation. In Rev. 3:14 the noun *arché* in the phrase *hē arché tēs ktíseōs tou Theou* is intended to identify Jesus as the first cause or source of creation and not as the first object of creation. Jesus Christ is consequently the *arché*, the ruler over all.¹⁹

The initial question raised above is how can Jesus be the *first-born* all creation of which creation Jesus was himself the creator (John 1:1-3, Heb 1:1, 2). The answer lies in the theological or cultural point being made. In keeping with the precise meaning of the Greek word used to describe Jesus, it means that Jesus carries *the full blessings of the first-born son of God's family. In this case, the family of God in Adam, then Jacob/Israel, representing the family created originally in the image of God.*

Note the fascinating narratives of Jacob and Esau. Esau was the son born first to Isaac and Rebekah, thus according to custom he was the *first-born* son to Isaac. Esau sold his *birthright*, that of

¹⁹ Zodiates, πρωτότοκος *prōtōtokos*.

being the *first-born* son of Isaac, to the second son Jacob, who then inherited the blessings of the first born son. Jacob was later referred to as the supplanter who wrestled with the angel of God and was renamed Israel.

The narratives of Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau, Gen 25:19ff; Joseph in Egypt, Gen 25:19ff; Gen 43:33, 34; 48:17ff; and Moses and the Pharaoh in Egypt, Ex 4:22f, continue this *first-born* heritage line of thought in the narrative of Israel and Egypt.

Paul was not claiming that Jesus was the one born first, but that Jesus carries all of the blessings of the *first-born* son, originally Adam, created in the image of God, who would carry the blessings of God's family!

Paul was simply drawing on the well-established and well-known ancient Jewish custom that the firstborn son was the favored one who carried on the tradition of the family and the father. In regard to Jesus it implies that Jesus as the *first-born* creator was *preeminent over all creation*, Eph 1:15-23, notably vs21-23, and Heb 1:1-3. Jesus was what Adam should have been, God's favored son! The writer of Hebrews expressed this beautifully as follows at Heb 1:1ff:

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs.

Furthermore, the word *first-born* used by Paul in Col 1:15 being πρωτότοκος, *prōtōtokos* does not mean *born first*, but translated contextually within a family it carries the sense of the *privilege* of the *first-born*.

Moo observes of this interesting theologically loaded term *first-born*, *prōtōtokos*.

The “hymn” adds a second depiction of the Son in its opening line: the firstborn over all creation. Calling Christ “firstborn,” especially in the common translation “firstborn of all creation” (e.g., ESV; NRSV; NASB), could suggest that Christ is a created being, a conclusion that the church leader Arius drew early in the fourth century. Arius’s views stimulated considerable christological reflection and resulted in the Nicene Creed’s affirmation that Christ was “eternally begotten of the Father, . . . begotten, not made, of one Being (homousios) with the Father.” *But what can we then say about Colossians 1:15?* The TNIV, by translating the Greek genitive construction (pásēs ktiseōs) as “over all creation,” hints at the answer. The word prōtótokos (“firstborn”), while often used in the literal sense of the first to come from the womb, takes on a metaphorical significance based on the ancient attribution of preeminence to the first to be born. Thus, Israel is called God’s “firstborn” (Exod. 4:22), and God says of David in Psalm 89:27 that “I will appoint him to be my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth.” This latter text is probably especially important for Colossians 1:15, since Psalm 89 rings with messianic allusions, and Paul has just been describing Christ in messianic/kingly terms (vv. 12-14). It may be noted in this regard that the author to the Hebrews also uses prōtótokos as a christological title in a messianic context (Heb. 1:6; cf. v. 5). Philo also uses prōtótokos and its close equivalent, prōtogenos, to refer to the “word,” so there could also be allusion here to the wisdom/word tradition. Against this background, then, and since the “hymn” goes on to affirm Christ’s mediatorial role in all of creation (v. 16) — and hence his existence before creation — it is clear that the word is used here in this sense of “supreme over.” The supremacy asserted in the hymn may be over “every creature,” but the translation “all creation,” found in the English versions, is preferable. *As the first predicate in v. 15 presents Christ in unique*

*relationship to God, so the second asserts his unique relationship to creation: he is “the acting subject who extends God’s activity to the creatures that follow him.”*²⁰

Col 1:16 builds on verse 15 explaining how Jesus’ creative activity supports his preeminence over all creation including the spiritual world.

¹⁶ for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

In him, ἐν αὐτῷ, en autó, is a locative/dative construction which focuses attention on Jesus in the creative process. It can emphasize Jesus as the *origin* of the creative power as well as the *reason for* the creative power. The expression *all things were created through him and for him* further builds on this dual sense of Jesus’ preeminence.

Bird observes,

The word firstborn (prōtótokos) has also been a playground for ancient and modern theologians in light of controversies about the nature of Christ (especially the Arian controversy of the fourth century). Does firstborn imply that Jesus is merely the most supreme created being? Hardly! The main point is surely Jesus’s function in bringing creation into being and his sovereignty over the entire created order. That authority encompasses the material and immaterial realms, the earthly and heavenly spheres, human and angelic creatures. Moreover, if Paul had wanted to suggest that Jesus was the first of God’s creatures to be formed he would have used the adjective *prōtoktistos* (“*created first*”) or the noun *prōtoplastos* (“*first made*”). *The words for “firstborn” and “first-fruits” are ascribed to Jesus in the New Testament where they carry connotations of priority since Jesus is the firstborn of*

²⁰ Moo, *Colossians.*, pp. 119f. Emphasis mine, IAF.

a new humanity which is to be glorified as its exalted Lord is glorified (Rom 8: 29; 1 Cor 15: 20, 23; Rev 1: 5 and Col 1: 18). In Hebrews, “firstborn” implies a special status and higher rank over and above others (e.g. Heb 1: 6). As the firstborn Jesus is: (1) God’s appointed ruler over all of creation with priority in time and primacy in rank; (2) Israel’s Messiah; and (3) a Son of God like Adam and Israel.²¹

Regarding the preeminence of Christ, Beale adds the following points:

But in light of the observation that verses 16–17 affirm Christ as the preexisting Creator and sustainer as the ground for verse 15, it is clear that *the main thought in verse 15 is of Christ being in God’s image before creation began*. This “image” is certainly described with Adamic contours from Gen. 1, but the image refers to Christ in his preexistence. Paul is speaking of the eternal relationship of the Son to the Father. Recall that ἐστίν (estin) refers to a timeless truth of Christ being in the divine image not only before creation but also in that archetypal image in his incarnation and exaltation. Christ being in the perfect Adamic image in his incarnation is but the expression of his eternal existence as the divine archetypal Adam-like image in his preexistence.²²

Beale further enlarges in this point:

As widely recognized, while Col. 1: 15–17 refers to Christ’s sovereignty over the first creation, verses 18–20 affirm his sovereign position in the second, new creation that has been launched by his resurrection. In this respect, the identical title of “firstborn” is reapplied to Christ in verse 18 in order again to indicate Christ’s rule over the new order by virtue of his resurrection from the dead (v. 18c). His priority in the new creation entails his kingship

²¹ Bird, *Colossians*, Kindle location 1327ff.

²² Beale, *Colossians*, Kindle location 3420f.

over it (see also Heb. 1: 2– 5 and 2: 5– 9 for a relevant parallel).²³

In addition, Beale adds an interesting thought.

By associating Christ with an activity typically considered to be a divine prerogative or attribute, his proximity to God is highlighted ... This is tantamount to a *divine-identity Christology*, whereby an activity of God is attributed to Christ.²⁴

Col 1:17-20. The following number of statements regarding Jesus all build on the centrality of the God/Jesus *eikōn* image. Since Jesus was in his preexistent role (John 1:1) and will be in his eschatological future role (Rev , and 1 Thess 4:13ff), and is in his present Messianic role (Matt 12:28f) is God, he simply must be *before all things*, etc.! *Before all things*, πρὸ πάντων, *pro pántōn*, is not a simple temporal statement, but is an ontological statement meaning *prior, above, superior* to all things. *Before* does not simple reference his preexistence. It emphasizes his *superiority* and *preeminence above* all things. Zodhiates observes regarding the meaning of *pro*.

Figuratively of *precedence, preference, dignity*, meaning *above* all things, as *pró pántōn*.²⁵

The statement that Jesus *holds all things together* builds on his existence as the *eternal creative* God, in addition, it emphasizes his “Adamic” role of *governing the created order* (Gen 1:26).

Col 1:18. The expression *He is the head of the body, the church* speaks to the fact that Jesus is not only the creator of all things who holds all things together, he is the *head κεφαλή kephalḗ*, of his eschatological body, the church. The word *kephalḗ* is used here metaphorically of his role in relation to the church body as its *founder* and sustainer. Zodhiates adds regarding *kephalḗ* that it can be used in a general *metaphorically of persons, i.e., the head, chief*,

²³ Beale, *Colossians*, Kindle location 3565f.

²⁴ Beale, *Colossians*, Kindle location, 366ff.

²⁵ Zodhiates, πρὸ. Edited by IAF.

*one to whom others are subordinate.*²⁶ This certainly would apply to Jesus being the *leader of the church as eschatological body to whom all the members are subordinate.*

To understand the full impact of this statement of the full divinity of Jesus, we must transpose this superior claim regarding the absolute *divinity* of Jesus into the cultural context of the Christians living in a *polytheistic pagan* world which was perceived to be dominated by, and subject to, demonic spiritual beings, demigods, etc.. This divine declaration regarding Jesus was a powerful encouragement to Christians to not be deceived by the quasi-Jewish gnostic persuasions of their neighbors regarding their supposed superior spiritual demiurge powers. Regarding Jesus being the head of the church we must set this in the context of Jesus' prophetic promise to build his own church, Matt 16:16ff.²⁷

The concept of the church being described as the body of Christ was a common metaphor often used to emphasize the point that Christ had only one body, hence one church, and that the members of the body are members of the church, sustaining a synergistic relationship to one another.

At 1 Cor 12 ff, while discussing this synergistic relationships of the church members, Paul stressed that all church members had been baptized into *one body* by the Holy Spirit who empowers the individual members for ministry service one of another.

At Eph 4:1 ff Paul encouraged the members of the church at Ephesus and in Asia to *strive to maintain the unity of the body* since there was *only one body of Christ*. Just as there was only on Christ, one God the Father, one Holy Spirit, and one baptism responsible for the conversion of both Jew and Gentile, there could be *only one body*, one universal church.

²⁶ Zodhiates, κεφαλή, *kephalē*.

²⁷ Regarding Jesus being the founder and head of the body, the church, cf. Matt 16:16ff where Jesus promised to build his church which would be able to withstand even the powers of death, his death and their death. Note also 1 Cor 15: 51-58, and Eph 1:22, 23 which likewise emphasizes the divine superiority of Jesus, and his all-sufficiency.

At Rom 4:12f Paul again drew on the analogy of one body, explaining that the synergistic ministry of the members was a sign of their spiritual worship of God.

⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, ⁵ so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ⁶ Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷ if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸ he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

Paul's point was that since there is only one body of Christ, thus one universal church, and since Jesus is the supreme, preexistent divine creator over all created and invisible things, then the church should subordinate itself to Christ, and only to Jesus, just as the whole created cosmos submits itself to the creator of all things, the Christ. Notice how Paul shifts so easily from Jesus' role in the cosmos to Jesus' role in the reconciliation of all things in the cosmos, notably the redemption and reconciliation of all things to God in Christ, and in the one church which he established.

Bird observes:

While the authority of Jesus is cosmic in scope, it is no less *ecclesial*. Even as the cosmic lord, Jesus remains the head of the body, the church. References to the church as the body are common in Paul and the metaphor was well known in antiquity and could even be applied to the universe (e.g., Plato Tim. 28B). Jesus is supreme over both such bodies. As the "body of Messiah" the church is the physical representation of Jesus upon the earth. The church (*ekklēsia*) here means the universal church. Jesus is the head of the church, not in the sense of its source, but as its titular head and leader. While the poem has a high Christology, it also has a *high ecclesiology*, as the one who is the creator of the cosmos is also the head of the church.

However disjointed these verses initially appear to be, they subtly shift the subject matter from creation (all things are sustained in him) to reconciliation (the church as the body of people reconciled to God) and so assist in the progression of the poem to the next subject matter.²⁸

Using Bird's terminology, Paul shifts smoothly at Col 1:18 to Jesus being the *beginning*, the *first-born from the dead*.

Since we have already discussed in detail the meaning of *firstborn*, *prōtōtokos*, we will pick up on this and note that *of all those who have and will be raised from the dead, Jesus is the preeminent origin and power of their resurrection*. He is the *source* of all resurrections and the *hope* of resurrection, *a core message of the Gospel*, 1 Cor 15 1-5:

¹ Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, ² by which you are saved, if you hold it fast— unless you believed in vain.

³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

At Rom 8:11, although Paul was speaking of the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit in the resurrection of Jesus, he stressed the power of the resurrection in the life of every Christian:

¹¹ Since²⁹ the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead

²⁸ Bird, *Colossians*, kindle location 1352.

²⁹ The conjunction in Greek *εἰ* translated in some translations as *if* is part of a 1st class conditional clause, *εἰ δὲ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ ἐγείραντος τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐκ νεκρῶν*

will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you.

Thus, at Col 1:18 Paul states since Jesus is the *beginning*, the *source*, ἀρχή, *archē* of all things, he is also the *firstborn*, *prōtótokos*, the *absolute source*, foundation, or power of the resurrection from the dead, *in order that he might be preeminent* in all things, ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων, *hina genētai en pasin autos prōteuōn*. This clause is introduced by *hina* coupled to an aorist subjunctive verb *genētai* indicating the *purpose* or *reason*³⁰ *for being the preeminent one*, πρωτεύων, *prōteuōn*.

Moo explains this interesting structure:

The outcome of Christ's being "beginning" and "firstborn" is that in everything he might have the supremacy. In everything could also be translated "among all people" (if we take *pasin* as masculine rather than neuter), but the usual rendering is to be preferred in a hymn that is so deliberately cosmic in its scope. The TNIV's he might have the supremacy renders a Greek periphrastic verbal that can be rendered either "that he might become supreme" or that "he might be supreme." But the difference between these two is minor; in either case, *Christ's supremacy is seen to be the result of his resurrection*.³¹

Col 1:19. *For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell.*

οἰκεῖ ἐν ὑμῖν. If should be more appropriately translated as "since the Spirit of him who raised Jesus dwells in you ..."

³⁰ Cf. H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1957, ἵνα, *hina*, p. 248f. Zodhiates observes, ἵνα *hina*; conjunction. *That, so that, for the purpose of*, construed usually with a subjunctive, seldom with the opt., often with the indic. *marking the end, purpose*. Also used to indicate the cause for, or on account of which anything is done. Can be translated, "to the end that," "in order that it might [or may] be." It may also be used simply to indicate a happening, event or result of anything, or that in which the action terminates. *Hina* can be translated "so that it was [is, or will be]."

³¹ Moo, *Colossians.*, pp. 129-130.

This sentence makes possibly the strongest claim for the full divinity of Jesus in the New Testament. It is complemented by Paul's claim at Col 2:9, that *in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily*. There are several other great texts that make similar claims, such as John 1:1; Heb 1:3, *et al*, all with major theological significance relevant to their context. Paul had just claimed that Jesus was the image of the invisible God, now he adds that every spiritual divine power one could seek in divinity is found in Jesus, he is thus all sufficient to the needs of the Christians living in a world surrounded by "quasi-spiritual powers".

There is significant discussion among scholars³² as to the background behind the term *fullness*, *πλήρωμα*, *plērōma*, with most recognizing that the term had a rich history among the Hellenistic, Jewish, mystery religions of the region, and the developing Valentinian Gnostic view, all of which imply that whatever one sought in their search for the ultimate reality could be found in their religious and philosophical programs. Paul challenged this stating bluntly that *ultimate truth and fullness* can be found only in Jesus, the son of God who embodies all fullness, truth, and divinity.

Moo expresses this well:

We might surmise, then, that the false teachers in Colossae were inviting the Christians there to experience true "fullness" by following their philosophy (2:8) and rules (cf. 2:16-23); to which Paul responds: the "fullness" that you are seeking is to be found in Christ. And the use of the word "all" (*pan*) here confirms this supposition, since it is tautologous: "fullness" itself indicates totality. "All the fullness" reflects the exclusive emphasis that is the warp and woof of Paul's response to the Colossian false teachers: *only in Christ can "fullness" be found. This "fullness," as Colossians 2:9 makes clear, is the "fulness of God," or "God in his fullness."*³³

³² Cf. Moo, *Colossians*, Beale, *Colossians.*, Bird, *Colossians*, Bruce, *Colossians*, *et al*.

³³ Moo, *Colossians*, p. 132. *Italics* emphasis, Ian A. Fair.

Col 1:20. *through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*

Paul got right to the heart and goal of his theological emphasis in his magnificent hymn. The explicative emphatic conjunction *and, kai*, can be understood in a number of ways such as *namely, consequently, also, indeed*. Paul drew on the demonstrative nature of this conjunction.³⁴

Bird,³⁵ citing Dunn in support of Paul's combination of a number of motives summarizes his view of Paul's use of this Christological hymn. It serves ultimately as a theological emphasis of Paul's high Christological soteriology:

Fusing the Horizons: Christological Assertions

One could write, teach, preach, or discuss this text for hours and still only scratch the surface of its theological depth. We are presented with a theological kaleidoscope that blends cosmology, Christology, and soteriology in the one hit. In a sense, we could say that a major purpose of the poem is to praise Jesus Christ and to correct aberrant and competing portraits of his person and work. But it is far more than that, as Dunn colorfully writes:

The vision is vast. The claim is mind-blowing. It says much for the faith of these first Christians that they should see in Christ's death and resurrection quite literally the key to resolving the disharmonies of nature and the inhumanities of humankind, that the character of God's creation and God's concern for the universe in its fullest expression could be so caught and encapsulated for them in the cross of Christ ... In some ways still more striking is the *and* means towards this cosmic reconciliation—the community in which that reconciliation has already taken place (or begun to take place) and whose responsibility it is to live out ... as well as to proclaim its secret (cf. 4: 2–6).

³⁴ *Zodhiates, kai*.

³⁵ Bird, *Colossians*, Kindle location 1438-1440.

The mileage one gets from this poem is not merely to make sure Christians believe the right stuff about Jesus, but to see Jesus and ourselves as part of the story of creation and reconciliation. The story of the church and of individual Christians themselves is written up in a narrative of a world made good, gone wrong, and being put right. It is part of a narrative tapestry related to the promises made to Abraham coming true at last in the cosmopolitan people belonging to Israel's Messiah. It encompasses human rebellion and divine reconciliation. It is a drama of despots and tyrants, spiritual and human (they were not always distinguished in the Bible), 38 being defeated through the blood of the cross. There is no shirking away from the obvious christological assertions made here. The devotion of Christians is not offered to a cultic figure, but to the Lord through whom and for whom the world was made. It is stupendous that the Nazarene who had been executed only thirty years earlier was now heralded and identified with the God of creation and reconciliation. 39 There is no room for idolatry or pluralism. Jesus does not accept rivals and his supremacy has no limits.³⁶

In closing this discussion of this magnificent hymn, whether it was composed by Paul, borrowed by Paul, or adapted by Paul, it certainly expresses in powerful concepts the heart of Colossians; Jesus is the fullness of spiritual divinity that one needs to attain the highest reach of spiritual maturity, on *earth*, or in the *heavenly realms*!

³⁶ Bird, *Colossians*, Kindle locations 1438-1440. Dunn, *Colossians.*, p. 146.

Chapter 6: God's Ministry of Reconciling the World: Col 1:21-23.

²¹ *And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, ²³ provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.*

In this paragraph Paul moves on from his argument regarding Christ being the image of God, and the new Adam who was the overseer of the former creation. God has *delivered* the Colossian Christians out of the dominion of darkness, out of the fallen creation, and the condition of the fallen Adam. He has *transferred* them into *the kingdom of hope in Christ, the new Adam* who is in the image of God. He has made them a *new creation* in which he has *recreated* them in the *image of their creator*, and *reconciled* them with God into their former relationship, *into the image of their creator*. All of this took place in the death and resurrection of God's incarnate son, Jesus Christ!

Paul moves on from the high Christology and universality of the fully divine Christ of Col 1:15-20 to discuss the working of reconciliation brought about in this new eschatological kingdom by the Christ, the new Adam, the preeminent sovereign of all creation.

Moo again deftly moves ones thinking from the exalted Christ to the exalted new creation:

This new creation work rests on the universal reconciling, or "peacemaking" power of the cross of Christ. It is God's intention to bring "peace" to his fallen and fractured universe, to bring all things again into subjection to his sovereignty, to bring all his enemies into subjection. This intention will be finally accomplished only when Christ returns in glory to establish the kingdom in its final form (cf. 1:22b; 3:4). But God invites human beings in the

present time both to participate in this reconciliation and to become agents through whom God's work of reconciliation can begin to be carried out.¹

Moo's statement *the kingdom in its final form* should not be interpreted to imply that the kingdom referenced in Col 1:13 is an incomplete kingdom. It implies that the kingdom *inaugurated* in Jesus ministry, death, and resurrection is still in force but awaiting its final climax when Jesus returns at the end of the age.

Bird explains the transition of Col 1:15-20 into Col 1:21-29 in succinct terms:

This section brings together both the thanksgiving of 1: 3– 14 and the Christ Hymn of 1: 15– 20 by providing further grounds for thanksgiving through the reconciling work of the Messiah as specifically applied to the Colossians. The train of thought in 1: 21– 23 appears to be: (1) the stark transition the Colossians have experienced in being transferred from enmity and hostility to holiness and hope, (2) the apparent need for the Colossians to remain faithful to the gospel, (3) and the cosmic scope of the gospel ... Paul here establishes the grounds for their continued adherence to the gospel (as opposed to their acceptance of the philosophy).²

This expression was encouragement from Paul to remain faithful to the message of reconciliation with God they had already received and adopted. They should not be drawn away by the strange philosophies being taught by their pagan neighbors, Col 1:21-23:

*²¹ And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, ²³ provided that you *continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which has**

¹ Moo, *Colossians.*, pp. 138f.

² Bird, *Colossians*, kindle location 1534-1543.

been preached to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Col 1:21, 22. I like the way in which Paul opens this paragraph, *And you ...* We have previously discussed the interesting ways in which the coordinating conjunction *καί*,³ *and*, can be used, not only as a simple coordination expression, but one making an emphatic point as in *indeed you, who were once estranged...*

Paul unequivocally states *indeed*, or *in fact*, you who were enemies and hostile have been reconciled to God in Christ's body of flesh by his death!

Obviously Paul had in mind the redeeming crucifixion of Jesus on the cross. In his atoning sacrifice Jesus had conquered whatever claim Satan had over them and had established their *sanctification for higher service* in the church, which is symbolically his body (Col 1:18). Being presented as *holy*⁴ in Christ derives from *hágios*, the root of the concept of *sanctification, cleansing*, and involves their being *set aside for dedicated service*. *Blameless* and *irreproachable* are synonyms for *justified* and *justification*, which Wright correctly defines as being *declared not guilty*.⁵ All of this is achieved not by some mysterious intuitive knowledge as in the gnostic philosophic persuasions, but by being reconciled to God and transferred by God's power out of darkness into the kingdom of his son, Jesus Christ, Col 1:13, 14:

¹¹ May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Col 1:23a. Paul inserts a conditional thought into this divine reconciliation! *Provided that you continue in the faith, stable and*

³ Cf. Dana and Mantey, p. 250, the emphatic use of *καί*.

⁴ Cf the discussion of *saints* at Col 1:2.

⁵ Cf. the magnificent discussion of Justification in N. T. Wright, *Justification*, Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2009.

steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard. The faith obviously refers to faith in Jesus as the Christ, the divine son of God.

Col 1:23b. Paul here clearly stresses the universality of the faith and the gospel message. Cf Eph 4:1-6. *The gospel which has been preached to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.* We recognize here Paul's use of hyperbole for a valid purpose! While in Ephesus Luke records that all Asia, which obviously includes Ephesus, Colossae, Hierapolis, Laodicea, *et al*, had heard the word of the gospel, indicating the breadth of Paul's ministry in Ephesus, Acts 19:10, *This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.*

Col 1:24-29: Paul's Christ-centered Ministry

²⁴ Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, ²⁵ of which I became a minister according to the divine office which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints. ²⁷ To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me.

Bird opens his discussion of this pericope with an interesting title, emphasizing the divine apostolic mission of Paul and the fact that in conducting this ministry Paul had shared the suffering of Christ. This did not indicate a complaint by Paul, but emphasized his sharing with Jesus in the message and power of the gospel.

“PAUL’S SERVICE: Messianic Woes, Messianic Mission, and the Messianic Mystery (1: 24— 2: 7).”⁶

⁶ Bird, *Colossians*, Kindle locations 1575-1576.

This pericope highlights Paul's discussion by stressing the *suffering servant* motif (Isa 53ff) experienced by Paul in service of Christ, and for the Colossians. Their *redemption* had been the *central content* of the Paul's *messianic mission*, thus Paul's emphases on the *purpose* of his *messianic mystery*. These were successively i) that living for and serving Christ will introduce opposition and suffering, ii) the message he preached was exclusively Christ and his death and resurrection, and iii) his purpose was to present everyone mature in Christ.

Col 1:24. *Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church ...* Paul saw the Messiah's suffering as the heart of God's eschatological plan of redemption and reconciliation. In this regard Paul saw his suffering as part of Christ's eschatological suffering in God's plan of salvation. For Paul this was almost like a badge of messianic ministry and office!

Col 1:25. Paul clearly saw the messianic nature of his ministry, expressing his becoming a minister as arising in the divine office, ministry, which was given to him for the Colossians with the purpose of making the *word* of God or *massage* concerning Christ, fully known to all. He recalled that he had become an Apostle, or a minister of Christ by the will of God in his divine office, or divine ministry, being commissioned by God to make the word of God fully known wherever he was.

Paul had stressed this in his letter to the Galatians when he was defending his Christologically focussed message in the context of charges that he was opposed to circumcision and the Law of Moses, Gal 1:13-17:

¹³ For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it; ¹⁴ and I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. ¹⁵ But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his

grace, ¹⁶ was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood, ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia; and again I returned to Damascus.

The Greek for the expression at Col 1:25 regarding Paul's understanding of his ministry is intense, especially when it is set in the context of God's *divine purpose*. Paul highlighted the point that he became a *minister of the divine office of God*, διάκονος κατὰ τὴν οἰκονομίαν τοῦ θεοῦ, *diákonos kata oikonomian to theou* as a *special servant of the divine economy (plan, office, ministry) relating to God's eternal purpose*. Paul's divine ministry, his apostolic calling, was thus simply to tell, to proclaim, to explain the *message concerning Christ*, that is, the gospel message, to all, to both Jew and Gentile. This was a divine calling with a divine purpose!

Col 1:26. This concept of how God would reconcile and redeem all, both Jew and Gentile, had been a *mystery* for ages, primarily to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles who were associated with the Synagogue, but it had now been made known by Paul in his preaching the message of Christ. Cf. Eph 1:9, 3:3, 6:19; Col 1:26, 2:2, 4:3.

Paul addressed this in his Ephesian epistle in a remarkably dense and intricate paragraph. He elaborated on this mystery of how God had achieved this in Christ by *abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, bringing the hostility to an end* in Christ, Eph 2:11-22:

¹¹ *Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—*

¹² *remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he is our peace, who has made us both*

one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility,¹⁵ by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace,¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end.¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near;¹⁸ for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,²¹ in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord;²² in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

Along the same lines, notice Paul's beautiful doxology at Rom 16:25-27:

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages²⁶ but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—²⁷ to the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Col 1:27. In one simple statement Paul summarized the content of this mystery. *To them* (all generations) *God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.* The mystery was Christ living in us, and our living in Christ by his power.

However, Paul conceived the mystery to lie also in the cosmic eschatological realm of the *full reconciliation of all things to God* harking back to God's purpose which was conceived before creation and set in motion with the fall of Adam. Without the

reconciliation of the ethnic Jewish/Gentile schism experienced by all, the full cosmic reconciliation of all things was not possible.

Dunn enlarge on this concept:

Here again we should recall the cosmic and apocalyptic context within which this understanding of divine mystery is formulated. The fact is that Paul saw the reconciliation of Gentile to Jew and both as one to God as an act of cosmic and eschatological significance. It was precisely this breaking down of one of the fundamental dividing lines in human society (between Jew and Gentile; see also on 3:1 1) that Paul saw as the climax of the divine purpose for creation. Such breaking down of barriers of nation and race, often so impenetrable to human resources, must therefore be for him one of the primary goals of the gospel. Indeed, we might even say that such reconciliation between the diversity of nationalities and races was one of the main tests for the church, one of the most crucial signs of the effectiveness of the gospel. Without the reconciliation of nation to nation, of race to race, of social group to social group, the reconciliation of all things "to him" (1:20) has not even begun.⁷

Into this cosmic eschatological context Paul inserted the reconciling role of Christ in reuniting all things to God. The mystery through the ages had been how he planned to do this. This mystery had for all ages not been known, but now was known in Christ, not in or through the pagan mystery religions.

Note Paul's comment on the role of Christ in this matrix of ideas, Gal 3:25-29:

But now that faith (the faith of Christ and not the Law) has come, we are no longer under a custodian; ²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

²⁸*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor*

⁷Dunn. *Colossians*, Kindle Locations 1708-1714.

free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ *And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.*

Col 1:28, 29. Paul's message was not simply preaching about the church, although that was important to Paul! The primary message preached by Paul was Christ, the message of his death, burial, and resurrection.

Note Paul's emphasis at Col 1:28:

Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ. ²⁹ *For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me.*

Bratcher and Nida draw attention to the expression *everyone* or *every man*:

Three times the Greek has "every man" (RSV), in order to stress not only the universal nature of the gospel but also the equality of all believers, without any distinction or discrimination: "warning *everyone* and teaching *everyone* ... in order that we might present *everyone* ..." ⁸

They note that there is inherent in this expression a *universal* implication in Paul's statement, *present every man mature*. The goal of the gospel message was to present *every person* spiritually mature before God, not only a select few who had been "spiritually enlightened by some esoteric private intuition". This concept of every person ran contrary to the mystery or gnostic false teachers who proclaimed that only those who received a special esoteric intuitive enlightenment could be perfected and pure.

Regarding the meaning of *mature*, τέλειος *téleios* ⁹, Bratcher and Nida add:

⁸ Bratcher and Nida, *Colossians*, p. 42. Bratcher and Nida comment on the Greek for *everyone* noting that πᾶς πᾶς; includes the idea of *oneness*, a totality or the *whole*, the same as *hólos* ... the whole. Cf. also Zodhiates, πᾶς πᾶς.

⁹ Zodhiates, τέλειος *téleios* ... goal, purpose. Finished, that which has reached its end, term, limit; hence, complete, full, wanting in nothing.

A *mature individual* translates the Greek adjective “perfect,” “complete.” In mystery cults it described the minority who had been initiated into the secrets and rituals of the religion; Paul here again emphasizes the universal nature of the gospel. Everyone is to be “perfect,” not meaning sinless perfection, but spiritual development and maturity, that is, a full knowledge of God’s will and a devotion to follow it. It appears elsewhere in Paul’s letters in 1 Cor 2:6, 14:20, Phil 3:15, and Col 4:12 (compare also Eph 4:13).¹⁰

The sense of being mature in Christ draws on the wide ranging word τέλειος *téleios* which primarily includes *having reached a goal*. Zodhiates adds that it speaks “specifically of persons meaning full age, adulthood, full-grown, of persons, meaning *full-grown in mind and understanding*.”¹¹

Peter O’Brien comments on this cosmic apocalyptic process of presenting everyone mature in Christ:

This is similar to the end God had in view in reconciling the Colossians through the death of his Son, verse 22: to present them (the aorist of the same verb *παρίστημι* is used) holy, blameless and irreproachable before him God’s work of reconciliation in Christ and Paul’s active ministry have the same end in view, namely, the perfection of each man in Christ *on the final day* (Rom 14:10).¹²

Col 1:29. *For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me.*

The Greek concept in this pericope regarding Paul’s toil is interesting, holding at least two possibilities, an alternate one to the RSV above is found in the English Standard Version of 1:29, *For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.* Paul is stressing that it is not by his personal energy

¹⁰ Bratcher and Nida, *Colossians*, p. 42.

¹¹ Zodhiates, τέλειος *téleios*.

¹² O’Brien, *Colossians*, p. 89.

that he struggles for the Christians, although Paul's energy surely is included, but *by Christ's energy* that works powerfully within him.

James Dunn's translation of 1:29 introduces this interesting point; *For this I also labor, striving in accord with his energy which operates effectively in me with power.*¹³ His comments on this are helpful:

As in 1:10-11, however, the balance between human effort and divine enabling is clearly struck. ἐνέργεια means basically "activity," and so also the "energy" that accomplishes activity; similarly the verb ἐνεργέω, "be at work" and so "produce, be effective." In normal usage the word group usually refers to the activity of God or other supernatural forces ... with the Semitic doubling of noun and verb (as in Eph. 1:19-20; cf. the similar doubling in 1:11) reinforcing the point. Lest the implication of the effectiveness of this divine "activity" be lost, ἐν δυνάμει ("in power") is added (NRSV "all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me"). As in 1:11 *no room for doubt is left as to Paul's own utter dependence on God's enabling for the exhausting schedule that he followed, or as to its effectiveness* (see also on 1:11).¹⁴

In similar line of thought, note Paul's statement to the Corinthians at 1 Cor 1:17 ff, and 2:1:

¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. ¹⁸For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God ... ^{2:1}When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. ²For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

¹³ Dunn, *Colossians*, Kindle Locations 1584-1585.

¹⁴ Dunn, *Colossians*, Kindle Locations 1780ff. Emphasis Mine, IAF.

Moo, like Dunn, draws attention to Paul's meaningful relocating the power operating through his preaching from himself to Christ:

As he has done earlier in v. 11 with reference to the Colossians' life of Christian obedience, Paul again stacks up words referring to power: with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me; or, more literally, "according to his [Christ's] energy which is working in me in power." And the ultimate aim is much the same: to balance human effort with the enabling grace of God in Christ. All Paul's work would be of little effect if it was not done through the power of Christ. Paul can brag that "I worked harder than all of them" (1 Cor. 15:10), but at the same time what he accomplishes in ministry is always and only "through him who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:13). "Energy" and "works" come from the same Greek root (*energeia/energe, sic*), which often refers in the New Testament to the power of God (e.g., Gal. 2:8; Eph. 1:11, 19-20; 3:7, 20; Phil. 2:13; 3:21; Col. 2:12). The combination of the three words is found nowhere else in the New Testament (though cf. Eph. 1:19-20).¹⁵

Paul states clearly that the goal of his preaching was to preach Christ crucified and resurrected as the center and pivotal point of the Christian faith. The transforming and reconciling power of Paul's preaching was not his erudition and persuasion but the empowered work of Christ's working through Paul's preaching. The goal of Paul's preaching was *to present every man to God mature in Christ*. For this he had been working with all his energy so that the power of Christ, working through the Holy Spirit, could recreate man in his original form and reconcile him with God.

This is what Paul had in mind when he penned 2 Cor 5:16ff:

¹⁶ *From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a*

¹⁵ Moo, *Colossians*, pp. 162-163.

human point of view, we regard him thus no longer.

¹⁷ Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Chapter 7: Paul's Deep Concern for the Colossians: Col 2:1-7

¹ For I want you to know how greatly I strive for you, and for those at La-odicea, and for all who have not seen my face, ² that their hearts may be encouraged as they are knit together in love, to have all the riches of assured understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, of Christ, ³ in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴ I say this in order that no one may delude you with beguiling speech. ⁵ For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

⁶ As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

As usual, this pericope is extremely tightly woven, and as N. T. Wright has expressed it in his many studies, is theologically dense, needing careful unpacking!

Col 2:1. *For I want you to know how greatly I strive for you, and for those at La-odicea, and for all who have not seen my face*

...

Using the word ἀγών, *agōn*, Paul expressed the *depth* of his concern and the *reason* for his *striving*. Ἀγών, *agōn* carries the sense of striving, being in contention with something. The English term *agony* expresses well the depth of this striving.¹ Paul is so concerned for the faith of these Christians, whom he has not met personally, that he *agonizes* over them and their faith. The danger they face in the battle with the false teachings of their pagan neighbors was intense!

¹Zodhiates, ἀγών *agōn*; strife, contention, contest for victory or mastery such as was used in the Greek games of running, boxing, wrestling, and so forth. Paul applies the word to the evangelical contest against the enemies of man's salvation (1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7 [cf. 1 Cor. 9:24]).

By the *causative* particle, *for*² at Col 2:1, Paul *emphasized the urgency* of his stress. They were surrounded daily by false messages from their neighbors. To resist such inroads challenging their faith, Paul needed to preach only Jesus Christ, and they needed, urgently, to maintain only Jesus Christ as the core of their faith. The pervasiveness of the several false philosophies of the region was a constant danger to their faith. In light of these philosophies there was the danger the Colossians being drawn away from their faith in Jesus into vain human or demonic views. Paul was drawing them back to Christ, and only Christ, as the real hope they had for their future. He had just, at Col 1:15ff, stressed the *divine sovereign preeminence* of Christ above all other human and spiritual powers. Now, in this pericope he was getting ready to introduce his next great Christological emphases, *the all sufficiency of Christ*, Col 2:8ff.

We are about to experience a key thought behind the writing of apostolic epistles, both in the Jewish and Gentile tradition. Such letters symbolized *apostolic presence*. Paul acknowledged that some at Colossae may not have known him personally, including others in Laodicea, but Paul considered his letters to be the equivalent of his *real apostolic presence*. Note this sense in Phil 2:12, *Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

Paul's implied personal presence in and through his epistle emphasized the degree of his concern.

Col 2:2, 3. Paul states the reason for his striving for the Colossians and his subsequent writing; that their *hearts may be encouraged as they are knit together in love*. While elsewhere in Col 1 and 2 Paul's chief concern had been to focus on the *theological* themes developed in his high Christology, in this place

² *Zodhiates, γάρ, gár*; a causative particle standing always after one or more words in a clause and *expressing the reason for what has been before*, affirmed or implied, in the sense of because, and so forth. In this case it intensifies the point that follows.

he redirects his thought to a *paranetic pastoral* concern, that because of their faith in Christ as the preeminent one the Colossians and Laodiceans would mature in love for one another in their appreciation of the full spiritual blessing of being in Christ.

Their mature understanding of Christ should result in their being *encouraged* and *comforted*³ to where they would *grow together in love for one another in Christ*. In a hostile pagan environment such mutual respect and love for one another would encourage them to maintain, their faith in Christ.

O'Brien presents an excellent discussion on the word *παρακαλέω, parakaléō*, often translated as *comfort, encourage, et al.*

The purpose of this apostolic activity is to strengthen the readers' hearts. The *παρακαλέω* word-group had a wealth of meanings in the Greek world of Paul's day, including "to call someone to oneself," "to beseech," "to ask" (sometimes in prayer), "to exhort," and "to comfort" ... On occasion in the NT, the verb served to denote missionary proclamation (2 Cor 5:20; cf. 1 Thess 2:3 and on this note ... and as a kind of formula to introduce pastoral administration ... While the translation "comfort" is perfectly legitimate in many contexts ... and is preferred here by Lohse ... Schmitz-Stählin ... and others, such a rendering appears to be too weak ... The verb implies more than "comfort" and ought to be rendered "strengthen"... In Colossians there is no mention of, or allusion to, distresses or persecutions that would have elicited consolation or comfort as the object of the apostle's energetic activities. What made Paul concerned was the readers' danger of being carried away by the heretical teaching. Consequently their hearts needed to be strengthened (note the parallel in 2 Thess 2:16, 17 where *παρακαλέω* is used, with reference to

³ Zodhiates, *παρακαλέω, parakaléō* ... To aid, help, comfort, encourage, to exhort, desire, call for, beseech with a stronger force than *ask*. Cf. Moo, *ibid.*, p. 164;

the addressees' hearts, synonymously with στηρίζω, "strengthen"). "Heart" (καρδία) is employed in its customary OT sense denoting the inner life of the person, the center of his personality, understood as the source of will, emotion, thoughts and affections.⁴

In agreement with O'Brien, Moo, Bruce, and others, we believe in context here that Paul was expressing his desire that the Colossians and Laodiceans would be emotionally and spiritually *strengthened* and *encouraged* in their *hearts*, that is, their *inner being*, by the promise of their inheritance and all the blessings they already enjoy in Christ. Paul's next words strengthen this point, Paul desired that they *have all the riches of assured understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, of Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*. Paul had already on several occasions referred to God's *mystery* which was *Christ in them and they in Christ*, cf. Col 1:6-29.

Moo adds an interesting view concerning their *growing together in love*:

Paul hopes that his ministry will both encourage these believers he has never met and foster unity among them at the same time. The concern for unity seems a bit unexpected in this context, particularly if it is a basis for the full riches of complete understanding It is possible, then, that this verb (συμβιβασθέντες a passive form of *sumbibázō*), instead of being translated united, as in almost all the English versions, should be translated "having been taught." The verb means "teach" in Acts 19:33 and 1 Corinthians 2:16 (quoting Isa. 40:13) and in all its LXX occurrences ... and "being taught in love" would provide a natural basis for full riches of complete understanding ... "Love," then, will be either the means by which unity is achieved (as 3:14 would suggest ... the sphere in which the unity exists. It is true that Paul has not touched on unity

⁴ O'Brien, *Colossians*, pp. 93f..

among believers yet in the letter. Nevertheless, as we have seen, Paul associates interaction among the members of the body with spiritual growth later in the letter (2:19). So a reference to the importance of unity is certainly not out of place.⁵

With the expression that the Colossians *have all the riches of assured understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, of Christ*, Paul asserted that all *true knowledge and true wisdom*, that which both the Jews and quasi Jewish Gnostics were seeking, *was already available in Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*, which knowledge and wisdom are destined to mature into *loving one another through careful teaching of the true mystery of Christ*.

It is only with some difficulty that one misses Paul's discussion of *insight* and *wisdom* (σύνεσις, *súnēsis*), and *knowledge* (ἐπίγνωσις *epígnōsis*) in this pericope and does not see in Paul's concern for the false knowledge and false wisdom being offered the saints in the syncretistic philosophies prevalent in Asia at this time. While not yet a full blown Jewish gnosticism, or any form of incipient gnosticism, the concern for esoteric intuitive wisdom and knowledge was a significant option and challenge of the prevalent philosophies.

Obrien observes:

As at chapter 1:9, 10 "insight" (σύνεσις) and "knowledge" (ἐπίγνωσις) are linked to express the concern of the apostle for the community. Here he goes out of his way to emphasize the abundant fullness of this σύνεσις ("insight" or "understanding" implies, as at 1:9, the capacity to distinguish the true from the false) by connecting the words "riches" (πλοῦτος; cf. the comments at 1:27) and "fullness" (πληροφορία). The latter term can mean "full assurance," "certainty" ... and this is its connotation at 1 Thessalonians 1:5 ... If this is the correct rendering here, then Paul has introduced the note of assurance or certainty which was

⁵ Moo, *Colossians*, pp. 165f.

important for the Colossians in the face of false doctrines: either Paul desires that their judgment be exercised with full certainty ... on the grounds that σύνεσις has an intransitive sense and means “the faculty of judging” or, more likely, he is looking for the conviction which results from insight.⁶

Paul stressed that all true wisdom, insight, and knowledge were already available in and through a real relationship with Jesus Christ in whom all divine knowledge and power dwelt. In the next paragraph, and then in the next chapter, Col 3:1f, Paul explained how Christians secured a real relationship with Christ; by being buried with Christ in baptism and raised to live in a new relationship with God, in Christ.

Col 2:3. Commenting on the high christological theology of Col 2:2, 3 and the Colossians:

... they are knit together in love, to have all the riches of assured understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, of Christ,³ in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge

Moo observes:

This verse is the christological high point of the letter. It does not match the “hymn” of 1:15-20 for exalted language in reference to Christ, but it expresses beautifully and compactly the cutting-edge christological point that is Paul’s driving concern: Christ is the one in whom is to be found all that one needs in order to understand spiritual reality and to lead a life pleasing to God.⁷

Col 2:4, 5. *⁴I say this in order that no one may delude you with beguiling speech. ⁵For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.*

⁶ O’Brien, *Colossians*, p. 94.

⁷ Moo, *Colossians*, p. 169. Italic emphasis IAF.

Paul clearly sees his *parakalēō*⁸ presence, that is his being called to their side in his apostolic epistolary presence, as a strengthening encouragement in the context of the pervading pagan and syncretistic Jewish wisdom. In their contest with the false prophecies he is with them in spirit, rejoicing at their firmness of faith in Christ.

Col 2:6, 7. Paul reminded the Colossians that they had received Christ with, and in, an obedient faith. He encouraged them to continue in that commitment.

As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him,⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

The concept of living in Christ carries the sense of constantly abiding in Christ, the word or message concerning Christ, and faith of Christ. The expression *so live*, *περιπατεῖτε*, *peripateite*, is a present active imperative verb implies a *constant steady living in Christ*. Paul drives this home with his next phrase, *rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving*. His analogy to a growing and thriving plant would have been easy for the Colossians to understand. Being deeply rooted in Christ implied maintaining their faithful obedient beginning through faithfully believing Paul's preaching and their consequent obedience to the gospel of Christ.

Col 2:8-15: Paul Stressed the All Sufficiency of Christ.

⁸ See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. ⁹ For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have come to fulness of life in him,

⁸ The term παρακληθῶσιν, an aorist passive subjunctive of παρακαλέω, *parakalēō*, is one of those “chameleon” type words that changes its emphasis in different contexts! Although it does not lose its sense of being called to one's side, it carries the meaning of *I am with you in spirit* through my apostolic epistolary presence to support and encourage you.

who is the head of all rule and authority. ¹¹ *In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ;* ¹² *and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.* ¹³ *And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,* ¹⁴ *having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross.* ¹⁵ *He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him.*

Paul had previously at Col 1:15ff stressed the absolute preeminence of Christ. In this pericope he builds on this by explaining the all sufficiency of faith in Christ. In Christ, in whom all divinity dwelt, they had all the spiritual blessings they needed to live fully in the light⁹, and to combat the pervasive philosophies of their pagan neighbors.

Col 2:8. His opening words, *see to it*, βλέπετε, from βλέπω, βλέπō, carried a sense of urgency and a call for alertness.

Zodhiates explains of βλέπō:

Metaphorically, to look to, direct the mind upon, consider, take heed ... keep an eye upon, and thus by implication, meaning *beware of*...¹⁰

Dunn translates this sentence expressively, “Watch out lest there be someone who tries to captivate you through philosophy and empty deceit in accordance with human tradition ...”¹¹

The expression *makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit* gets to the heart of Paul’s concern, the intended misleading

⁹ *Receiving the light* and living in the light was one of the emphases of the “gnostic” type philosophy the false teachers were holding forth as spiritual fulfillment.

¹⁰ Zodhiates, βλέπω, βλέπō.

¹¹ Dunn, *Colossians*, Kindle location 2007.

and spiritual captivity of the false teachers! Zodhiates adds that prey:

... from συλαγωγέω, sulagōgēō implies to strip, rob...to carry away. To lead off as prey, carry off as booty, rob, or kidnap. Figuratively, it is used here of the destructive effects of false teachers who rob believers of the complete riches available in Christ and revealed in the gospel (Col. 2:8).¹²

Paul is not simply opposed to *philosophy*, φιλοσοφία, *philosophía*¹³, which primarily means the *love of thinking*. Paul clarified that his contention concerns vain or empty philosophy that is designed to deceive the thinker into supposing they had a superior philosophy which was set in speculative assumptions! Such speculative thinking cannot be compared to the absolute historical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the foundation of Christian theology. Paul's christological atoning message was rooted in the real life, death, and resurrection of Christ, prophesied in Scripture, witnessed by the Apostles and hundreds of early Christians, and by Paul himself. This had been his message everywhere, notably to the Corinthians, and was precisely what he had preached to the Colossians. Note Pau's observation at 1 Corinthians 15:1-8:

Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, ² by which you are saved, if you hold it fast— unless you believed in vain.

¹² Zodhiates, συλαγωγέω, sulagōgēō.

¹³ Zodhiates, φιλοσοφία, *philosophía* ... which is from *philósophos* ... a philosopher, friend of wisdom. Love of wisdom, philosophy, which came to mean the doctrine or tenets of the heathen or Gentile philosophers (Col. 2:8 [cf. 2:16]; 1 Tim. 6:20). The modern definition of the word must not be read into its use in the Bible. Philosophy, as the study of reality, knowledge, and values, is a profitable and biblically supported endeavor. However, this is not the meaning of the word in Scripture. There it carries a negative connotation and refers to quasi-religious doctrines and speculations (e.g., gnosticism) all of which are irreconcilable with the Christian faith.

³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Likewise, their faith was clearly set in the preeminence and all sufficiency of Christ, and not vain or human philosophy.

Beale summarizes Paul's concerns well:

Commentators agree that Paul is not condemning all "philosophy" but only that which does not base itself on and line up with this faithful teaching. Such "philosophy" is "empty deception" for three reasons: (1) because it is based on "the tradition of men" and not on the "word of God" (1: 25) or true "instruction" (2: 7), which they have "received" (2: 7); (2) because it is based on worldly doctrine ("the elements of the world") and not on that which proceeds from heaven (cf. 3: 1–2); (3) because it is not based on Christ. Rather, all knowledge is to be seen through the lens of Christ and him alone ...¹⁴

Martin reads this as:

"the Colossians must be on their guard lest anyone should "kidnap" them (2:8) and carry them off as a prize of war. He puts his finger exactly on the nature of this teaching, "according to human tradition." It is identified by two pejorative remarks: it is a philosophy which Paul regards as a hollow sham, and it gave inordinate place to "the elemental spirits of the universe ..."¹⁵

¹⁴ Beale, *Colossians*, p. 272.

¹⁵ Martin, *Colossians*, p. 113.

Bird observes regarding this pericope that it identifies in scornful terms the dangerous philosophies the Christians were facing:

The obvious impression is that Paul is fireproofing the Colossians against perceived error. The philosophy has not gained a foothold yet, but Paul and his coworkers are intent on preventing any further encroachment. These persuasive arguments (*pithanologia* ...) refer to views and practices that sound attractive and alluring, but in fact adherence to them removes the Colossians from their root and foundation in the Messiah.¹⁶

O'Brien notes regarding the words "*philosophy* and empty deceit":

παραλογίζεται ἐν πιθανολογία. "[That no one] may deceive you with persuasive language." The verb, meaning "deceive," "delude" ... is used in the New Testament only here and at James 1:22 which refers to the self-deception of those who are hearers of the word but not doers (the term appears in the LXX and later Greek writers ... This deception is effected (sic) "by plausible (but false) arguments" ... *πιθανολογία* means "persuasive speech," "art of persuasion" ... and here it is being used in an unfavorable sense. Paul has said these things (vs 1–3, especially v 3) to warn the Colossian community not to give in to the beguiling speech of the false teachers ... Their behavior and manner are so different from the true messenger of the gospel whose proclamation is "not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power" (1 Cor 2:4; cf.).¹⁷

Paul enlarged on his description of the false philosophies circulating by describing them as *the elemental spirits of the universe*, τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, *ta stoicheia tou kosmou*. The terms *elemental spirits* and the *universe* have been widely

¹⁶ Bird, *Colossians*, Kindle locations 1713ff.

¹⁷ O'Brien, *Colossians*, p. 97.

discussed and the common view is that primarily they refer to some forces or spirits that were commonly held by the pagans in the region which Paul has described as *empty philosophical concepts*. The words *elemental spirits* derive from the Greek noun στοιχεῖον, *stoicheion*, which according to ancient Greek philosophy meant *the basic parts, rudiments, elements, or components of something*.¹⁸

The word *stoicheia*, the pseudo-religious term being discussed in this pericope, translated as *elemental spirits*, is not common in the New Testament (cf Col 2 and Gal 4), so Paul must have been building more on how the terms were understood in general in the contexts of his discussion. It is apparent, therefore, that the terms in Col 2 and Galatians must have had a similar connotation.

Scholars have discussed three basic options; 1) simply taking *stoicheia* in its basic Greek philosophical meaning of the primary elements in the cosmos out of which the cosmos evolved, 2) the cosmic astral spirits that inhabited the universe as in some proto-Gnostic myths, 3) the primary basic elements of the religious faith upon which the faith hinged. The seeming Jewish overtones discussed in the pericope have caused some to see in this pericope a reference to the Jewish Law, etc., which the syncretistic Jewish synagogue teachers were proclaiming, or a combination of all three which were possibly part of the syncretistic form of religious philosophy being encountered by the Christians. In whatever way *stoicheia* is understood, it certainly seems possible that some element of all three options would have been present in the syncretistic philosophies that circulated in Asia at the time.

Whatever these *stoicheía* or *elemental spirits* were, Paul obviously considered them to be basic elementary principles, whether Jewish of otherwise, that were a challenge to the primary faith in Jesus. These *stoicheia* were of no use in building up, or maturing the relationship with God which they already enjoyed in Christ.

¹⁸ Zodhiates, στοιχεῖον, *stoicheion*.

Col 2:9, 10. *For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily,¹⁰ and you have come to fulness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.*

In these two straightforward verses Paul drew on the high Christology already enunciated at Col 1:15, *he is the image of the invisible God*, by adding the highest claim to divinity that ranks along with John 1:1 and Col 1:19 as definitive claim to Jesus' sovereignty, and then adds the consequent outcome of such faith:

⁹ *For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily,*
¹⁰ *and you have come to fulness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.*

O'Brien stresses the fact that all the fulness that the Colossians needed was found *in him, in Jesus*, by observing how often the expression *in him* occurs in the text:

Paul continues his polemical thrust as he makes plain to the readers why (ὅτι) the "philosophy" of the false teachers is "not according to Christ" ... He focuses attention on the centrality of Christ, whom the readers are to follow unswervingly, by resuming the phrase "in him" (ἐν αὐτῷ) of verse 7 and repeating it as a theme in the following verses ... In fact it runs like a scarlet thread through this whole section, verses 9–15: "in him" (ἐν αὐτῷ) the entire fullness of deity dwells bodily (v 9); "in him" (ἐν αὐτῷ) you are filled (v 10); "in whom" (ἐν ᾧ) you have been circumcised (v 11); "with him" (αὐτῷ συν-) you have been buried, "in whom" (ἐν ᾧ) you also have been raised with him (v 12); God has made you alive "with him" (σὺν αὐτῷ, v 13); and he has led the principalities and powers in triumphal procession "in him" (ἐν αὐτῷ, v 15).¹⁹

At Col 1:19, we had previously commented on the meaning of the word fulness²⁰ as it was used in various religious movements

¹⁹ O'Brien, *Colossians*, pp. 110–111.

²⁰ The word fulness is spelled either as fulness or fullness depending on the translation adopted, the writer, and the context. Both spellings are correct. Cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*.

of the day. My observation at that point was that fulness in the pagan context implied “whatever one sought in their search for the ultimate reality could be found in their religious and philosophical programs.” Paul challenged this stating bluntly that *ultimate truth and fullness* can be found only in Jesus, the son of God who embodies all fullness, truth, and divinity.

Since the concept of fulness is found in Colossians only in here verses, Col 1:19, 2:9, and 2: 10 it would help if we explored this concept a little more fully at this point.

O’Brien offers a reasonably comprehensive survey of the word *plērōma* as it is found in both the Old and New Testaments, as well as in the many mystery religions of the day. He concludes by observing:

These three lines converge at Colossians 1:19 in the person of Christ ... He is the “place” (note the emphatic position of ἐν αὐτῷ) *in whom God in all his fullness was pleased to take up his residence* (the verb is the aorist infinitive κατοικῆσαι). *All the attributes and activities of God—his spirit, word, wisdom and glory—are perfectly displayed in Christ ... This is no temporary indwelling as the verb κατοικέω (in contrast to παροικέω, “sojourn”) with its present tense at chapter 2:9 makes plain: “in him all the fullness of deity dwells (κατοικεῖ) bodily.”*

He is the one mediator between God and the world of mankind. The Colossian Christians need not fear those supernatural powers under whose control men were supposed to live, whether divine emanations, agencies or the like. God in all his divine essence and power had taken up residence in Christ.²¹

Bruce recognizes that we do not have a definitive description of the supposed Colossian heresy at hand, but that we can identify certain characteristics of what Paul was addressing from the general discussion of Paul’s response. Bruce observes:

²¹ O’Brien, *Colossians*, p. 53.

The Greek word translated “fullness” (plērōma) is one that Paul and other NT writers use in a variety of senses. The peculiar force of its use here has been thought to lie in its probable employment in a technical sense by the heretical teachers at Colossae. In the mid-second century the word was used by Gnostics of the Valentinian school to denote the totality of aeons (divine entities or emanations), and it is conceivable that it bore some such meaning in incipient forms of gnosticism in the mid-first century. We must constantly remind ourselves that we have no knowledge of the Colossian heresy apart from inferences drawn as cautiously as possible from the argument and wording of this letter, but it would make sense in the present context if the heresy envisaged powers intermediate between the supreme God and the world of humanity, so that any communication between God and the world, in either direction, had to pass through the spheres in which those powers exercised control. Those who thought in this way would be careful to treat those powers with becoming respect. But the whole of this theosophical apparatus is undermined here in one simple, direct affirmation: the totality of divine essence and power is resident in Christ. He is the one, all-sufficient intermediary between God and the world of humanity, and all the attributes of God—his spirit, word, wisdom, and glory—are disclosed in him.²²

All of the *fulness* spoken of by the false teachers, or present in the Colossian philosophical options, is to be found only in Jesus.

In contrast to the confusing pantheon of gods and philosophies offered by the syncretistic philosophies confronting the Christians Paul’s point was that there was no single philosophy taught by the false teachers that offered them the high *spiritual fulness* they postulated.

²² Bruce, *Colossians*, pp. 73-74.

From the confusing array of pagan and polytheistic offerings Paul identified in their teaching soon to be described at Col 2:16-23, nothing in these polytheistic syntheses of the deification of a pagan god like Dionysius of wine, the worship of the fertility goddess Artemis of Ephesus, the worship of angels, or their obeisance before Zeus of Olympus, met their deep spiritual needs as supposed in the concept of *fulness, plérōma!*

These religious options were all *impotent* options of a pantheon of gods who each met partial or occasional cultural perceived hopes. In contrast, *in Jesus* all the divine and spiritual hopes man could seek were found in the one divine being, *Jesus, the image of the invisible god, the firstborn* of all creation who created everything in the beginning and who *fulfills all of man's spiritual needs and hopes!*

The potency of Paul's argument lay in the power of the gospel and the historical fact of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. For Paul, the *fact* of the *power* of the gospel, his *real personal experience* of the death and resurrection of Jesus, which the Colossians and others had all believed, was more *realistic* than the many *vague* philosophies being proclaimed by the false teachers.

Paul had personally experienced the risen Jesus, had been challenged and called by that Jesus, and had witnessed the grace of God in that experience on the road to Damascus and in Damascus, cf. Acts 9:1-19; 22:1-16. It was this factual personal experience of the resurrected Jesus that penetrated and permeated Paul's life and ministry to where he could write to the Romans at Rom 1:15-17 and proclaim:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."

Col 2:10, *you have come to fulness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.* Paul drew on the rich religious implications of the Greek concept of *plérōma, fullness*, common in the mystical quasi-incipient gnostic hopes, to make this point.

Jesus *fulfills* and completes every hope and aspiration that man could seek since in his *fulness* Jesus is the head of all rule and authority. Note how in this claim Paul repeats his majestic claims for Jesus stated at Eph 1:15ff, which the Colossians would also have read in Paul's letter to the Ephesians which was circulating among the churches of Asia at the same time:

¹⁵ For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸ having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might ²⁰ which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; ²² and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all.

Col 2:11-15. Paul goes off in his usual manner, piling thoughts one on top of another, as he builds his argument in a crescendo of ideas! In doing this he stressed that the Colossians and Laodiceans had already been brought into the realm of God's fullest blessings and fulness by being united to Christ, in whom all fulness dwells, through baptism.

¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; ¹² and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

¹³ And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him.

In opening his argument with a mention of circumcision one can hardly miss Paul's slap at the Jewish dimensions of the syncretistic Jewish-gnostic. The *circumcision* the Colossian Christians had received was not the *partial circumcision made by human hands*, the hands of a Jewish Rabbi.²³ They had been brought into *the fulness of life in Jesus* by a different kind of circumcision not made with human hands, but by the power of God and the Holy Spirit, in or through their *baptism*.

The Greek clause at Col 2:12 does not open with a conjunction, *and*, as in the RSV, which could be suggested by the aorist passive participle συνταφέντες, *suntathentes* from συνθάπτω, *suntháptō*, *to bury*. However, it is better to maintain the sense of the aorist passive participle as in the ESV, reading simply *having been buried* with him in baptism.

Extensive discussion is found among scholars²⁴ relating to the expression *in the circumcision of Christ*, ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ. *Of Christ*, τοῦ Χριστοῦ, is a genitive noun and could be a *subjective possessive genitive*. The *subjective possessive genitive* could be understood as *the circumcision experienced by Christ as a Jewish child*.

²³ Circumcision in the Jewish system was a Jewish covenant mark of identity with God and his covenant. It was given to the Jews under the Mosaic Covenant for Jews and not Gentiles. A Gentile wishing to be identified as in a covenant relationship had to become a proselytized Jew and be circumcised as a Jew. Baptism was the new Jew and Gentile mark of covenant relationship in with God in Christ. In Baptism both Jew and Gentile were reconciled to God in Christ through faith in Jesus and being baptized into Jesus Christ, cf. Gal 3:23-29, and Eph 2:11-22.

²⁴ Cf. Bruce, *Colossians*, Col 2:12; Moo, *Colossians*, Col 2:12; Dunn, *Colossians*, Col 2:12; O'Brien, *Colossians*, Col 2:12, *et al.*

A *subjective* genitive could also be a metaphor referring to the *circumcision that Christ experienced on the cross when he shed is flesh in atonement*, which the Christian experiences in *baptism*.

However, adopting an *objective* genitive option would also refer to the experience of Christ on the cross. This would also connect the circumcision of the Christian in baptism to the metaphor of the circumcision of Christ on the cross.

Bruce²⁵ adopts a similar view by arguing that the *circumcision of Christ* is the *circumcision conducted by Christ when he purifies the Christian's heart*; circumcising the heart from the dead sins in the forgiveness experienced in their baptism.

The many nuances of the relationship between circumcision and baptism adopted by scholars, although confusing, are nevertheless very similar; stressing that what occurred to the Christians *in baptism* Paul relates to *a new and different circumcision*, not simply of the flesh by human hands as in the Jewish priestly experience, but *a circumcision experienced by the Christian conducted by Christ at their baptism*.

This would relate the discussion to one of Paul's greatest christological theological points regarding baptism, *being united with Christ's death and resurrection in baptism*. Cf. Rom 6:1-11:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For he who has died is freed from sin. ⁸ But if we have died with Christ, we believe that

²⁵ Bruce, *Colossians*, pp. 103-107.

we shall also live with him. ⁹ For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰ The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Col 2:12 also introduces an important nuance present in baptism that is profound. Paul stated *and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.* This highlights the point that the power of the baptism to save does not lie in the power of the Christians to be obedient, although obedience to the gospel call is important. The working power of baptism resides in *the working of God* in Christ through his Holy Spirit²⁶ *accessed through faith* (τῆς πίστεως, a noun, *trusting*) in the working (τῆς ἐνεργείας, the *energy*) of God, and not one's own power.

Col 2:13, 14. *And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross.*

The comment re being dead in trespasses and being made alive together with Christ develops the baptism theme of Col 2:12, and Rom 6:1-11. Here Paul introduces a new thought, the avenue to a real relationship with God was no longer based on circumcision, but to the contrary, was through a new relationship with God in Christ through baptism.

Paul clarified the argument on circumcision by adding that God had *cancelled* the bond which stood against all sinners with its legal demands, having set that bond side. We will shortly comment more fully on the nature of that bond! Paul had in

²⁶ I have added *in Christ through the Holy Spirit* which is assumed in the doctrine of the atoning working of God.

previous epistles explained that God had in Christ *annulled*²⁷ the Mosaic covenant which involved a relationship with God based on circumcision, and opened a new avenue of relationship with man through faith in Christ. Paul's point was that Christian baptism, which was the new circumcision made without human hands and experienced in Christ, and presumably which all of the Colossian and Laodicean Christians had experienced (cf. Col 3:1), was precisely the point in which all people through faith in Jesus would be brought into a new covenant relationship with God in Christ.

This theology of baptism into Christ and a new relationship with God was not a new theme for Paul. He had previously expounded this point of view in his magisterial epistle to the Galatians. In what was possibly the earliest of Paul's epistles we have in our Christian canon,²⁸ Paul wrote at Gal 3:23-29:

²³ Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed.

²⁴ So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Shortly after the Galatian epistle, Paul wrote what many believe to be his *magnum opus* of New Testament theology, Romans. In this brilliant epistle Paul argued that Christians were no longer under the Law of Moses for their covenant relationship with God. Paul was concerned that some in Rome felt that since

²⁷ Cf. Paul's arguments at Gal 3:23-29; Eph 2:14-18; and the "Hebrew preachers" comments at Heb 8:1-13.

²⁸ Some scholars prefer to list 1 Thessalonians as the first extant Pauline Epistle. Cf. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999; Carl R. Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament*, Nashville: Abingdon, 2005.

they were no longer under the Law of Moses, but under faith in Christ, they could take sin carelessly. His answer at Rom 6:1-11 is decisive:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For he who has died is freed from sin. ⁸ But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. ⁹ For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰ The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Col 2:14 poses an interesting question! We drop back to Col 2:13 to pick up the context Paul was developing.

¹³ And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Picking up on the theologically loaded thoughts regarding circumcision and baptism, Paul spoke of *a bond being cancelled!* But what *bond* did Paul have in mind when he stated that God *has cancelled the bond which stood against us*? Several interesting suggestions are offered regarding the nature of this bond.

Some interpreters, among several within my own early church tradition, have seen a parallel to Eph 2:11-16 where Paul obviously had the Law of Moses being annulled in mind.

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end.

In this Ephesian text Paul spoke of a *circumcision made with hands separating the Gentile from Christ, alienating them from the commonwealth of Israel*. He apparently had in mind circumcision under the Law of Moses which was a “*dividing wall of hostility*”, and a “*wall of separation*” between the Jews and Gentiles. Paul stressed that God had in Christ’s death brought this *wall of separation* to an end, cf. Gal 3:23-29:

²³ *Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. ²⁴ So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.*

It is most likely that Paul here had the Mosaic Law regarding the dividing wall of circumcision, etc. in mind at Eph 2:11ff.

Other scholars more appropriately, however, keep this *bond* in the context of Col 2:13 and the *redemptive* and *atoning* process of *forgiveness* which took place on the sacrificial cross of Christ. In the context of sins and transgressions the reference seems more appropriately to God *having canceled the bond of sin which stood against us with its legal demands. The legal demand incurred by sin was death! God set this bond aside on the cross through the death of Christ in our behalf.*

Note the discussion relating to the *legal bond of sin, death*. Sin and death were an age old principle going all the way back to the sin of Adam and Eve, Gen 3:1ff:

¹ Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?" ² And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; ³ but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.' " ⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die.

Note also this principle expressed more clearly in Ezek 18:20:

²⁰ The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.

Paul summarized his principle at Rom 3:20ff, reminding the Romans of what God had done for them in Christ:

²⁰ When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ But then what return did you get from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death. ²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life. ²³ For the wages of

sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This was the point Paul was addressing in our text, Col 2:13, 14. God made us *alive together with him (Christ) having forgiven us all our trespasses*,¹⁴ *having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross.* Clearly the context is one of atonement for sin!

Of the word *trespass*, παράπτωμα, *paráptōma* Zodhiates observes:

It represents errors or faults of weakness, it does not necessarily fail to imply culpability ... occurring only in Paul's writings and Matt. 6:14, 15; 18:35; Mark 11:25, 26; James 5:16, is often used where pardon is spoken of (Gal. 6:1). It is used of sin in general (Gal. 6:1; Sept.: Ps. 19:12).²⁹

In the context of the *atonement* for *sin*, Col 2:13, 14, circumcision, παράπτωμα, *paráptōma*, and the Law of Moses do not fit at all with the atoning removal of a debt, *death*, or a bond incurred by sin that stood against us. It was because of this debt, sin and death, that Christ came to do what the Law could not do.

The atonement context is heightened by Paul's use of *the bond χειρόγραφον, cheirógraphon*, which refers to "a handwritten record of debt, a note written by the hand which makes one obligated to fulfill what is written".³⁰ This definition of bond defines this clearly as a bond involving death which was incurred by sin.

The word χειρόγραφον, *cheirógraphon* is found only once in the New Testament, at Col 2:14,³¹ but it was common in legal circles referring to some bond of indebtedness incurred by the person involved. Sin and death thus can be understood as that

²⁹ Zodhiates, παράπτωμα, *paráptōma*.

³⁰ Zodhiates, χειρόγραφον, *cheirógraphon*.

³¹ *The Englishman's Greek Concordance of the New Testament*, Ninth Edition, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970, original publication 1860.

bond against a moral and legal requirement that God laid aside in Christ and his substitutionary death.

Dunn writes in a lengthy comment regarding χειρόγραφον, *cheirógraphon*:

only here in the New Testament, meant literally a document written by the person responsible, a holograph, so "receipt," as in its only occurrence in the LXX (Tob. 5:3 and 9:5). But here it has the further sense of "a certificate of indebtedness, bond," ... The metaphor is probably adapted to the earlier Jewish idea of a heavenly book of the living (Exod. 32:32-33; Ps. 69:28; Dan. 12:1; Rev. 3:5) as developed in apocalyptic circles into that of books wherein deeds of good and evil were recorded with a view to the final judgment (Dan. 7:10?; 1 Enoch 89:61-64, 70-71; 108:7; Apocalypse of Zephaniah 7:1-8; Testament of Abraham (A) 12:7-18; 13:9-14; (B) 10:7-11:7; 11:7; 2 Enoch 53:2-3; Rev. 20:12). ... This is most obviously the background of thought here, with καθ' ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον ("against us") confirming that the document in question was one of condemnation, that is, presumably the record of their "transgressions" (repeated for emphasis in the following relative clause), "which was opposed, posed, hostile (ὕπεναντίον, another Pauline hapax) to us." ... They presumably, therefore, refer to that which constituted the record of transgression as condemnatory ("against us," "hostile to us") ... This is important, since the act of redemption on the cross under this imagery effects a wiping out of the χειρόγραφον ... The expunging of the record confirms that none of these transgressions is any longer held "against us." That does not mean, however, that the underlying decrees or regulations cease to have force, that is, that the law no longer functions as God's yardstick of right and judgment; there is no contradiction here with Rom. 2:12-16. It is simply that the record of the

transgressions has been erased - another way of saying "he forgave us all our transgressions"³²

Moo, likewise, succinctly observes regarding *cheirógraphon*:

And still others think that the word may refer to the Mosaic law, viewed by Paul as a record of human obligation that has not been met. But, as Hay points out, this last view fits a bit awkwardly with the basic sense of the word, since, of course, an IOU is written not by the one to whom the obligation is due (God, the author of the law), but by the one who is in debt (human beings) ... And, on the whole, there is insufficient evidence to give to the word any nuance beyond its general well-attested meaning of "IOU." As Moule succinctly puts the idea, " 'I owe God obedience to his will. Signed, mankind.'"³³

O'Brien pulls together the several proposals regarding the bond that was cancelled:

The evil powers had attacked Christ since he had assumed in his body the *χειρόγραφον*, *the charge-list of guilt* (Martin, *Reconciliation*, 1974, 122), and so they accused him as though he was a sinner. However, he stripped off (*ἀπεκδυσάμενος*, v 15) their hold and overcame them. This ingenious interpretation, if correct, would solve some of the exegetical problems of the passage. But certain difficulties remain: first, in the light of the widespread use of *χειρόγραφον* as a certificate of indebtedness signed by men over against a single instance of a heavenly book, doubt is raised about the application of the term to an angelic indictment. Also *χειρόγραφον* becomes the heavenly charge-list, then the body of flesh and finally Christ, or at least the body which Christ takes upon himself. The term is meant to signify too many things at once. (3) Our preference is to understand *χειρόγραφον* as the signed acknowledgment of our indebtedness before God.

³² Dunn, *Colossians*, Col 1:14, Kindle locations 2281-2303.

³³ Moo, *Colossians*, Col 1:14, Kindle locations 209, 210.

Like an IOU it contained penalty clauses (see Job 5:3; Philem 19). The Jews had contracted to obey the law, and in their case the penalty for breach of this contract meant death (Deut 27:14–26; 30:15–20). Paul assumes that the Gentiles were committed, through their consciences, to a similar obligation, to the moral law in as much as they understood it (cf. Rom 2:14, 15). Since the obligation had not been discharged by either group the “bond” remained against us (καὶ ἡμῶν).³⁴

Dunn concludes a somewhat convoluted discussion with the comment that it was in Christ’s crucifixion that the condemnation for sin was removed:

Once again we should just note that it is not the law which is thought of as thus destroyed, but rather its particular condemnation (χειρόγραφον) of transgressions, absorbed in the sacrificial death of the Christ (cf. Rom. 8:3).³⁵

In conclusion regarding the enigmatic expression *having cancelled the bond which stood against us*, we observe that *this bond was sin and death*. It was the *bond which we had incurred and which stood against us* because of *our sin*. *It had nothing to do with circumcision or uncircumcision under the Law of Moses*. *Sini and death* not only stood between us and God and his will, but also stood against us as a bond of condemnation due to personal sin. Jesus took this bond of sin and condemnation that stood against us and *in his death and nailed it to the cross; paid in full!* **Col 2:15**. Bringing this discussion home to finality, Paul stated decisively that God in Jesus and his death and resurrection had also *disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him*.

There is some question among scholars³⁶ as to whether the subject of this disarming activity was God or Jesus who disarmed the powers. The words *in him* at the end of the sentence seem to

³⁴ O’Brien, *Colossians*, pp. 124–125.

³⁵ Dunn, *Colossians*, Col 1:14, Kindle Locations 2310-2311.

³⁶ Cf the discussion of this in Dunn, *Colossians*, Col 1:15.

imply that the subject was *God who disarmed the powers in him, Christ*.³⁷

The hub of the discussion as to whether it was God or Christ who stripped the powers of their authority lies in how to interpret the middle voice of the Greek ἀπεκδυσάμενος which could be either *middle* or *active* voice. O'Brien and others observe that the middle vice can be translated as an active voice in some cases, in which case we should consider God as the subject of this *decisive action* without missing the point that Christ was also active with God in this stripping of the powers and authority under discussion. O'Brien observes:

In NT Greek there was a tendency to substitute the middle voice for the active in certain verbs (BDF para. (1) lists ἀπεκδύομαι as one example of this tendency; cf. Robertson, *Grammar*, 804, 805). Perhaps, therefore, the best way to resolve the exegetical difficulty is to regard ἀπεκδυσάμενος as a middle voice with an active sense (=“strip”), so indicating that God stripped the principalities and powers, utterly divesting them of their dignity and might (Lohmeyer, 119, argued that the imagery was not drawn from the battlefield where an army is “disarmed” [rsv, cf. Oepke, *TDNT* 2, 319, and BAG, 83] but from a royal court in which public officials are degraded by being stripped of their dignity; cf. Martin, NCB, 87, Schlier, *TDNT* 2, 31, and Lohse, 112. However true this may be, the context of Colossians 2:15 demands that we understand the removal of power or authority which the principalities exercised over the lives of men by holding the certificate of indebtedness in their grip).

This interpretation retains the same subject throughout (it must be pointed out, however, that many who consider Christ is the subject of the action of divesting remind us that such a transition is possible for Paul since it was God

³⁷ O'Brien, *Colossians*, pp. 126, 127.

in Christ who was at work in the redemptive events; we ought not to separate the action of the Father from that of the Son: so Bruce, 239 ..., Hanson, *Studies*, 10, 11, while allowing the final words of the paragraph ἐν αὐτῷ to be rendered “in him,” rather than “in it (i.e. the cross),” so being consistent with the earlier references in the section, verses 6–12, where the words “in him” and “in whom” sound like a refrain.³⁸

Regarding the meaning of *disarmed*, Zodhiates provides an extensive comment on the Greek as translated *disarmed* in the English RSV, observing that ἀπεκδύομαι, *apekdúomai* in Col 2:15 means to *strip, divest power or authority, or to deprive of power*.³⁹

The Greek of Col 2:15 is stronger than our English translation in the sense that Paul included the Greek conjunction *kai* just before the statement *he set aside*. The sentence as translated in the RSV reads *having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross*. Note that the RSV and other similar translations substitute a semi-colon or period between *demands* and *this he set aside*. The Greek has in place of a semi-colon a Greek copulative conjunction καί, *kai* which should read as an emphatic expegetical point which conveys the sense *indeed he set the legal bond aside*. Note Moo on this point:

In the Greek text, a *kai* (“and,” “now”) breaks the flow of Paul’s syntax in the middle of v. 14. TNIV represents the break with a semicolon (cf. also RSV; NASB NJB; REB); other versions start a new sentence here (ESV; NLT; NET). The basic flow of vv. 13-14, then, runs as follows: “God has made alive with Christ us who were dead by forgiving our sins, in that he has cancelled the IOU; in fact, God removed this IOU from the situation by nailing it to the

³⁸ O’Brien, *Colossians*, pp. 127–128.

³⁹ Zodhiates, ἀπεκδύομαι, *apekdúomai*.

cross.” Both the syntax and the wording of this last clause lend it emphasis.⁴⁰

What Paul’s use of the emphatic *kai* does for the flow of thought in this text is accentuate that it was *indeed* in the cross of Christ that God cancelled the bond of sin and death that stood against us.

In an attempt to address the two-sided nature of the doctrine of atonement expressed in the cross and the resurrection, with on the one side the sacrificial victory of Jesus on the *cross*, and on the other side the dynamic victory of Jesus over death in his *resurrection*, Moo has an interesting proposal that makes sense of this profoundly important victory; that is, regarding the double process of the sacrificial victory on the cross, and the powerful triumph of Christ in his resurrection:

But just what does Paul have in mind by this public display of victory over the powers? The answer to this question hinges partly on how we translate the last phrase in v. 15. The antecedent of the pronoun that Paul uses in this phrase — ἐν αὐτῷ — could be either the “cross” (TNIV; NRSV; NET; NAB) or “Christ” (ESV; NLT; HCSB; NASB). The former is certainly the closest explicit antecedent (end of v. 14), and Paul has explicitly referred to the cross in a passage that has some parallels with this one, 1:20. On the other hand, of course, God’s work on our behalf “in” and “with” Christ has been a leitmotif of this whole passage. A decision between the two is very tough, but we are inclined slightly to think that Christ might be the antecedent. If this is so, it means, in turn, that the display of God’s triumph over the powers may refer not to the cross (as most assume) but to the resurrection and ascension of Christ. Certainly this latter reference fits well with other New Testament texts. In Ephesians, for instance, Paul asserts that God raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the heavenlies “far above all rule and authority, power

⁴⁰ Moo, *Colossians*, p. 211.

and dominion” (1:20-21). In Romans 1:3-4, Paul claims that Christ was “marked out” as “Son-of-God-in-power” through the resurrection. Peter in his Day-of-Pentecost speech similarly argues that it is the resurrection that demonstrates the reality of God’s presence in and with Christ (Acts 2:32- 36). And, in what many (including myself) think the most likely interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19-22, it is when Christ goes into heaven to the right hand of the Father (v. 22) that Christ “proclaims” his victory over evil spiritual beings (v. 19). This pattern suggests that we might have a temporal progression in v. 15: it was on the cross (v. 14b) that God “disarmed” the rulers and authorities, but it was in Christ’s resurrection and ascension that God put on public display the reality of that victory over the powers.

Paul seems to imply in the sequence of vv. 14-15 a relationship between the forgiveness of our sins and the disarming of the powers. In what has been called the “classic” view of the atonement, the connection between these is seen in the power that Satan and his minions hold over human beings because of their sin. God pays the debt that we all owe to Satan because of sin in the provision of Christ. Without adopting the questionable concept that God had to “buy off” Satan in some sense, we may find some basis for this understanding of Christ’s death in our passage. We can imagine the false teachers in Colossae, feeding on a widespread ancient fear of various celestial spirits, insisting that believers needed to follow their own rules-oriented procedure for finding freedom from the power of these spirits. In response, Paul insists that God, by sending Christ to the cross as the final and definitive means to take care of the sin problem, has removed any power that these evil spirits might have over us. This victory, celebrated and displayed in the resurrection and ascension of Christ, is what believers need to grasp as their own. Christ’s authority over the rulers and authorities (v. 10) has

been decisively manifested; and “in him” believers share that authority.⁴¹

Determining what or who Paul had in mind with the *principalities and powers* generates considerable discussion among scholars! Some have suggested this might mean the cosmic spiritual powers who were supposed to control all events on earth in some fashion. The spiritual principalities and powers were considered by some to be the spiritual powers of the pagan gods, the demigods of the gnostic cosmic world, or whatever spiritual powers might be part of the spiritual powers of the world of darkness. Whatever these powers were thought to be, in the pagan mindset they were considered to have ruled over the darkness of the physical world. They are defined however here in Colossians as demonic spiritual powers that ruled over the minds and lives of the pagan world.

Some scholars have held that it is best to maintain the understanding of these powers as whatever powers there might be that were perceived to hold the power of life and death over sinners.

Paul argued that these powers were stripped by Jesus’ death on the cross and his subsequent powerful resurrection of whatever hold they held over man.

Some scholars point to the motif of Gustaf Aulen’s magisterial *Christus Victor*⁴² which explored and expounded on theories of atonement. One of these discussed was a ransom theory with roots in the early church scholar, Origen, in which it was held that in his atoning death Jesus had paid the legal ransom demands of Satan. God had paid the price demanded by Satan for man. Aulen reinterpreted this to mean that in his death Christ achieved a victory over the powers that held mankind in bondage, that is, over sin, death, and the devil. The thought inherent in Origen’s ransom

⁴¹ Moo, Colossians, pp. 215, 216.

⁴² Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor*, Wise Path Books, 2016. The date of Aulen’s original Swedish composition is 1930. This will not be the place to discuss or debate the various doctrines of the atonement other than to observe that a legal bond was settled in Jesus’ atoning death.

theory that Satan had such power that he could force God to pay a ransom has appropriately been rejected by most since Aulen. Ben Pugh in his study of atonement theories states “ever since [Aulen’s] time. We call these patristic ideas the *Christus Victor* was of seeing the cross.”⁴³

Nevertheless, regardless of one’s sensitivity over a ransom theory, in his death which was the atoning action for redeeming the debt of death incurred by *the bond of sin* held against us, Jesus cancelled that legal bond incurred by sin releasing us from the “powers” that held us captive. In his death and resurrection from the dead, Jesus finally conquered the power and threat of death. In this atoning activity God in Jesus’ death *disarmed* (ἀπεκδύομαι, *apekdúomai*) or *stripped* the bond of sin and death from man, and in this Jesus was victorious, triumphing over sin and death in his resurrection.

O’Brien adds regarding the *stoicheia*, the demonic spiritual authorities and *principalities and powers* in the pagan thinking, God had in Jesus provided a more effective release from such powers :

It is probable that in the syncretistic teaching being advocated at Colossae these στοιχεῖα were grouped with the angels and seen as controlling the heavenly realm and man’s access to God’s presence. One way they could be placated was by rigorously subduing the flesh so as to gain visionary experiences of the heavenly dimension and to participate in their angelic liturgy (see the discussion on 2:18). By this the devotees gained fullness of salvation, reached the divine presence and attained the esoteric knowledge which accompanied such visions. Christ [*in the pagan mind, IAF*] had in effect become just another intermediary between God and man.⁴⁴

⁴³ Ben Pugh, *Atonement Theories: A Way Through the Maze*, James Clarke, 2005.

⁴⁴ O’Brien, *Colossians*, p. 132.

In the closing comments to his exegesis and commentary on Col 2:8-15 O'Brien had concluded:

Those who had once been spiritually dead in their trespasses and sinful nature God had made alive. The Colossians had come to life with Christ who was dead and rose again. Their new life, then, was a sharing in the life which he received when he rose from the dead. God had forgiven them as Gentiles, along with Paul and other Jewish Christians, all their trespasses. Indeed, he had not only canceled the debt but also destroyed the document on which it was recorded. This he did by blotting out the bond with its damning indictment against us and nailing it to the cross when Christ died. Further, he stripped the principalities and powers, who had kept us in their grip through their possession of this document, divesting them of their dignity and might. God exposed to the universe their utter helplessness leading them in Christ in his triumphal procession. He paraded these powerless "powers and principalities" so that all the world might see the magnitude of his victory.

But these spiritual powers had not been annihilated. In that triumphal procession they were visible. They continue to exist, inimical to man and his interests (Rom 8:38, 39). Nevertheless they are powerless figures unable to harm the Christian who lives under the lordship of Christ. How foolish is it then for the Colossians to think, as the false teachers want them to, that they needed to grovel before these weak and beggarly elements as though they controlled the lines of communication between God and man.

Christ is the one whom they received as Lord. Let them continue to live in him, for he is the one in whom the entire fullness of Godhead dwells, the one in whom they have been made full, the person in whom they have been incorporated in death, burial and resurrection. It is in him

that they have been raised and given new life. What really matters then is Christ and Christ alone.⁴⁵

Moo, likewise, summarizes this pericope well:

In response, Paul insists that God, by sending Christ to the cross as the final and definitive means to take care of the sin problem, has removed any power that these evil spirits might have over us. This victory, celebrated and displayed in the resurrection and ascension of Christ, is what believers need to grasp as their own. Christ's authority over the rulers and authorities (v. 10) has been decisively manifested; and "in him" believers share that authority.⁴⁶

Christus Victor!⁴⁷

⁴⁵ O'Brien, *Colossians*, pp. 133–134.

⁴⁶ Moo, *Colossians*, pp. 215, 216. Cf additional comments in Bratcher and Nida, *Colossians*, p. 62f, Dunn, *Colossians*, Col 2:14, 15. Richard R. Mellick, Jr., *Colossians*, pp. 262ff,

⁴⁷ Christ is the one who is victorious!

Chapter 8. Believers in Christ Should Not Submit to Asceticism and Religious Ritual: Col 2:16-23

¹⁶ Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. ¹⁷ These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸ Let no one disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, taking his stand on visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, ¹⁹ and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

²⁰ 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, ²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” ²² (referring to things which all perish as they are used), according to human precepts and doctrines? ²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh.

It is generally agreed that this pericope describes in clearest terms Paul’s major concern, the danger of the misleading pseudo-religious teachings of certain false teachers. Obviously the Colossians would have known what Paul was discussing since he had already so vehemently spoken against what was going on. He had used such caustic terms as *make you pray of you*, and *philosophy and empty deceit, human traditions and the elemental spirits of the universe*.

It is possibly that Paul was not identifying any single philosophy but simply gathering together several of the common themes of the aberrant philosophical thinking of the region which were weakening the principal faith in Jesus taught by the Christians and their evangelists like Epaphras, Timothy, and Paul.

Col 2:16, 18. *Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath.* Paul had in mind the denigrating judgment of Christians by their pagan neighbors. The term judgment, κρίνω, *krínō*, primarily means *to separate from, to distinguish, to discriminate between good and evil, to select, to choose out the good.*¹ In the New Testament it meant *to judge, to form or give an opinion after separating and considering the particulars of a case.*² Obviously some, Jews and pagans were judging and denigrating Christians who declined partaking in some of the ceremonial ritual food activities associated with local, Jewish or pagan, religious festivals such as the new moons or sabbath festivals that indicated membership or social standing in religious movements or groups.

Paul made a play on the two Greek words, *skiá, skia, shadow*, and *σῶμα, sōma, body, substance, or reality*. These pseudo religious festivals and rituals are only a *shadow, σκιά, skiá*³, or foggy signs of the full and *perfect body or reality*, which is Christ. Paul had previously explained that in Christ they have the *fulness of deity* (Col 1:19, 2:9) *dwelling in Christ bodily*. Why play with shadowy things when you already have the real thing?

These shadowy rituals would include some Jewish rituals since they too are only a prefigure or shadow of things future and more perfect. Cf. Heb. 8:5; and 10:1.

^{8:5} *Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law.*

⁵ *They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary; for when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern which was shown you on the*

¹ Zodhiates, κρίνω, *krínō*.

² Zodhiates, κρίνω, *krínō*.

³ Zodhiates, σκιά, *skiá, Shadow or shade*. Metaphorically, a foreshadowing in distinction from *tó sōma, the body or reality*.

mountain.”⁶ But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry which is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.⁷ For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion for a second.

^{10:1} For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices which are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who draw near.² Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered? If the worshipers had once been cleansed, they would no longer have any consciousness of sin.³ But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year.⁴ For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins.

Paul added to these shadowy ritual concepts of pseudo self-abasement, including even the worship of angels in some form, and certain visionary experiences. Paul did not spend much time developing these concerns, recognizing that the recipients of the epistle would know what he meant. Scholars have debated these themes with no unanimity of conclusion, however, recognizing that they must have been real options to the region’s philosophical and religious choices.

One that has occasioned some interest is the syntactical construction of the expression the *worship of angels*. The Greek θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων, θρησκεία, *thrēskeia* is rendered *to worship*, to be religious, or pious. It can include simply worshipping angels.⁴ The genitive noun construction following *worship*, τῶν ἀγγέλων, has two possibilities, *to worship angels* in an objective genitive construction implying that the angels were being worshipped, and a subjective genitive construction in which the angels are worshipping possibly some divine being, hence, *the worshipping practice of angels!* Both possibilities have been

⁴ Zodhiates, op., cit., θρησκεία, *thrēskeia*.

defended by scholars, to no real result since both practices are condemned by Paul in this pericope, as disqualifying Christians! **Col 2:18b**. Paul was scathing regarding such teachers or proclaimers who would *make pray* of the Christians, Such a one making prey on the Christians is:

puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind,¹⁹ and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

Such ritual practitioners do not hold to what has substance, *the Head* of the body, that is, Christ. Bird makes the following connection to Paul's previous discussion of Jesus being the head of the body, Col 1:18:

A further polemical description pertains to those who are not grasping the head. *Here head is an obvious reference to Jesus (1: 18; 2: 10), but the failure to grasp Jesus Christ could lie with one or more groups. This could conceivably mean that some believers in Colossae, already influenced by the philosophy, fail to comprehend the full account of their riches in Messiah and fail to apprehend the fullness of God in the Messiah. Or else, and more probable, it signifies that the teachers external to the community simply do not "get it," or do not register the reality of Jesus's identity and authority.* Paul proceeds to use a body metaphor (see Rom 12: 4; 1 Cor 12: 12– 31) to refer to Jesus as the one from whom the body is nourished and united together. The quest for a maturity and growth that comes from God is ultimately attained only in the Messiah.⁵

Paul had on several occasions used the human body as an analogy to the church with a head and several members who serve the head of the body. 1 Cor 12:12ff; Eph 4:11ff. Note at Eph 4:11ff Paul's emphasis on the bodily growth Christians experience in the body of Christ, the church, when all the members have their

⁵ Bird, *ibid.*, kindle locations 2039-2046. Italics Ian Fair.

mind set on Christ. Note how Paul emphasizes several themes in this text that are parallel to the one we are working with in Col 2:18ff:

And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.

In this pericope, Col 2:1, 19, Paul was enlarging on the concept of the all sufficiency of Christ, the head of the body, the church of which Christ is the Head, which is the real substance of life, both present and eternal, and not a shadowy, foggy, indistinct passing entity.

Col 2:20. *¹For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices which are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who draw near.* Paul opened this next thought with an interesting strong declaration. A good translation would read “since you have already died (in Christ through your baptism into Christ) to the elemental spirits of the universe ... why do you live as if you belonged to the world” Note the technical discussion below.

Paul continued the theme that *in Christ* things are different since they have already died with Christ and had been raised with him! Paul was reminding them of the faithful experience of their baptism, and what this meant. The opening expression in the Greek

reads εἰ ἀπεθάνετε, *ai apethanete*, which is a *first class conditional* statement using the subordinating conjunction *ei* with a verb in the aorist indicative mood *which renders it firmer than if perhaps* you were buried with him in baptism. There was no *if* about their experience of baptism which had obviously been clearly explained to them! Hence, it reads *since we have already died with Christ...* The verb ἀπεθάνετε is an aorist verb implying *something already certain*.

Wright summarizes this pericope with the following comments:

This final appeal, like the earlier ones in the chapter, is grounded in that reality which is true of the Colossians because they belong to Christ 92:11ff. Christ, by his death, came out from under the apparent dominion which the ‘powers’ had exercised over him. Those who are his have therefore already emerged from that old tyranny. This is expressed in the words *since* (literally ‘if’: but this ‘if’, not of doubt, but of logic) *you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world*.⁶

O’Brien likewise observes regarding Col 2:20, “Because the Colossians *have died* with Christ on the cross (the *εἰ* does not express doubt, but means “if, as is the case,” “since”...”⁷

Markus Barth adds that the translation of Col 2:20 might be better understood as “*When you (thus) have died with Christ to the elements of the world ...*). The premise of this conditional clause is an actually existing reality.”⁸

We will observe later at Col 3:1 that *Εἰ οὖν συνηγήθητε τῷ Χριστῷ, εἰ οὖν sunēgerthēte tō Christō, If then you have been raised with Christ*, and the statement at Col 2:20, *Εἰ ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ, εἰ οὖν apethanete sun Christō, if then with Christ you*

⁶ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England, 11986, p. 125. Some emphases IAF.

⁷ O’Brien, *Colossian*, p. 148.

⁸ Markus Barth, *Colossians*, The Anchor Bible, New York: Doubleday, 1944, p. 353. Some emphases IAF.

died, are both syntactically parallel first class conditional expressions with *ei* being defined or conjugated by a verb in the indicative mood implying *something that has actually happened with certainty*. Hence we should read Col 2:20 as follows:

If (since) with Christ you (have already) died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world?

The rhetorical question asked by Paul at Col 2:20Bff expressly describes the shadowy teachings offered by the false teachers, Col 2:20bff, which Paul was vehemently challenging and denying.

Why do you submit to regulations,²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”²² (referring to things which all perish as they are used), according to human precepts and doctrines?²³ These have indeed an (a shadowy) appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh.

Chapter 9: The Parenetic Discussion on the Theology of Living in Christ: 3:1-4:1

In Col 1 and 2 Paul had emphasized the fundamental theology of his message, the *preeminence* and *all sufficiency* of Jesus Christ. The key thought to his theology was a strident claim that Jesus Christ was the full realization of the mystery of God's plan of redemption that Paul had mentioned at Eph 1:3ff. Paul's message was that God had been activating that plan since before creation, and that in Christ God had fulfilled that plan and would redeem the world to himself as his chosen children in and through Christ.

In Colossians Paul returned to this key Ephesian thought, explaining that the mystery of God's plan had been revealed to the world in Christ, in whom all the riches of God' wisdom is revealed, and in whom all the fullness of divinity had been revealed.

Key to this point is the "hymnic credal" confession Paul had discussed at Col 1:15ff:

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. ¹⁹For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Having laid out this key theological center to God's working, Paul turned to explaining how the Christians in Colossae and Laodicea should translate this into action in their lives. They obviously must reject the pagan concepts of an esoteric knowledge that would free them from the powers of the heavenly places, and should refrain from the regulations proposed by some false teachers. But by being baptized into Christ they had died to their

past life of paganism, orgies ,and sin, and had been raised with Christ to a new life which he had opened to them.

Col 3:1-4:1. The Colossian's Changed Lifestyle

¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you once walked, when you lived in them. ⁸ But now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ¹¹ Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.

¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, ¹³ forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

¹⁸ *Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.* ¹⁹ *Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.* ²⁰ *Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.* ²¹ *Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.* ²² *Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord.* ²³ *Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men,* ²⁴ *knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you are serving the Lord Christ.* ²⁵ *For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.*

^{4:1} *Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.*

Col 3:1. The pericope opens with an interesting 1st class conditional clause, *If then you have been raised ...*, *Ei οὐ̅ν συνη̅γήρη̅τε*, *Ei oun sunēgerthēte* ... This opening clause, *if then*, is syntactically significant since the *then*, *οὐ̅ν*, more appropriately meaning *therefore*, ties the opening discussion of the paranetic section of the epistle, Col 3:1ff, back to the theological message, Col 1, 2. The question is how far does it point back!

Beale holds that this pericope builds on the previous one encouraging the Colossians to not let false teachers, whomever they might be, judge, denigrate, or disqualify them in contrast to the rich blessings they had in Christ.

Here is a fuller statement of the main idea of this unit: Believers should seek heavenly things and not old earthly things because they have died to the old world and have been raised with Christ as a new creation in a new heavenly world. Believers have died with Christ (cf. 2: 11– 12, 14) to the old world (2: 20a). Because saints have died to the old world, they should not be subject to outmoded OT commandments (cultic and civil laws) 1 of that old world in order to obtain a closer relationship with God. Faith in and identification with Christ is all they need to be close to God

(2: 19), since Christ represents the full presence of God in the end-time heavenly temple. They also should not be subject to outdated statutes because these decrees are part of the corrupt world that is fading away and have their origin in human tradition, which is rooted in self-made religion (2: 21– 23). Therefore, as we have seen, the main point of 2: 16– 23 is that true believers should not be required to submit to the false teachers’ outmoded and distorted laws in order to experience the tabernacling fullness of God’s presence, since only faith in Christ is necessary for that.

The “therefore” in 3: 1 should be paraphrased as “on the basis that you have died with Christ to the old world ... you must not submit to old-world laws, you have also been ‘raised up with Christ.’”¹

Beale correctly observes that the word *therefore* in the Greek text, οὖν, *oún*, translated in the RSV and ESV as *then*, points back to the instruction at Col 2:15-23, which stressed not permitting false teachers to *judge of disqualify* you.

But this is only partially correct! In place of this view, it is better to see the *therefore* including everything from Col 2:1!

Moo takes the *therefore* back to Col 2:6:

Paul’s call to keep Christ Jesus as Lord at the center of Christian experience (2:6b) hangs over the body of the letter (2:6-4:6). Because Paul writes in response to the immediate threat of false teachers, he begins by elaborating this basic summons negatively. And so he warns his readers about the false promise of these false teachers in 2:8-23. Now, beginning in 3:1, Paul elaborates this call to remain centered on Christ positively. *Taking up the key christological teaching of chapters 1-2, Paul shows how identification with Christ leads to a new way of life.* He proceeds in three basic steps. He begins, appropriately,

¹ Beale, *Colossians*, p. 417.

with an overall summons to adopt a mind-set that reflects our new identity in Christ (3:1-4).²

Bird refers Col 3:1, *then, therefore*, back to the larger theological pericope at Col 2:9ff with the discussion of Christ being the image of God, etc., and then finally baptism representing the Christian's death in and with Christ. He observes:

The imagery of 3: 1 picks up the theme of Christ's resurrection and triumph in 2: 10, 12, 15 and lordship in 1: 15– 20. The reference to death in 3: 3 echoes 2: 12, 20 where death with the Messiah abounds in liberation from all forms of evil. The virtue of humility in 3: 12 contrasts naturally with the false humility of the teachers in 2: 18, 23.³

Col 3:1-4. Christians are raised with Christ to live a new life.

In referring to being raised with Christ Paul obviously had in mind his comment on baptism at Col 2:11ff:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; ¹² and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses ...

One cannot fail to read this text without referring to Paul's major comment of baptism at Rom 6:1-11 which expresses so well what happens as a result of God's working thought Christ and the Holy Spirit in baptism:

¹ What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by

² Moo, *Colossians*, p. 243.

³ Bird, *Colossians*, Kindle locations 2308 ff.

baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For he who has died is freed from sin. ⁸ But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. ⁹ For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰ The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Col 3:1. *If therefore you have been raised with Christ ...* We have already noted at Col 2:20 that *if* in such clauses, serving as a conditional adverbial conjunction, could suggest in English the possibility of either *doubt* or *certainty*! In Greek it can introduce an element of certainty such as in *since*... This can be somewhat puzzling to the English reader! When used as a conditional conjunction *if* is interpreted or conjugated by the mood of the verb which it introduces. If it is followed by a verb in the *subjunctive* mood, it then implies *possibility*. However, when the conditional conjunction *if* introduces a clause which is followed by a verb in the *indicative* mood it implies *certainty* such as in *since you have been raised ...* This little piece of grammatical style can be confusing or incidental in simple English grammar, but is important to the argument the writer wishes to imply.

Fortunately, the Greek grammar is more inflectional and easier to conjugate and interpret! For instance at Col 3:1 the conditional conjunction *if*, εἰ, *ei*, is conjugated or defined by the mood of the *aurist indicative* verb *συνηγέρθητε*, *been raised*, resulting in a *mood of certainty*, not *possibility*! If *ei* had introduced a verb in the *subjunctive* mood then it would have merely implied

possibility! In the case of Col 3:1 *ei* is conjugated by the *aorist indicative* verb implying *certainty*, hence since you have been raised with Christ. We should thus read Col 3:1 as *therefore, since you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God*.

Note that Moo cites the TNIV (New International Version) translation of Col 3:1 as *Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above ...*⁴

Emphasizing the strength of the translation of *ei* as *since*, F. F. Bruce introduces Col 3:1 with the following thoughts:

The readers knew (in theory, at least) that, like their fellow-Christians throughout the world, they *had been* brought to new life with Christ when they were spiritually dead, that they *had been* “raised with him through faith in the power of God” (Col. 2:12). *On every occasion when they recalled their baptism and its meaning, they ought to be impressed afresh with the reality of their participation in Christ’s death and resurrection, and draw the logical and practical conclusions. If their death with Christ severed the links that bound them to the old world-order, which was trying to impose its dominion on them again, their resurrection with Christ established new links, binding them to a new and heavenly order, to that spiritual kingdom in which Christ their Lord was sovereign.*⁵

With this thought in mind, Paul launches into the paraenetic material he has in mind; *how the Christians must respond in their new relationship with both Christ, and with the worldly powers that were seeking to take them captive as prey*. Three major points make up the theme of this chapter, we might even look at it as a three point sermon! Since they have been united with Christ and have died to their past life, 1) they must seek the things that are

⁴ Moo, *Colossians*, p. 243. Moo’s commentary is based on the *Today’s New International Version* (TNIV). Wright, *Colossians*, pp. 130f, likewise adopts the translation *since, therefore*. Cf. also Markus Barth, *Colossians*. p.353, and O’Brien, *Colossians*., p. 148.

⁵ Bruce, *Colossians*, p. 132..

above, where Christ is; seated at the right hand of God; 2) they must put to death the things that are earthly; and 3) they must clothe themselves with a new lifestyle as God's holy and beloved people.

Col 3:1. Disciples of Jesus must *actively seek* the heavenly things that *are above*,⁶ that is things that belong to Christ where God is. Notice again Paul's emphasis on being raised with Christ in baptism in which they have died, raised with Christ they have been born anew (Rom 6:1-11, Col 2:12ff.). Paul introduced his point with a *present active imperative*, ζητεῖτε, *zēteite, to seek after, look for, strive to find.*⁷ The present aspect refers to a *constant continuous activity, a lifestyle!* The imperative adds to the urgency of this instruction. Seeking the things of Christ is contrasted with seeking earthly things which he will shortly at Col 3:5 discuss in detail, which things will end up with them living in their pagan sinful past!

Col 3:2. In addition, the disciples must *set or fix their minds* φρονέω, *phronéō*⁸ on those heavenly things. *Seek* is likewise another *present active imperative* derived from φρονέω, *phronéō* which implies to *constantly actively think deeply, to have a mindset, to be mindful of the things that are above.* The activity represented by this word involves the will, affections, and conscience.

Col 3:3. Paul again reminds the Colossians of the new beginning and new life they have been granted by God. In Christ through

⁶ Zodhiates, *ibid.*, ἄνω, *ánō; above, in a higher place. Metaphorically, a heavenly place.* Cf. Kittel, in the NT it is normally used of heaven in its material (Jn. 11:41; Ac. 2:19) or religious sense (Jn. 8:23; Gl. 4:26; Phil. 3:14; Col. 3:1, 2). For early Christianity, as for Judaism and Hellenism, *it is natural to think of the Deity in heaven and thus to equate divine and heavenly.* Thus expressions like the substantive τὰ ἄνω (Jn. 8:23; Phil. 3:14; Col. 3:1, 2) or the attributive ἄνω (Gl. 4:26; Phil. 3:14) may be regarded as traditional.

⁷ Zodhiates, from ζητέω, *zētēō, to seek.*

⁸ Zodhiates, φρονέω, *phronéō ... have a mindset, be minded.* The activity represented by this word involves the will, affections, and conscience

their baptism they had died and *their new life is now hidden with Christ in God!* Hidden is from κέκρυπται, *kekruptai*, a perfect passive indicative verb which implies that *they were hidden* from the powers of darkness in their past action of baptism and *remain hidden or out of reach in the present in Christ in God!*⁹

Col 3:4. *When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.* Paul inserts this activity into an *eschatological* view of salvation that began in Christ according to God's eternal plan, and will continue until Christ appears in glory.

Understanding the New Testament theology of *apocalyptic inaugurated eschatology* as discussed here and elsewhere in the New Testament is a primary key to understanding *kingdom and end time theology*. At Col 3:1-4 Paul draws on such a perspective to explain that the Colossian and Laodicean Christians were already experiencing in the *present* God's richest blessings in Christ's victory on the cross (the *past* of inaugurated eschatology), and the blessings of presently being hidden safely in Christ, (the *present* of inaugurated eschatology), which blessings they will enjoy until Christ returns at the end of the age and *fulfills* all of God's promises in Christ (*the not yet future of eschatology*).

I like the structure of this sentence in Paul's use of Greek at Col 3:4 so much that I am including the whole sentence for discussion! Bear with me! ὅταν ὁ Χριστὸς φανερωθῆ, ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν, τότε καὶ ὑμεῖς σὺν αὐτῷ φανερωθήσεσθε ἐν δόξῃ. Now here comes the English alphabet transliteration! *Hotan ho Christos phanerōthē, hē dzōē, tote kai humeís sun autō phanerōthēsesthen doxa!* For a literal translation into English we read *When the Christ, who is your life appears, then you also will appear together with him in glory!*

They were *already hidden* with Christ, who was their life, furthermore, *when he appears at the end time they will accompany him in glory!*

⁹ Cf. Zodhiates, κρύπτω *krúptō*. To hide, conceal. In the mid. / pass. to hide oneself, to be hidden.

Excursus: Discussion on Eschatology

Since *eschatology*, that is, the *discussion of the end time and Christ's parousia or second coming*, is so misunderstood in our religious world today, notably by Premillennial and Dispensational doctrines, which we reject as misinformed, bear with me as we discuss in some detail the concept of *inaugurated eschatology*, and Paul's understanding of this. We have previously at Col 1:13ff introduced the concept of the "already" kingdom, that is, the kingdom of God *inaugurated* by Jesus. God in several leading Old Testament texts had promised that he would restore his kingdom, and that it would be an eternal kingdom (cf Dan 7). We need to press behind this in some detail at this point.

John the Baptist had proclaimed that the kingdom of heaven, spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, was *at hand*, Matt 3:1ff:

¹ *In those days [after Herod had died] came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea,* ² *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."* ³ *For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, [Isa 40:3] "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."*

It is only by a misinformed imagination that *at hand* can mean after 2, 200 years, or sometime in the distant future! The expression *at hand* is from the Greek ἤγγικεν, *éggiken*, a perfect indicative verb of ἐγγίζω, *eggízō*¹⁰, which in the perfect tense means *has come and is still here*, or *has drawn near*! A weak interpretation by some premillennialist and dispensationalists is

¹⁰ Zodiates, ἐγγίζω *eggízō* ... from *eggís* ..., near. To bring near and come near in a trans. and intrans. sense, to approach, as is often the case with verbs of motion such as ... lead ... Usually in the NT used intrans., meaning to come near, approach (Luke 7:12; 15:1, 25; 22:47; Acts 10:9), in the perf. *éggika*, *to have drawn near, to be near*, to be at hand; in the expression *éggiken*, is near, referring to the kingdom of God or heaven (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; Mark 1:15; Luke 10:11). The verb has reference to space, *meaning that something is here*.

that God intended to establish his kingdom but because of the rejection of the Jews postponed its establishment until sometime in the future! Unfortunately, Paul did not understand this postponement concept and wrote to the Colossians that God had already translated them into a kingdom that was not here, but which would come sometime in the future. Great comfort!

Matthew also records for us that Jesus (God himself present in human form) also thought the kingdom of God was *at hand*! Matthew records at Matt 4:17:

Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he [Jesus] withdrew into Galilee; ¹³ and leaving Nazareth he went and dwelt in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— ¹⁶ the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Wow! Did you get that, Jesus, God himself in human form as the son of God, did not know that the Jews would reject him and cause the kingdom to be delayed or postponed! How far from the truth can you get to make an appointment!

But there is more! Jesus himself, the son of God, announced at Matt 12:28ff that the kingdom of heaven, God’s kingdom, *had already been inaugurated on earth in his ministry*:

“Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand; ²⁶ and if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand? ²⁷ And if I cast out demons by Be-elzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. ²⁸ But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come

upon you. ²⁹ Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house."

Please forgive my sarcasm! Here we have God himself in the form of Jesus, his son, thinking that he had demonstrated that the kingdom of heaven was already here on earth, while he was wrong or misinformed not knowing that the Jews would reject him to the point where God had to postpone the establishment of his kingdom.!

The problem is that Premillennialists and Dispensationalists, like the Jew in Jesus' day, are looking for an earthly physical kingdom whereas God and Jesus, and the Apostles, when they had been taught by Jesus, were looking for a spiritual kingdom that would reign in the hearts of men and reach out into all the earth.

Notice what Luke records for us at Acts 1:6ff:

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

⁷ He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority.

⁸ But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."⁹ And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

After the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples on the Day of Pentecost, Acts 2, and then later on the Gentiles in Cornelius, Acts 10, 11, the Apostles understood the kingdom differently from their previous misunderstanding of a physical kingdom on earth!

Note that the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in Jesus ministry, and in the Apostles ministry, changed the dynamic of the kingdom of heaven from a physical political to a spiritual kingdom that had no boundaries! God's kingdom had been *inaugurated* in Jesus's ministry, and then furthered in the Apostles ministry!

Paul clearly understood this, and stated in his Col 1:13 text that the Colossian disciples were *already* experiencing *the kingdom* of God in their lives, which kingdom had been *inaugurated* in Jesus' Ministry (Matt 28:12, Col 1:13), and *conferred* on them in their baptism. This kingdom experience would remain with them as long as they remained *hidden* in Christ.

This kingdom would *finally be fulfilled*, that is, brought to its desired purpose when Christ returns at the end of the age to judge the world in righteousness. Note Paul at 1 Cor 15:20ff:

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷ "For God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "All things are put in subjection under him," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things under him. ²⁸ When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to everyone.

Confer also John's understanding of this at 1 John 3:2, *Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*

In spite of this strong affirmation of the Colossians having *already experienced the kingdom in their lives, and presently enjoying all of the eternal blessings God had promised in Christ*, there are still some who believe that we have *not yet received the blessings* of the kingdom, and must therefore wait for a future rapture or experience of the kingdom. However, note Eph 1:3ff:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,*⁴ *even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.*⁵ *He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,*⁶ *to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.*⁷ *In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace*⁸ *which he lavished upon us.*⁹ *For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ*¹⁰ *as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*

To the contrary of some mistaken “rapture” theologies¹¹, Paul fully believed that he and all Christians had *already received in Christ every spiritual blessings that God had in mind for them*.

The rapture false teachings postulate two comings of Jesus, one in advance of the end, the other at the end of the age. They base their teaching on 1 Thess 4:13ff. That there will be two comings, a rapture and then final second coming! But this simply is not what Paul was teaching at 1 Thess 4:13ff.

¹¹ This false view postulates two comings of Jesus, one in advance of the end, the other at the end of the age. In this text, 1 Thess 4:16 Paul speaks of the trumpet being blown, a symbol of the final judgment and resurrection, 1 Cor 15:52, not an intermediate rapture judgment. Cf Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, New York: Baker Books, 2004, Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, The Anchor Bible, New York Doubleday, 2000, pp. 281ff.

We need to examine closely the rapturist's chosen text, 1 Thess 4:13ff:

¹³ *But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep (koimáō -euphemism for dead¹²), that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; ¹⁷ then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore comfort one another with these words.*

A necessary step in biblical interpretation is to determine what the contexts of the text is, its historical, literary, sociological, and theological context. Obviously the historical context was a letter from Paul to the Thessalonian church shortly after its establishment¹³. The Christians were still young in the faith and were still under the influence of their pagan neighbors, notably in regard to *death and mourning*. We will comment on that shortly.

The context touches also on both the sociological and pastoral concerns Paul was expressing in his letter. Abraham Malherbe, internationally recognized scholar on Thessalonians, argues that the epistle was pastoral and paranetic in style, meaning that the

¹² Zodiates, *ibid*, κοιμάω *koimáō* ... to lie outstretched, to lie down. To cause to lie down to sleep. In the NT, generally ... to fall asleep, to sleep ... *Spoken of the sleep of death, to die, be dead* (Matt. 27:52; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Cor. 7:39; 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Thess. 4:13–15; 2 Pet. 3:4; Sept.: 1 Kgs. 2:10; 11:43; Is. 43:17).

¹³ Cf. Malherbe, *Thessalonians*, pp. 71ff.

main concern of the epistle was the *practical* life of the Thessalonians, not so much their theological needs. That does not mean that there is no theological emphases in the epistle, but that the major concern was their relationship with their pagan culture. Malherbe stresses the *paranetic* style of the epistle especially in regard to 1 Thess 4 and 5.¹⁴ He develops this as follows:

In 1 Thess 4:11-5:11 Paul provides the most extensive discussion of the Parousia contained in any of his letters. Viewed superficially, the introductory formula in 4:13 may indicate that Paul is moving from exhortation to instruction. Furthermore, the subject matter of this section eschatological admonitions, further distinguishes 4:13-5:11 from the paranesis of the rest of chaps. 4 and 5 ... The didactic nature of this section of the letter appears even more pronounced if one assumes that Paul writes to correct some erroneous teaching, for example, that of Gnosticism Thessalonica ... What he corrects, however, is not their theology, but their behavior, namely, that they were grieving ... These verses therefore do not interrupt Paul's paranesis, but are themselves hortatory...¹⁵

To clarify Malherbe, he is emphasizing here that Paul is not providing a theology of some rapture, which is not in any sense inherent in the text, or a *theology* of the parousia, but is addressing some unsteady paranetic behavior regarding living like the pagans in a pagan world, that is with *uncontrolled* mourning for the dead. Christians will mourn, but not like the pagans, for pagans see no certain future after death, but the Christian faith is built on a resurrection from the dead and future "life" in heaven with Christ.

Notice the opening statement of the pericope, *But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.* This pericope addresses the spiritual attitude of the new Thessalonian

¹⁴ Malherbe, *Thessalonians*, pp. 81ff.

¹⁵ Malherbe, *Thessalonians*, p. 279.

Christians regarding death. Death is not the end of everything. Death is not an occasion to mourn like the pagans who have no hope! Death for those in Christ is a victory!

Paul clearly states that *we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep*. *Precede* is from the Greek φθάνω, *phthánō* which in the case of the New Testament is a *hapax legomena*, meaning an word or expression *used only once*, and in this case only in 1 Thess 4:15. Malherbe translates this as Christians alive “have no *precedence* over those”, implying that those alive “do not have an *advantage* over”.¹⁶ The dead in Christ. Charles Wannamaker concurs with Malherbe, translating φθάνω as “an *advantage* over”.¹⁷

English dictionaries have the following comments of on *precede* and read:

1. To surpass in rank, dignity, or importance, to be, go, or come ahead or in front of, to be earlier than ... Merriam-Webster.
2. To be or go before someone or something in time or space ... Cambridge English Dictionary.
3. To go before or beyond in quality or degree, to go before in rank of importance ... Oxford English Dictionary.

In other words, Paul was stating that those Thessalonian Christians who would be alive at Christ’s *coming*, the *parousia*, would *have no advantage over* those who had died and who were with Jesus, for when he returned, at his coming, παρουσία *parousía*, Jesus would bring with him those who had already died in Christ and hidden with him. So, Paul’s point was, *do not mourn over Christians who are dead in Christ for they are safe! They are with Christ!*

Clearly as both Malherbe and Wanamaker observe, the context of this pericope is a pastoral exhortation to the Christians

¹⁶ Malherbe, *Thessalonians*, p. 261,

¹⁷ Charles A. Wanamaker, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1990, p. 172.

encouraging them not to mourn as pagans over those who had died in Christ. The text was a *pastoral exhortative paranetic encouragement* and not a major theological statement. Although this text is set in an eschatological context, is not an eschatological theology of the *parousia*. It simply says in an eschatological context that it is a pastoral paranetic exhortative concern. It says nothing regarding a rapture, that is people being *left behind*¹⁸, or that the kingdom will arrive, or be fulfilled, when Jesus returns for his second coming, his *parousia*¹⁹.

The text does state that when Jesus returns it will be to judge those who have rejected him. He will bring with him *those who have died* in Christ and save *those who are alive* in Christ. Those who have been obedient through faith and baptism are already hidden in Christ (Col 3:3, 4) even though they are not alive on earth. Being no longer alive on earth, that is dead in Christ, is not a disadvantage, but an advantage, for they are with Christ. Paul's point was that in the end, when Jesus returns, he will come in judgment and salvation, 1 Thess 4:15-18:

¹⁵ For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; ¹⁷ then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Returning from a *mythological journey* into the *rapture* (somewhat sarcastic, I admit) which is not mentioned in this text at

¹⁸ A favored term of rapture Premillennialists, cf. Tim LeHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 1995.

¹⁹ *Parousia*, from the Greek *parousia* is a technical theological term used by scholars to describe Jesus' *second coming* or final coming in judgment on the world.

1 Thess 4:13ff, we stress that much of the problem that premillennial and dispensational issues have is that they are based on a poor apocalyptic eschatological understanding of the end days, or the last days, which according to Acts 2:17 and Heb 1:1, 2, have already begun. Jesus has already *inaugurated* the last days, the eschatological kingdom (the present kingdom) which are already in existence, and in which the Colossians already exist through their baptism into Christ, and where they are now “hidden” for safety, and where they will remain whether alive or dead until Christ returns (*appears*) and when he will finally *fulfill* all of God’s promises (the *not yet promises such as the resurrection*) at the *end of the age*. Hence, an *inaugurated kingdom eschatology* (the *already*). hidden in Christ where Christians will remain in the kingdom until he returns and *fulfills* the final promises of the kingdom age (1 Cor 15:20ff).

For some scholarly discussion of this *already - not yet* concept I am including a rather long comment by Peter O’Brien:

By way of response we have already noted that *there is an emphasis on realized eschatology in Colossians*. In terms of the Pauline “*already—not yet*” tension the accent falls upon the former, called forth no doubt by the particular circumstances of the letter ... But this is not to suggest that the “*not yet*” pole in Paul’s tension is absent. There is future eschatology at chapter 3:4 and 6 (a reference to the future eschatological wrath of God), (where *the reception of a future inheritance is in view*) and in our estimation at chapter 1:22 and where the presentation of every man as perfect at the Parousia is in mind ... Steinmetz ... notes traces of future eschatology in 4:11 also). The “*hidden—revealed*” motif and the concept of glory (note ἐν δόξῃ at v 4) are both significant apocalyptic features (cf. 1:26, 27 where the “*hidden-revealed*” theme is used of the mystery that has now been made known), while spatial concepts (“*above,*” “*on earth*”) are used in the service of eschatology. To speak of a heavenly realm was

meaningful in a Hellenistic syncretistic environment while categories such as this were already at hand in the thought world of Jewish apocalyptic. Paul had previously employed such motifs in his earlier letters and they are used in Colossians to draw attention to the two ages: “this age” and “the age to come” ...

Further, the apocalyptic notion of a resurrection from the dead is found at chapter 1:18 in the title ascribed to Christ, “firstborn from the dead” (πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν, cf. 1 Cor 15:20), and even if [Paul] is taking over traditional [terminology] ... it is clear that he is giving the terminology his approval. Verse 18 can only be adequately understood of Christ’s primacy in resurrection ... In the undisputed Paulines the notions of *the resurrection from the dead and eschatological life are interchangeable* (so Rom 4:17; 5:17, 18, 21; 6:22, 23; 8:11; 1 Cor 15:45), and Grässer’s remark that whoever has been raised with Christ will not participate in a future resurrection shows *he fails to come to grips with the “already-not yet” tension*.

... There was good reason for Paul stressing what God had done in uniting the readers with his Son (the aspect of realized eschatology or the “*already*” of the tension) as the basis for ethical exhortation in Colossians. “Against those who were removing the basis of Christian living away from grace and toward legalistic observances, knowledge, visionary experiences, Paul insists that God has *already* done everything necessary in Christ”.²⁰

Beale, who has a keen understanding of the *already – not yet* tension²¹, agrees with O’Brien and others on this aspect of the *inaugurated yet not fulfilled* nature of the kingdom, adds;

²⁰ O’Brien, *Colossians*, pp. 168–170.

²¹ Beale has published a major work discussing this, G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 2013.

Verse 4 is probably a reference to the final glorious resurrection of Christians on analogy with Phil. 3: 19– 21, where Christ will “transform the body” of those who have their “citizenship in heaven” (in contrast with those “who set their minds on earthly things”) and transform it “into conformity with the body of his glory” on the last day. This is the focus of “the hope laid up . . . in heaven” (Col. 1: 5) and of the “inheritance of the saints” (Col. 1: 12). That saints “will be manifested in glory with him [Christ]” probably refers to Christ’s glory in the midst of which they will be and which they will reflect (on analogy with the Phil. 3: 19– 21 parallel and 1 Cor. 15: 43 in relation to 15: 44– 49). *In this sense, “in glory” is a possession of Christ’s followers, since they share in it. Colossians 3: 4 focuses on the “not yet” of eschatology, while verses 1– 3 are centered on the “already” or beginning of eschatology (likewise O’Brien 1982: 170).*²²

Col 3:5-11: Putting off the Old Life of this World

Paul explained that the theme of being buried with Christ in baptism involved a dying to the past life of sinful behavior under the spiritual powers and the principalities of the cosmos, the *stoicheia*, the elemental spirits of the cosmos by clearly defining some of *the things that are on earth* (Col 3:2).

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you once walked, when you lived in them. ⁸ But now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old

²² Beale, *Colossians*, p. 426.

*nature with its practices*¹⁰ and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.¹¹ Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free-man, but Christ is all, and in all.

Col 3:5. *Νεκρώσατε, nekrōsate*,²³ is an aorist active imperative commanding that the disciples *put to death* the powers of the earth under which they once lived. *Nekrōsate* is used metaphorically to imply *denying the power* of the *earthly forces* to function in one's life. Paul obviously had in mind what God-fearing people would define as *sin* or *sinful*, that lifestyle that denies one of the blessings of God's presence such as *love, grace, kindness*, etc. which he elsewhere had defined as not experienced in the life of the pagan or Gentile (Eph 2:11 ff).

Wright explains that by bluntly naming sins Paul was moving on from euphemisms such as *powers of the cosmos* or the *stoicheia*, to specific sins that corrupt the spiritual life of God's people but which are glossed over in a world trying to hide its spiritual lives in a shadowy world of decency. Paul clearly established the standards of behavior he has in mind.²⁴

Bird observes regarding the specificity of this list of sins;

The inference that Paul draws (Therefore) in v. 5 is that if they have died with Messiah then they must enact this death and put to death the members of your earthly being. That carries the sense of killing, murdering, or destroying the earthly nature which stands as the antithesis to the Christ-saturated life which they now partake of (see

²³ *Zodhiates, νεκρώω, nekroō; contracted nekroō, ... dead. To put to death; ... Used metaphorically meaning to deaden, to deprive of force and vigor, e.g., the members, in which case the meaning is to mortify (Col. 3:5). In the perf. pass. part., nenekrōmēnos, deadened, means dead, powerless, impotent, referring to the body (Rom. 4:19; Heb. 11:12).*

²⁴ Wright, *Colossians*, p. 133.

Rom 6: 11; 8: 13). *One is either dead in sin (Col 2: 13) or dead to sin (Col 3: 5) ...*²⁵

Bird amplifies Paul's thought;

But the point is to allow a heavenly perspective to determine one's being rather than allowing an earthbound perspective to shape one's behavior. What that means is underscored with the following vice list in which Paul urges them to put to death certain activities and attitudes: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed which is idolatry. Vice lists are common in both Paul's letters and in Jewish and Greco-Roman literature. Its function here is to provide real content to activities and attitudes that are proscribed. Further explanation is given in v. 7: because of which the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience.²⁶

Moo points out that the list of vices in Col 3:5 are primarily *sexual sins* and that the list of vices at Col 3:8 refer to *behavioural community sins*.

The list of sins in v. 5 focuses on sexual sins, while the one in v. 8 singles out sins relating to interpersonal relationships. The virtue list of v. 12, along with many of the positive exhortations of vv. 13-17, also focuses on community relations.²⁷

Beale explains that although *covetousness* or *greed*, *πλεονεξία*, *pleonexia*²⁸ are included in this list, the whole list of sins circles around *sexual impropriety*.

²⁵ Bird, *Colossians*, Kindle locations, 2373f.

²⁶ Bid, *Colossians*, Kindle locations 2385f.

²⁷ Moo, *Colossians*, p. 254, 258.

²⁸ Zodiates, *πλεονεξία pleonexia* ... to have. Covetousness, greediness (Luke 12:15; Rom. 1:29 [cf. 1 Cor. 5:10, 11]; 2 Cor. 9:5, "as bounty or blessing on your part, and not as covetousness on ours, not as extorted by us from you" (a.t.); Eph. 4:19; 1 Thess. 2:5; 2 Pet. 2:3, 14; Sept. Jer. 22:17; Hab. 2:9). *Pleonexia* is a larger term which includes ... love of money to hoard away, avarice. It is connected with extortioners (1 Cor. 5:10); with thefts (Mark 7:22, covetous thoughts, plans of fraud and extortion); *with sins of the flesh* (Eph. 5:3,

If “greed” (“covetousness”) is linked to the list of preceding sexual sins, then it suggests that people’s ever-increasing desire for more and more sexual pleasures is nothing other than idolatry (D. Moo 2008: 258). That “covetousness” likely includes “sexual greed” is apparent from the exhortation against sexual immorality in 1 Thess. 4: 3– 7, where the combination of the same Greek words for “immorality,” “uncleanness,” “passion,” and “desire” all occur and are equated with sexual “greed” (or “covetousness”: *πλεονεκτέω*, *pleonekteō*, the verbal form of *πλεονεξία*). Thus “covetousness” may be the source for these preceding four sins (Barth and Blanke 1994: 404). “Covetousness” may be singled out as more dangerous than the others because it “may assume so many respectable forms” (Bruce 1984: 144). Since the tenth commandment (Exod. 20: 17) condemns “covetousness” with respect to both possessions and sex (“You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife”), it is natural that both are in mind here ... In this connection, Grant (1947: 6) may be on the right track in suggesting that “immorality, impurity, passion” sums up the sixth commandment on adultery, and “evil desire and greed” sums up the tenth commandment on coveting, both commandments of which are inextricably related to the first table of the law, which prohibits idolatry. Judaism understood the sin of “covetousness” (*ἐπιθυμία*, *epithymia*) in the garden as “the origin of every sin” ... just as Rom. 7: 7– 12 designates it the primal sin in the garden.²⁹

5; Col. 3:5). *Pleonexia* may be said to be the root from which these sins grow, the longing of the creature which has forsaken God to fill itself with the lower objects of nature.

²⁹ Beale, *Colossians*, p. 432; Cf. also Barth *Colossians*, p.404, Dunn, *Colossians*, Kindle locations 2958ff, Moo, *Colossians*, pp, 256ff.

In the following paragraph we will provide a brief discussion of each of the sexual or sexually related words Paul identifies. We should remember that although there are six sins listed they should be considered as related as discussed above by Bird, Barth, and others. They are all sexually related as corrupt behaviour exercised in a fallen corrupt pagan world.

Dunn observes at this point that;

Paul and Timothy clearly did not harbor any illusions regarding their converts. They did not attempt to promote a Christian perspective which was unrelated to the hard realities of daily life. On the contrary, they were all too aware of the pressures which shaped people like the Colossian Christians and which still held a seductive attraction for them. They were concerned that the Colossian believers' death with Christ, the atrophy of old habits of evil, had not yet worked through the full extent of their bodily relationships.³⁰

Dunn continues by drawing parallels between Paul's list of sexual sins and those of the Stoics and Jews. He writes;

So here, two features call for particular attention. *One is the immediate focus on sexual sins.* This is not always the case in the Christian lists (though cf. Mark 7:21; 1 Cor. 6:9; Gal. 5:19; Didache 5:1), but presumably indicates a considerable concern among the earliest Christian leadership at the continuing attractiveness within their churches of *the looser sexual standards for men in Hellenistic society of the time* (see F. Hauck and S. Schulz, TDNT 6.582-83; Jewish perception is summed up in Aristeas 152). *The other is the strongly Jewish character of this list, as indicated by the association between sexual promiscuity and idolatry ...* Paul did not want his readers to follow the Colossian Jews in their ritual and worship, but

³⁰ Dunn, *Colossians*, Kindle locations 2946-2948.

their ethical standards were to be Jewish through and through.³¹

First in the list we have *fornication*, πορνεία, *porneía*, which includes *any and all illicit sexual activity*, including *adultery* and *sodomy*. Paul had elsewhere included these sexual sins in a list of the corrupt pagan sins of turning away from God. Rom 1:24-32:

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, ²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them.

Following fornication Paul includes, *impurity*, ἀκαθαρσία, *akatharsía*, which in context simply adds to the thought that *fornication* that behavior which is sexual impurity. Zodiates observes regarding ἀκαθαρσία, *akatharsía* that it:

³¹ Dunn, *Colossians*, Kindle locations 2954-2959.

refers to that which is unclean or filthy in a natural or physical sense (Matt. 23:27; Sept.: 2 Sam. 11:4); moral uncleanness, lewdness, incontinence in general (Rom. 6:19; Eph. 4:19; 5:3; 1 Thess. 2:3 of avarice; Thess. 4:7) ... any unnatural pollution, whether acted out by oneself (Gal. 5:19; Col. 3:5), or with another (Rom. 1:24 [cf. Rom. 1:26, 27]; Sept.: Ezek. 22:15; 36:25).³²

Passion, πάθος, *pathos* likewise is associated with sexual desire. Zodhiates observes;

Páthos occurs three times in the NT; once coordinated with *epithumía* ... desire (Col. 3:5), and once subordinated to it, *páthos epithumías*, the *lust of desire* (1 Thess. 4:5), and in the third reference modified by *atimía* ... dishonorable, and *vile affections* (Rom. 1:26). *These are lusts that dishonor those who indulge in them. Páthos* is the soul's diseased condition out of which the various lusts spring. *Epithumía* is the active lust or desire springing from the diseased soul.³³

Serving almost as a synonym to *passion* we have ἐπιθυμία, κακός, *epithumía kakós*, which intensifies evil as a *desire for evil* with a *passion*.

Covetousness, πλεονεξία, *pleonexía* refers to the *desire for something belonging to another*, but in the context here it refers to coveting another person's spouse, husband or wife. The concept of covetousness is listed in several sources as identified with the sixth commandment of the book of Exodus Ex 20:17, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's."

Beal observes regarding covetousness, πλεονεξία, *pleonexía*: If "greed" ("covetousness") is linked to the list of preceding sexual sins, then *it suggests that people's ever-*

³² Zodhiates, ἀκαθαρσία, *akatharsía*.

³³ Zodhiates, πάθος, *pathos*.

increasing desire for more and more sexual pleasures is nothing other than idolatry (D. Moo 2008: 258). That “covetousness” likely includes “sexual greed” is apparent from the exhortation against sexual immorality in 1 Thess. 4: 3– 7, where the combination of the same Greek words for “immorality,” “uncleanness,” “passion,” and “desire” all occur and are equated with sexual “greed” (or “covetousness”: *πλεονεκτέω*, *pleonekteō*, the verbal form of *πλεονεξία*). Thus “covetousness” may be the source for these preceding four sins (Barth and Blanke 1994: 404). “Covetousness” may be singled out as more dangerous than the others because it “may assume so many respectable forms” (Bruce 1984: 144). Since the tenth commandment (Exod. 20: 17) condemns “covetousness” with respect to both possessions and sex (“ You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife”), it is natural that both are in mind here ... In this connection, Grant (1947: 6) may be on the right track in suggesting that “immorality, impurity, passion” sums up the sixth commandment on adultery, and “evil desire and greed” sums up the tenth commandment on coveting, both commandments of which are inextricably related to the first table of the law, which prohibits idolatry. Judaism understood the sin of “covetousness” (*ἐπιθυμία*, *epithymia*) in the garden as “the origin of every sin” (LAE [Apoc.] 19.3), just as Rom. 7: 7– 12 designates it the primal sin in the garden.³⁴

Finally, Paul sums the list up with *idolatry*, *εἰδωλολατρί*, *eidōlolatria*, the *worship of idols*, which we have noted above, therefore includes all the *sexually related sins* listed as *idolatry*.

Moo observes regarding *covetousness*, or *greed*, *pleonexia*;

Greed (Gk. *pleonexia*), the last item in the list, likewise usually has the general sense of an “inappropriate desire for

³⁴ Beale, *Colossians*, p. 432.

more,” but this general sense would, of course, include the uncontrolled desire for more and greater sexual experiences. This being the case, and considering the general meaning of the word, Paul might intend to suggest that “greed,” or “covetousness” (RSV; ESV), is the source of the other four sins. And Paul’s additional description of “greed,” which is idolatry, might also point in this direction. The idea has its roots in the Old Testament and has parallels in Judaism and in the New Testament. The Old Testament frequently sets wealth in competition with God as a source of security (e.g., Ps. 52:7; Jer. 48:7; Prov. 10:15). Philo claimed that the first commandment prohibits “money-lovers” (On the Special Laws 1.23). And the New Testament frequently highlights the love of material possessions as offering a particularly enticing and entrapping alternative to the love of God (e.g., Matt. 6:25-34; 1 Tim. 6:17; Heb. 13:5). Ephesians, as usual, offers the closest parallel: “For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person — such a person is an idolater — has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God” (5:5). The word used in the Ephesians text (*eidolotrēs*, “idolater”) along with “immoral person” (*pornos*) and “greedy person” (*pleonektēs*) in 1 Corinthians 5:10, 11 and with “immoral person” in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and Revelation 21:8; 22:15. Clearly, then, we are dealing with a customary cluster of terms and ideas. Jewish writers habitually traced the various sins of the Gentiles back to the root problem of idolatry; and especially was this true of sexual sins. Putting some other “god” in the place of the true God of the Bible leads to the panoply of sexual sins and perversions that characterized the Gentile world. Paul reflects this tradition here: sexual sins arise because people have an uncontrolled desire for more and more “experiences” and “pleasures”; and such a desire is nothing less than a form of idolatry. It is not necessary, then, to suppose that the Colossian Christians were particularly guilty of such sins. Rather, the

list reflects the kinds of sins to which Gentiles who came to Christ were generally prone.³⁵

Col 3:6. Paul leaves no doubt as to the seriousness of these sins, *On account of these the wrath of God is coming. Is coming, ἔρχεται*, is a present indicative verb implying *constantly coming*. Here we encounter again one of Paul's *already but not yet* theological statements. There is a sense that *is already coming* has yet a *future implication*.

Beale infers this double sense of *is coming*;

“On account of” the sins listed in verse 5, “the wrath of God comes [upon the sons of disobedience].” Those who have violated God’s moral laws and have not turned to Christ in repentance will be held to account and accordingly judged on the last day. This judgment will be an expression of God’s holy and just anger for breaking his holy moral laws (so O’Brien 1982: 184– 85).³⁶

Beale includes the following as a footnote on *is coming*;

“ἔρχεται (erchetai) may be a futuristic present ... or similarly may express imminence, or it may merely be a progressive present, focusing on the notion that the wrath has been set in motion and will reach its object (“the wrath of God is coming”). The latter would fit well into an “*already and not yet*” framework in which God’s wrath has begun to be revealed in the present age (so Rom. 1: 18, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness”), and it will be consummated in the future ... Cf. 1 Thess. 1: 10 ... “Jesus, who delivers us from the coming wrath.”³⁷

³⁵ Moo, *Colossians*, pp. 257f.

³⁶ Beale, *Colossians*, p. 432.

³⁷ Beale *Colossians*, p. 462. *Italics* IAF.

Col 3:7. Paul follows the list of sexually elated sins with a list of moral behavioural sins that were rejected in both the Graeco-Roman and Jewish codes of behaviour.

⁷In these you once walked, when you lived in them. ⁸ But now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth.

The opening clauses of Col 3:7 contain some textual difficulties in translation relating back to the closing thoughts of Col 3:6. Some early Greek manuscripts conclude Col 3:6 with the following expression, *in which you once walked* as in Eph5:6, which clause is not included in some manuscripts at Col 3:6. This suggest to the Greek scholars³⁸ that either the words were original but were dropped in some manuscripts, or that they were included in order to agree with Eph 5:6.³⁹

The move from Col 3:6 without the expression *in which you once walked*, to the *now* of Col 3:7 raises some problems of transitioning from the *once* past tense to the *now* present tense eschatological shift in Paul's thought.

Several scholars attempt to explain the transition from Col 3:6 to Col 3:7, but with difficulty, which should advise us to tread carefully!

O'Brien attempts to clarify this, but not too well, as he leaves one still wondering what Paul had in mind!

You used to practice these same vices on account of which God's wrath is coming; in fact, your lives were characterized by them. At verses 7 and 8 the "once-now" antithesis is repeated ... as the readers (cf. the emphatic "and you," v 7) are shown how they *ought to behave now in contrast to their past*. In the two earlier contexts (1:21, 22 and 2:13) the antithetical statements described their previous lost condition and their present standing in Christ.

³⁸ Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary of the Greek New Testament*, 2001, the Kurt Aland, *et al.*, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, Nestle-Aland Greek text of 1979, the Kurt Alan, Matthew Black, *et. al.*, the Greek New Testament, 2001.

³⁹ Cf. Barth, *Colossians*, p. 405.

Here, however, the “once-now” antithesis functions rather differently. The past behavior is characterized by the indicative mood (περιεπατήσατε, “you walked” [aorist indicative, IAF] and ἐζήτε, “you lived,” [imperfect indicative, IAF] v 7), but instead of following this with another indicative to describe their present standing the apostle employs an imperative “put away” (ἀπόθεσθε, v 8; cf. Rom 6:15–23; 7:4–6; Gal 4:8–11; Eph 5:8) to spell out their new responsibilities in Christ. At the same time the two catalogs of vices (vv 5, 8) are joined together through the “once-now” schema (the antecedent of ἐν οἷς, “in which,” v 7, is the first list of vices, v 5, while τὰ πάντα, “all,” v 8, is defined more precisely by the second catalog) in two sentences which are constructed chiasmatically ...⁴⁰

Moo has also attempted to discuss this difficulty:

In v. 7 Paul, after inserting the general principle of v. 6, uses an emphatic construction to return his attention to the Colossians. “God will visit his wrath on these kinds of sins. And you yourselves were committing just these sins at one time — when you were living in the world where such things are typically done.” The verb “live” has the same connotation in the previous chapter, when Paul rebukes the Colossians for submitting to regulations “as if you were still living in the world” ... The TNIV’s “in the life you once lived” therefore captures the nuance of the Greek here quite accurately.⁴¹

Perhaps the simplest solution to this enigmatic construction of *kai* and the pronoun *tortois*, ἐν οἷς καὶ ὑμεῖς περιεπατήσατέ ποτε, ὅτε ἐζήτε ἐν τούτοις, is to understand that *kai* can be translated as either *indeed* or *also*, and Paul connecting back to a favored expression regarding *the sons of disobedience* as in Eph 5:6, with

⁴⁰ O’Brien, *ibid.*, pp. 185–186.

⁴¹ Moo, *ibid.*, pp. 261, 262.

toutois being seen as a plural pronoun referring to the vices in which you indeed had previously lived according to the pagan world and its vices, and you were as such sons of disobedience upon whom the wrath of God had already been pronounced (*the now*) but which would finally be delivered at the end of the age (*not yet*).

Note that Moo observes;

If “coming on those who are disobedient” (v. 6b) is included as part of the original text, then the initial pronoun could refer to “disobedient people”: “among which people you once walked.”

However, if we do not consider the missing text at Col 5:6, *upon the sons of disobedience*, then the proposal above rendering the text of ἐν οἷς καὶ ὑμεῖς περιεπατήσατέ ποτε, ὅτε ἐζήτε ἐν τούτοις, as *in which vices you indeed you once walked when you lived among these*, [*the vices of the sons of disobedience*].

Col 3:8. Paul now adds additional sins of *moral disorder* to his list of vices in Col 3:5.

⁸*But now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth.* ⁹*Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices.*

In similar fashion to Col 1:5, Paul again lists a series of vices that should be put to death, or as Paul nuanced it in this context, *they should be put away*, from ἀποτίθημι, *apotithēmi*; *laid aside*,⁴² *rid of*, indicating that they may be commonly found among people, even Christians, but these attitudes and behaviors should not be present in the Christian new life in Christ. These vices are not sexually oriented but would be commonly found in a Gentile pagan culture or lifestyle. However, they are each to *relational behavioral* in nature, interpersonal sins.

Beale, always sensitive to the apocalyptic genre of eschatology, observes an important use by Paul of the Greek

⁴² *Zodhiates*, ἀποτίθημι, *apotithēmi*; *laid aside*.

correlative adverb *now*, *vuví*, *nuní*, which is identical to *nún*, *now*, but is *strengthened by the demonstrative i (iota) for emphasis* ⁴³ in Col 3:8;

Even though (δέ, *de*) they have lived in the iniquities of the old, corrupt world, “now” (*vuví*, *nyni*) that they have died to the old world and been raised into the new world, they must “indeed, lay aside” their old manner of existence. Just as they “also” had “once walked in” the sins of the old world, now they are “also to put them aside.” They are able to fulfill this command to “lay aside” because they have the real power of the new creation to do so ... Those whose hearts have not been created anew are unable to respond to commands intended for those who have become part of the new creation. “*Now*” indicates an eschatological turning point for Paul’s audience. While there are varying uses of “now” in the NT (e.g., a logical use, “now at this point in my argument”; or a reference merely to present time), the eschatological use of “now” to demarcate the beginning of an age in contrast to a former old age occurs elsewhere in Paul and the NT. The combination of “now” (*vuví* or its alternate form *vōv*, *nyn*) with “time” (*καίρος*, *kairos*) appears in Paul six times, most of them clearly in connection to latter-day contexts. The use of “now” by itself can often have the same temporal association. Thus Paul’s use of an eschatological “now” in Col. 3: 8 fits naturally into his other such uses and underscores an *inaugurated eschatological context* for the verse. Romans 13: 11– 12 similarly uses *vōv* (*nyn*) in an eschatologically charged context: “Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is near.” This turn of the ages

⁴³ Zodhiates, *op. cit.*, *vuví*, *nuní*.

reference is the basis there for the imperatives: “Lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”⁴⁴

Regarding *anger, wrath, malice*, Moo observes, that *anger, rage, and malice will then refer to verbal expressions of these emotions rather than to the emotions themselves.*⁴⁵

To open this list at Col 3:8 Paul mentions anger, ὀργή, *orgḗ*, *angry, quick-tempered*. Contrast this with *thumós*, *wrath as the outburst of a vengeful mind. To be provoked.*⁴⁶ We might then define anger as a *flash of passion!* To *anger* Paul adds, *wrath*, θυμός, *thumós*; to *move impetuously, particularly as the air or wind, a violent motion or passion of the mind.*⁴⁷ The anger Paul has in mind here is a *flash of passion*, a heated outburst.

Regarding malice, κακία, *kakía*; Zodhiates observes that malice refers to:

That which is bad, wickedness as an evil habit of the mind, while malevolence, not only doing evil, but being evil. Evil in a moral sense meaning wickedness of heart, life, and character (Acts 8:22; 1 Cor. 14:20 [cf. Matt. 18:3; James 1:21; 1 Pet. 2:16; Sept.: Ex. 32:12; Is. 29:20]), malevolence⁴⁸

To this list Paul adds *slander*, βλασφημία *blasphēmía*, *blasphemous, verbal abuse against someone which denotes the very worst type of slander.*⁴⁹ It is not surprising that Paul would add *foul talk* to slander! Moo observes that the Greek word *aischrología*; which is not found elsewhere in biblical Greek, literally means *shameful words.*⁵⁰ Zodhiates adds regarding evil talk, αἰσχρολογία, *aischrología*, that it is;

⁴⁴ Beale, *Colossians*, pp. 432f. Italics emphasis mine, IAF.

⁴⁵ Moo, *Colossians*, p. 263.

⁴⁶ Zodhiates, ὀργή, *orgḗ*.

⁴⁷ Zodhiates, θυμός, *thumós*.

⁴⁸ Zodhiates, κακία, *kakía*.

⁴⁹ Zodhiates, βλασφημία, *blasphēmía*.

⁵⁰ Moo, *Colossians*, p. 264.

to be foul-mouthed ... Vile conversation. It occurs only in Col. 3:8 where it refers to shameful words coming out of the mouth, implying that the person who has been redeemed by Christ (Col. 3:1) should never utter improper or filthy words which he may have uttered in his life of unbelief. A Christian ought to have a changed vocabulary, and the genuineness of one's Christianity can be discerned by his vocabulary.⁵¹

In a parallel pericope at Eph 4:25-32 Paul had enlarged on this thought of evil talk. Notice how Paul defined evil talk, *that which is not edifying, which does not build up the other person, or does not fit the occasion in which the Holy Spirit is present.*

Therefore, putting away falsehood, let everyone speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶ Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸ Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need. ²⁹ Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, ³² and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Col 3:9. As in the Ephesian text cited above, Paul includes *not lying to one another*. Lying does not build anyone up, and only diminishes the Christian witness of the disciple. Paul's reason for giving up, or putting off such behavior is that they have *stripped off the old person with its practices* or functions, ἀπεκδυσάμενοι

⁵¹ Zodiates, αἰσχρολογία, aischrología.

τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον σὺν ταῖς πράξεσιν αὐτοῦ, *apekdusamenoī ton palaion anthrōpon sun tais apxesin auto.*

Col 3:10. Paul returns to the new life the Christian has received in Christ, *and indeed*⁵² [you] *have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.* The thought of a new nature or self builds on the concept of a new birth experienced in baptism. At this point, Paul’s Greek is expressive, He adopts the emphatic *kai*, *and, indeed*, to emphasize his point! *καὶ ἐνδυσάμενοι τὸν νέον τὸν ἀνακαινούμενον, kai endousamenoī to neon to akakainoumenon, indeed you have clothed yourself in the new [person/self], which is constantly being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator!*

At Col 1:15 we learned that Christ is the very image of the invisible God. He was the one *in whom* and *for whom* all things were created. Now we learn that we have been born anew with a new nature of character *which is being recreated in the image of our creator, Christ!* Christians must⁵³ bear the very nature of Christ and God in their daily lives! *This new nature is constantly being renewed in the knowledge of the image of our creator.*

The syntax (grammatical structure) of the text at Col 3:10 is challenging and somewhat difficult. Moo suggests that the best understanding of the text is;

The need to work out in daily life the reality of our transfer into the new realm, or “new self,” reflects Paul’s typical “already-not yet” tension. While “already” detached from the “old self” and attached to the “new self,” we yet live in a time when the old has not been finally defeated and destroyed. *The old realm continues to exist and to exercise its influence over us who still live in unredeemed bodies.* Paul alludes to this tension when he goes on to say

⁵² Paul’s use of *καὶ, kai*, an emphatic copulative conjunction *and, also, indeed*, Zodhiates.

⁵³ The imperative *ψεύδεσθε* at Col 3:9 implies that this should read *must* put on or dress oneself with the nature of Christ. Moo in the next paragraph will explain understanding of the imperative here.

that the new self is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. The present durative force of the verb (a present participle in Greek) makes clear that the “new self,” the new reality which is ruled by Christ, *is not in its final state: it is in a state of “becoming.”* Paul uses this same language to make a similar point in 2 Corinthians 4:16 — “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day” — and Romans 12:2 — “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Paul qualifies this ongoing renewal with two prepositional phrases: it is taking place in or “for” knowledge; and it is taking place “according to” (or “in”) the image of its Creator. In the former phrase, *knowledge is probably the goal* or object of the renewal (so most translations) rather than its means “you have put on a new self which will progress towards true knowledge the more it is renewed.” *This knowledge is, of course, knowledge of God*, an understanding of who he is in terms of Christ and what that understanding means for living rightly. *It is this knowledge that human beings lost in the fall into sin* (Gen. 2:17; 3:5, 7; see Rom. 1:28) and that incorporation into Christ makes possible once again. However, as Paul has made clear earlier in the letter by praying that the Colossians might be filled with this knowledge (1:9, 10), we do not gain this knowledge automatically. It may well be, then, that we should find an implied exhortation in v. 10b: “make sure you are allowing this renewal to take place!” *As God created human beings originally to be in his “image,” an image defaced in the fall, so God is now working to renew human beings “in accordance with”* (Gk. kata) his image. Redemption is itself, in a certain basic and fundamental sense, a “new creation” (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15).⁸¹¹ However, we will also recall that Paul has already claimed in this letter that it is Christ himself who is supremely “the image (eikōn) of God” (1:15). It is Christ

who supplies the pattern for the renewal of the “new self,” as Romans 8:29 makes clear: “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.”⁵⁴

Col 3:11. *Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.* In Christ, in the new self, in the new creation in the image of our creator, all previous relationships are cancelled. Christians are new persons *being recreated* in the image of God and Christ! The image of God created in man (Gen 1:26, 27) lost in the original fall of man (Gen 3) is now being recreated in man in Christ.

Moo expresses the corporate nature of the new creation *in Christ* well;

The *here* (*hopou*; it could also be translated “where”) opening the verse refers to the “new self” in v. 10a: “Here, in the new humanity being created by God in Christ and in accordance with Christ, there is neither [Greek nor Jew barbarian, Scythian] . . .” What follow are eight designations intended to accentuate the inclusiveness of the new humanity.⁵⁵

The concept is that in Christ there is no favored gender or ethnic makeup, all this is cancelled out in Christ and in the a new creation. Cf. Gal 3:26-29, speaking in the context of justification through faith in Christ rather than in the Law of Moses, Paul explained;

for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.
²⁷ *For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.* ²⁸ *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* ²⁹ *And if you are Christ’s,*

⁵⁴ Moo, *Colossians*, pp. 268-270. For clarity, I have emphasized certain statements in Moo’s comments.

⁵⁵ Moo, *Colossians*, p. 270.

then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

In the context of Col 3:5-12, Paul was stressing that the old self seen in fallen man in Adam and displayed in the pagan lifestyle must be discarded, and a new man rising in Christ in the fulness of God is seen in and dwells in Christ. This took place when in baptism (Col 2:12) the old person died and the new person rose in Christ.

Col 3:12-17: Putting On the New Life in the Image of Christ.

Paul explains that there are new life characteristics that the new person in Christ must demonstrate. The opening *imperative statement*, Ἐνδύσασθε, *endustasthe*, shifts the meaning from *should* put on to *must* put on!

¹² *Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience,* ¹³ *forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.* ¹⁴ *And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.* ¹⁵ *And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.* ¹⁶ *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.* ¹⁷ *And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

Col 3:12. Paul reverts to some favorite terms for Christians, emphasizing their exalted role in God's economy. He refers to them as God's *chosen ones* who are *holy* and *beloved*. He surely had in mind the letter he had written to Ephesus and the churches in Asia as in Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea. Eph 1:1ff set the tone for explaining what God had done for the Christians, calling them saints:

¹ *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,*

To the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus:
² *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

³ *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. ⁵ He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸ which he lavished upon us. ⁹ For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*

¹¹ *In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹² we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory.*

Col 3:12, 13. *Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, ¹³ forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*

Paul draws on the analogy of *putting clothes on*, Ἐνδύσασθε οὖν, *endusasthe oun*, an *aorist imperative* implying a necessary action. Zodhiates observes that it can mean to put on as a garment, to cause to get into a garment, to clothe, dress; in the pass., to be clothed, and that, He adds that metaphorically it includes the sense:

used of the soul as clothed with the body (2 Cor. 5:3; see Job 10:11); of a person as clothed, i.e., endued, furnished with any ... quality (Luke 24:49; 1 Cor. 15:53, 54 referring

to incorruptibility and immortality; Col. 3:12 referring to the bowels of compassion ... Of one who puts on or assumes a new character, the new man (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10) We are to “put on Christ” (a.t.), which means to be filled, endued with Christ’s spirit, be like Him (Rom. 13:14; Gal. 3:27) filled, endued with Christ’s spirit, be like Him (Rom. 13:14; Gal. 3:27).⁵⁶

On the imperative *endusasthe* Dunn observes;

Now we come to the particulars, the clothes, as it were, which the new person should wear. The verb (*endusasthe*) is the same as in 3: 10, though now clearly in the imperative. It is as a result of that decisive step and engagement with Christ (οὖν) that a whole set of particular consequences must follow.⁵⁷

The expression *as God’s chosen ones*, ἐκλεκτός *eklektós*, would resonate with the Jewish readers since this term had been used by the Jews to refer back to God’s call of Abraham and his descendants to be his chosen ones (cf. Gen 12, *et al*).

Dunn observes regarding this expression that it carried with it the intense meaning of standing before God as his chosen people.

For these are all terms which individually, but particularly in this combination, can be understood only from their reference to Israel. Εκλεκτός ("chosen, select") was familiar enough in Greek, but the idea of a people "chosen by God" was wholly and exclusively Jewish, a fundamental feature of Israel's self-perception. So too, as we have already seen, with ἄγιοι ("saints, holy ones"; see on 1:2). And though the idea of one beloved of the gods is familiar outside the Judeo-Christian tradition (cf. Dio Chrysostom 3.60; BAGD s.v. ἀγαπάω), it is again a particular emphasis in Jewish self-understanding (e.g., Deut. 32:15; 33:26; Isa. 5:1, 7; 44:2; Jer. 12:7; 31:3; Bar. 3:37). The phrasing is so concentrated and has not yet become conventional (there

⁵⁶ Zodhiates, ἐνδύω *endúō*.

⁵⁷ Dunn, *Colossians, endusasthe*, Kindle location 3173.

are divergent parallels in Rom. 1:7; 1 Thes. 1:4; 2 Thes. 2:13) that the allusions must be deliberate and could hardly have been unnoticed by the recipients. The echo of the classic covenant text, Deut. 7:6-7, in particular, is striking ... More clearly than anywhere else in Colossians it is evident that the Gentile recipients of the letter were being invited to consider themselves full participants in the people and heritage of Israel. Or to be more precise, the particular exhortations which follow assume and expect the Colossians to presuppose that the starting point for their praxis as Christians was the recognition that they stood before God as Israel stood before God. It is very likely that this assumption on the part of uncircumcised Gentiles (2:13) was a bone of contention with or provocation to the more traditional Jewish synagogues in Colossae.⁵⁸

The expression *holy and beloved*, ἅγιοι καὶ ἡγαπημένοι, is interesting and is possibly better read as *beloved saints!* The two words, ἅγιοι καὶ ἡγαπημένοι, an adjective and a participle in Greek are joined by *kai* in a hendiadyl construction meaning that *those who were called by God were his beloved holy people, dedicated, consecrated saints.*

Moo adds the following insight to the coupling of *being called, saints, and loved by God*;

In the New Testament, Paul's address to the Roman Christians touches on these same three conceptions: "to all in Rome who are *loved by God* and *called* to be his *holy people.*" See also 1 Peter 2:9-10: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Dunn, Colossians, Kindle locations 3176ff.

⁵⁹ Moo, Colossians, p. 276.

Therefore (οὖν, οὖν, *therefore, then, now*) as God’s chosen and beloved saints, you should be dedicated (*hágios*, holy, sanctified, dedicated) to *clothing yourself in Christlike qualities, compassion, kindness, lowliness, etc.*

Paul opens this list of qualities Christians need to find in their lives because of their faith in Jesus, *Compassion*, σπλάγγχνον, *splágchnon*. *Zodhiates observes;*

...figuratively, the inward parts indicating the breast or heart as the seat of emotions and passions. In the New Testament it is used of the gentler emotions such as compassion, tender affection indicating the mind, soul, the inner man ...metonymically, inward affection, compassion, pity, love (2 Cor. 7:15; Phil. 1:8, meaning in my ardent love to Christ; 2:1).⁶⁰ In the King James translation it is rendered “*bowels of merch*”!

Moo enlarges on this point regarding *compassion*, σπλάγγχνον, *splágchnon* which literally applies to the inner parts of the body;

“But the parts of the human body were often in the ancient world (and in ours) associated with psychological aspects of the person. “Bowels” was very often associated with the seat of the emotions and especially love. The word is used this way regularly throughout the New Testament (Luke 1:78; 2 Cor. 6:12; 7:15; Phil. 1:8; 2:1; Phlm. 7, 12, 20; 1 John 3:17). In our text, then, “bowels of mercy” means “love characterized by mercy,” “heartfelt compassion” (NAB; HCSB), or “tenderhearted mercy” (NLT).”⁶¹

Paul himself enlarges on the concept of *compassion, the emotions of the inner being*, adding several qualities that he had touched on in his other epistles such as Eph 4:1ff and Gal 5:22f, indicating that he considered them fundamental or primary Christian characteristics or attitudes.

We have in **Col 3:12-14** the following list of compassionate qualities characteristic of the life in Christ: *kindness (oiktirmós* is

⁶⁰ *Zodhiates, ibid.*, σπλάγγχνον, *splágchnon*.

⁶¹ *Moo, ibid.*, p. 277.

the compassionate goodness one shows toward the sufferings of others), *lowliness* (*tapeinophrosúnē*, humility, lowness of mind), *meekness* (*praūtēs*, gentleness) and *patience* (*makrothumía*, longsuffering with others), *forbearing* one another (*anoché*, indulgence), forgiving each other (*charízomai*, showing grace or favor), *as* (*kathōs*, just as) the Lord has forgiven (*charízomai*, shown favor to) you, *so* (*οὕτω*, thus, in the same way) you also, indeed,⁶² must forgive, and *maintain perfect harmony* (*súndesmos teleiótēs*, perfect or mature bonding, unity).

Col 3:14. As Paul continued through the qualities desired in the new Christlike lifestyle, he included several qualities he felt were essential to *maintaining perfect or mature harmony* (Col 3:14b) in the church. In one way or another these were signs of the true compassion expressed in a genuine deep love for one another. These characteristics were *kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing* one another, and if one had a complaint against another, *forgiving* each other. This was to be expressed *just as the Lord has forgiven you*, so you also *must forgive*. *And above all these put on love*, [*agapáō*], *which binds everything together in perfect harmony*. The imperative *put on* in the translation is not in the Greek but is supplied in order to maintain the flow of imperatival thought regarding things *that needed to be put on*, ἐνδύσασθε, introduced at Col 3:12.

The well-used and well-known word *love*, ἀγάπη, *agápē*, needs some amplification! This is not an emotional reaction to something or someone, but a *rational cognitive decision* to react in a manner that best serves the other. A good lead into this is suggested by Zodhiates:

With reference to God's love, it is God's willful direction toward man. It involves God doing what He knows is best for man and not necessarily what man desires. For example, John 3:16 states, "For God so loved [*ēgápēsen*] the world, that he gave." What did He give? Not

⁶² I like an alternative reading here for the emphatic *καὶ*, *indeed*. Cf. Zodhiates, *καὶ*.

what man wanted, but what God knew man needed, i.e., His Son to bring forgiveness to man.⁶³

Paul's point is that in order to maintain perfect harmony the Christians must make a cognitive decision and effort to love or act in a way that will produce perfect harmony in the body of Christ. This ties in well to the imperatival teaching *in like manner to Christ forgiving you, you must also forgive one another.*

Col 3:15-16. *And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*

Again Paul inserts an imperative into the discussion, *let the peace of Christ rule in your hear...* This is balanced by another imperative at Col 3:16, *let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.* Both concepts provide parallel imperative applications; *let the peace of Christ rule in your heart*, and *let the word of Christ dwelling in you.*

Moo correctly observes;

No conjunction or particle links v. 16 to v. 15, perhaps as a way of *enhancing the obvious parallelism between the two*: “let the peace of Christ rule in (en) your hearts” parallels let the message of Christ dwell among (en) you (the Greek word order is even the same). TNIV’s “message” translates *logos*, which, of course, can also be translated “word.” References to the “word of God” are extremely common in the New Testament, but “word of Christ” is rare (only here and in Heb. 6:1; “word of the Lord [referring to Christ]” occurs in 1 Thess. 1:8; 4:15; 2 Thess. 3:1; 1 Tim. 6:3 [plural]). Probably Paul means not “the word, or message, that Christ proclaimed” but “*the message that proclaims Christ,*” “*the message about the Messiah.* Paul uses the phrase to *summarize the authentic teaching about Christ*

⁶³ Zodhiates, ἀγάπη, *agápē*.

and his significance, an immediately relevant example of which we have in the first two chapters of Colossians.⁶⁴

Col 3:16. Paul closes this short list of *imperatives* with the instruction to *let the word [message] of Christ*, which is a key to Paul's message to the Colossians, *dwell in you richly*.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

We noted above that Moo had observed that the expression *word of Christ*, Ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ, refers to the Christians being filled with *the message concerning Christ*. The Greek λόγος, *lógos* has a wide range of meanings and applications. A first thought that comes to mind referring to *the word of Christ* for modern Christians is that this refers primarily to the New Testament message. The New Testament certainly does include the *word of or about Christ*, but in this context where the New Testament books had not yet been assembled into our New Testament canon or Bible, it refers to *the message of or concerning Christ*, or *the message referring to Christ*. We have already noted that the letter to the Colossians is all about the *preeminence* and *all sufficiency* of Christ, and that the center to the message is that *Christ is the image of God*, and is the *fulness* of the deity bodily.

Paul's instruction was that the Colossians must fill their lives *with the meaning and message concerning Christ*. This would empower them to maintain the *perfect harmony* of the body of Christ especially in light of the constant encroachment of the pagan synthetic view of religion challenging the Christians, and provide them with a message to teach others regarding Christ.

By filling themselves with Christ and the message of Christ they would be able to teach their neighbors about Christ.

⁶⁴ Moo, *Colossians*, pp. 285-286.

The syntax of the following clauses is interesting and informative! Paul writes in all wisdom teaching and admonishing others, *ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ διδάσκοντες καὶ νοουθετοῦντες ἑαυτούς*. He began with the expression that the teaching of their faith must be *in all wisdom*. Moo appropriately observes that this means *within the appropriate behavior of true worship*.

That is, that those doing the teaching and admonishing do them in appropriate ways, governed by insight into the situation and the people being addressed. And, of course, in contrast to the previous text, this text gives to each member of the congregation the responsibility to teach and admonish other members.⁶⁵

In the Greek *σοφία* could be either a locative noun setting wisdom as *the location of their teaching*, or a dative noun of reference, *with reference to wisdom*, that is *wise teaching regarding the worship of God*. Thus, setting their *teaching and instruction* in or with *wisdom*, the Christians are to teach one another and their neighbors the message of truth about Christ.

Moo focuses on the corporate nature of this teaching and exhorting;

But the rest of this verse, with its focus on the worship of the collective body, suggests rather that Paul is urging the community as a whole to put the message about Christ at the center of its corporate experience. Specifically, Paul urges them to let it dwell richly among them. The message about Christ should take up permanent residence among the Colossians (NJB: “find a home with you”); it should be constantly at the center of the community’s activities and worship. “Richly” suggests that this constant reference to the word of Christ should not be superficial or passing but that it should be a deep and penetrating contemplation that

⁶⁵ Moo, *op. cit.*, p. 289

enables the message to have transforming power in the life of the community.⁶⁶

Paul's syntax in the Greek is informative, but also complicated! Primarily it is comprised of an *imperative verb*, *let it dwell*, referring to *the word of Christ*, and *three modal participles* (διδάσκοντες, νουθετοῦντες, ᾄδοντες) that explain *how* the Christians in this context were to do this; *teaching, encouraging, singing...* They *let the message of Christ dwell in them* as they *teach, admonish* (encourage) and *sing*.

First, let me give you the Greek text and then work with this as we work through the text! Ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐνουκείτω ἐν ὑμῖν πλουσίως, ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ διδάσκοντες καὶ νουθετοῦντες ἑαυτούς, ψαλμοῖς ὕμνοις ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς ἐν [τῇ] χάριτι ᾄδοντες ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν τῷ θεῷ.

Second, a literal translation would read, *The word of Christ let it dwell in you richly, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another, psalms hymns spiritual songs in or with grace singing with your hearts to God.*

Let it dwell is the *controlling imperative* in this pericope. This is followed by the *three participles* (*teaching, admonishing, and singing*), which are described as *modal participles*, or *imperative participles*⁶⁷, explaining the result of the word of Christ dwelling in them richly. You will *teach, admonish, and sing* to one another.

The words *teaching* (διδάσκοντες), *admonishing* (νουθετοῦντες), and *singing* (ᾄδοντες), are thus participles *modifying* or *explaining how* the disciples were to let the word of Christ dwell in them richly. This would involve *teaching* and *admonishing* one another, and *singing* in their hearts to their God in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. We can call the three participles either *modal* or *imperative* participles since they are governed by the imperative clause *let the word of Christ dwell in*

⁶⁶ Moo, *Colossians*, p. 286.

⁶⁷ Dana and Mantey, *Greek Grammar*, pp. 228, and 229.

you, explaining *how* letting the word of Christ dwell in you richly was to be carried out.⁶⁸

There is general discussion among scholars as to the background behind the words, psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with agreement that the *psalms* (ψαλμοῖς, ψαλμός, *psalmós*) were “biblical” psalms as in the psalms of the Old Testament which were commonly sung among the Jews in the Synagogue. The *hymns* (ῥυμοίς, *húmnois*) and *spiritual songs* (ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς, *hudais pneumatikais*) would have been any spiritual songs sung in praise of God and Christ.

There is some discussion on the meaning of *singing*, ᾄδοντες, from ᾄδω, *ádō*, *to sing*, mostly pertaining to its origins, and then its use in the 1st century CE and the New Testament. It is interesting that the word ψάλλω, *psállō*, *to sing*, does not appear in Col 3:16! *Psállō* (found in 1 Cor 14:15 and Eph 5:19) is a synonym to *ádō* and was commonly used in the 1st century and in the New Testament for *singing*. Here however, in Col 3:16, Paul uses the simple word *ádō*, *sing*. Paul does use *ádō* at Eph 5:19 in the participle form, ᾄδοντες καὶ ψάλλοντες τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμῶν τῷ κυρίῳ, *singing and singing melodiously to the Lord with the heart*. In 1 Cor 14:15, Paul uses the word ψαλῶ, ψαλῶ τῷ πνεύματι, ψαλῶ δὲ καὶ τῷ νοῖ, *I will sing in or with the spirit and I will sing with or in the mind*. This opens the door to a discussion of what the words ᾄδω and ψαλῶ, *sing* mean!

Most scholars today agree with the conclusion of Professor Everett Fergusson that the word *psállō* in use in the 1st century CE simply meant *to sing vocally* with no mention or emphasis on an instrument.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Cf. Moo, *Colossians*, p. 288; O’Brien, *Colossians.*, p. 206f; Bruce, *Colossians*, p. 147f; Dunn, *Colossians*, kindle locations 2392ff.

⁶⁹ Everett Fergusson, *A Cappella Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, Biblical Research Press, 1972, p. 14, *passim*; Everett Fergusson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996, pp. 268ff; Everett Fergusson, Jack P. Lewis, Earl West, *The Instrumental Music Issue*, Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co, 1987, *passim*. For a more detailed study of singing in the New Testament Church cf. Dr. Ian A. Fair,

One might ask why Paul in Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16, parallel texts, used both ᾄδω and ψαλῶ. The most logical conclusion was for emphasis, one *sings vocally* and *sings melodiously* with the heart. **Col 3:17.** *And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

Returning to the context of Col 3:16 we have the following observations. The text basically includes two imperatival instructions; The imperative, *let the word of Christ dwell in them richly*, and three modal participles, *teach and encourage one another by singing spiritual songs*. As in the Ephesian instruction at Eph 5:19 ff, the contrast of singing drunken orgy songs and singing spiritual songs emphasizing the message of Christ is unmistakably obvious!

The Colossian church was to *fill their lives with the word/message of Christ*, that is, let that message and its meaning dwell in them richly in such a manner that it would maintain perfect, mature harmony. They were to teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in their hearts with grace and thanksgiving in such a way that it would bring praise to God and attract the attention of the pagans.

Commentary of Ephesians, HCU Media, 2019, and *A Biblical Theology of Worship*, HCU Media, 2020.

Chapter 10: The Christian Household: Col 3:18-4:1

In his circular Ephesian letter Paul included a general message on household behavior which we today in theological circles refer to as *haustafeln*, codes of ethical household behavior. Paul addressed such a *haustafeln* in detail, Eph 5:20ff.

Hhaustafeln, or house codes, were common among the well behaved Roman and Greek cultures and families. If the Colossian Christians were to have any influence among their neighbors they would need to manifest the high quality of life, notably within their family household, the cultured Roman and Greek societies expected. It would only be natural to expect exceptional family behavior from the Colossian Christians, notably if they preached a “higher way” than their pagan neighbors.¹

In light of contemporary gender equality concerns, notably in the West, we need to remember to set the exegetical discussion of any text involving family guidelines first within the culture of the specific text, then seek to identify the theological concerns and emphases within the text, and finally apply these theological principles to our contemporary culture and society. That safeguards against our reading the text through our contemporary sociological context and presuppositions.

So, in regard to our Colossians text, we need to seek to understand the cultural and sociological traditions of the Colossian, Greek, and Roman societies.

¹ For a fairly extensive discussion of *haustafeln* cf. David Balch, Carolyn A. Osiek, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*: 1997; David L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in I Peter*, Society of Biblical Literature, Monograph Series, No. 26, Scholars Press, 1981; David L. Balch, *Early Christian Families in Context*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003; Bruce, *Colossians*; Dunn *Colossians*; O’Brien, *Colossians*, Moo, *Colossians*; Fee, *Ephesians*, Thiselton, *Ephesians*.

Col 3:18-4:1. The *haustafeln* of Colossians.

¹⁸ *Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.* ¹⁹ *Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.* ²⁰ *Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.* ²¹ *Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.* ²² *Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord.* ²³ *Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men,* ²⁴ *knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you are serving the Lord Christ.* ²⁵ *For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.*

Regarding this set of household behaviors O'Brien observes:

In this household table Paul deals with concrete human relations within the ancient οἶκος ("house," "household"), not with abstract ordinances. The first pair of injunctions concerns wives and husbands, then children and fathers, finally slaves and masters. In each case the subordinate member is mentioned first and is exhorted to be subject (ὑποτάσσομαι) or to obey (ὑπακούω). Wives, children and slaves are addressed equally with their husbands, fathers and masters. They too are ethically responsible partners who are expected to do "what is fitting in the Lord" just as the male, the father and the free man. But the exhortations to subordination do not stand alone; immediately the second member of each pair is addressed and reminded of his responsibilities. The twin admonitions stand together and the first ought not to be interpreted apart from the second ... Each member of the family or household stands in his or her place within the created order (at 1 Cor 11:9

Paul expressly mentions the creation ordinances) and has certain responsibilities.²

Bruce makes the following succinct observations:

The Christian duty of mutual deference is inculcated in several of the ethical sections of the NT letters. Thus, in the section of Ephesians which corresponds to Col. 3:18-4:1 the Christian wife's deference to her husband is enjoined as a particular expression of the general duty of submissiveness which all Christians are encouraged to show to one another: "Be subject one to another in the fear of Christ—wives [in particular] to your own husbands, as to the Lord" (Eph. 5:21-22). Here in Colossians, however, there is a more definite paragraph division between the preceding general instructions ("Put on") and the specific directions for the Christian household. Certainly in Col. 3:18-4:1 the general principles of Christian behavior laid down in the foregoing paragraph (Col. 3:12-17) are applied in the special setting of the Christian home, but the exposition of the theme "be subject" is confined to that setting. The household (*familia*) was recognized as a stabilizing element in ancient society, and treatises on household administration were common. The household was wider than the nuclear family of the Western world today: it included all who were under the authority of its head. In NT times the head of a household might be a woman, like Lydia of Philippi (Acts 16:15), Chloe of Corinth, who may or may not have been a Christian (1 Cor. 1:11), and Nympha of the Lycus valley (Col. 4:15). But usually the head of the household was a man, who exercised within it the authority of a husband, a father, and a master. As in society in general, so in the Christian community the household appears to have been the basic

² O'Brien, *Colossians*, p. 220.

unit or cell. Where the family home was of a convenient size, the household could be expanded for certain purposes by the inclusion of fellow-believers who joined its members from time to time to form, with them, the “church” in So-and-so’s house. When the head of a household was converted to Christianity, the whole household appears normally to have joined in adhering to the new faith and receiving baptism, but it was not invariably so, and in 1 Cor. 7:12-16 provision was made for tensions which might arise from divided religious allegiance. In the literary treatment of household administration, codes of domestic behavior were a regular feature. In these the mutual duties of husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves, and so forth were prescribed. The Byzantine anthologist Stobaeus has some very interesting quotations from ancient authors on these mutual duties. Similar summaries of domestic duties are found here and there in the NT; that in Col. 3:18-4:1 is the earliest extant instance of such a Christian summary. Its relation to summaries given elsewhere in the NT letters suggests that such instruction formed part of a fairly well-defined body of catechesis imparted to converts from early times. While many of the ethical emphases in these Christian summaries can be paralleled from Jewish and Stoic sources, to say that the addition of such a phrase as “in the Lord” (vv. 18, 20) “Christianizes them in the simplest possible way” is to say everything, for such an addition introduces a difference in kind and not merely in degree.³

³ Bruce, *Colossians*, pp. 161f.

Col 3:18 – 21. Wives/husbands, children/parents.

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.
¹⁹ *Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.* ²⁰ *Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.* ²¹ *Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.*

Col 3:18. *Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.* The Greek *Αἱ γυναῖκες* is a generic noun that can refer to a woman or a wife. Here in the context of family, expressly in the same context as husbands or children, it is correctly translated as *wives*. The inclusion of the definite article *Αἱ* adds a sense of specificity, wives not women in general! The clause *as is fitting in the Lord* adds a theological motivation as did Paul at Eph 5:21 *Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

Dunn observes regarding the word *γυναῖκες*, wives or women: Wives are addressed first (as in Eph. 5:22; in I Pet. 3:1 following slaves, but before husbands). It is important to note that it is wives and not women generally who are in view (as also in I Cor. 14:34) ...⁴

The expression *be subject* to your husbands has generated significant discussion notably in Western cultures where gender equality has become a major interest and concern. Gender equality has spawned sharp debates in fields as wide spread as business, economy, government, political concerns, sport, education, and marriage principles, scholarly debate, to name a few of the more prominent concerns.

Zodhiates observes regarding *be subject*, ὑποτάσσεσθε, *hupotassethe* that it:

is and verb in the present tense, middle or passive voice, and imperative mood of ὑποτάσσω, *hupotássō* from *hupó*, and *tássō*, *to place in order. To place under in an orderly fashion.* In the active voice it can mean to subjugate, to place in submission. In the middle voice *hupotássomai* it

⁴ Dunn, *Colossians*, Kindle Locations 3467f.

can imply *to subject oneself, place oneself in submission*. In the relation of a wife to her husband: Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; 1 Pet. 3:1, 5; Titus 2:5. In these verses the duty of the wife to submit herself to her own husband is clearly enunciated (Gal. 3:28; 1 Pet. 3:7). Although there is an ontological spiritual equality between men and women, there remain physical, positional and functional differences. There are designated functions for a husband and a wife which man cannot change because God has ordained them.⁵

Melick adds a helpful comment on the voice of the verb *be submissive*:

When it occurs in the active voice, the power to subject belongs to God himself. This is evidenced in 1 Cor 15:24–28 (Christ subjecting all things); Phil 3:21; Rom 8:20; Eph 1:21–22. In the middle voice, it describes a voluntary submission which resembles that of Christian humility. It may describe Christ's submission to God (1 Cor 15:58), church members to one another (Eph 5:21, a parallel context to this one), believers submitting in the exercise of their prophetic gifts (1 Cor 14:32), or the proper order for wives (Eph 5:22ff.; Col 3:18). This latter use appeals to free agents to take a place of submission voluntarily. The term does not suggest slavery or servitude, and certainly never calls for the husband to make his wife submit. If he could, her heart would not be in it. Besides, Paul addressed wives here, not husbands. In this context, the word differs radically from the word which describes the role of children and slaves who are to obey (*hupakoúō*).⁶

In the parallel text to this haustafeln in Eph 5:21 Paul uses the same word in the passive voice ὑποτασσόμενοι to encourage the all Christians to be submissive to one another, ἐν φόβῳ Χριστοῦ, *en phobō Christou, out of respect for Christ*, followed by an

⁵ Zodhiates, *ὑποτάσσω, hupotássō*.

⁶ Melick, *Colossians*, p. 311.

encouragement for wives, in the same manner, to voluntarily subject themselves to their husbands ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ, *ōs tō kuriō*, as in the *Lord*. The key to both the Colossian and Ephesian submission of the wife to the husband is that this should be the attitude all Christians have for all other Christians out of respect they have for Christ. The motivation influence in this submission is not simply house rules, but one's voluntary attitude toward Christ who submitted himself to the cross for all regardless of gender. In the Colossian text Paul adds that this voluntary submission is ὡς ἀνήκεν ἐν κυρίῳ, *ōs anēken en kuriō*, as is fitting in the *Lord*!

Melick draws attention to the fact that this text does not reflect on social position or personal value, but does reflect on social role or function:

Naturally, some express concern about the wife having a seemingly inferior role. Such thinking is unbiblical and a misunderstanding of these passages. First, since Paul used the term of Jesus' attitude who is Lord of all (see 1 Cor 15:28), the term may be appropriately used of one with the highest office. Both wives and husbands must recognize that the term has nothing to do with personal worth and value. Second, Paul described a functional situation which reflects God's plan for families on this earth. He was not speaking ontologically, that is, regarding the essence of personhood. There is a functional subordination, but an essential equality. Differences of roles to accomplish specific functions do not call for the categories of superior and inferior. It is better to speak of "suited for" and "not suited for." Such an economic division is found in God, where the Father, Son, and Spirit each have different operations (functional subordination), but they are all equally divine (essential equality). Thus Christian relationships on earth are patterned after those in God, and both husbands and wives should endeavor to understand their roles in that light.

Furthermore, as the text develops, we see that this attitude of submission and respect between wives to husbands, Children to parents, and slaves to masters follows an attitude that would be contrary to the secular ethical culture of the time, the seemingly *lesser* to the *seemingly greater* in culture, but each is reciprocated by a suitable behavior of the *greater* to the *lesser*! Husbands love your wives. Fathers, do not provoke your children, Masters, behave like the Lord would! Interestingly, Paul does add that the *attitude* of children to fathers and slave to master is one of *obedience*, children obey your fathers, etc. Obedience is from ὑπακούετε, *hupakouete*, which Zodhiates defines as to listen to, to harken to, from *hupó* and *akoúō* to hear.⁷ Zodhiates adds,

A distinction should be made between the meanings of *hupakouō* and *hupotássomai* ... to place oneself under another, to assume a subordinate position. *Hupakouō* is used of the obedience children render to their parents (Eph. 6:1; Col. 3:20). This refers to an obedience which springs from their sense of duty toward, and dependence on parents.⁸

Two aspects of this submissive attitude are suggested by Moo and others; the one the love of the husband, and the other the general nature of life under god and in Christ. Moo writes:

... the submission of the wife to the husband is inevitably and necessarily conditioned significantly by the demand that husbands love their wives, and, in so loving them, will often “submit” to their needs, desires, and wishes (Eph. 5:21). The mutuality implied by the one-flesh union of husband and wife and the husband’s love of the wife must be given full weight, even as the need for wives to recognize the headship of their husbands is upheld ... As the majority of English translations suggest, this last clause does not limit the submission of the wife but explains why

⁷ Zodhiates, ὑπακούω, *hupakouō*.

⁸ Zodhiates, ὑπακούω, *hupakouō*.

it is necessary. She must submit not because it was necessary for the order of society (as the secular household codes usually emphasized) or (only) because it was appropriate to that time and place but because it is the kind of behavior that is “fitting” to those who “live in the sphere of the Lord.” As we noted above, it is this theme of what is required of those who belong to the Lord that undergirds the household behavior Paul requires in this passage. And it is this same theme that suggests that these admonitions are of permanent validity for the people of God.⁹

Col 3:19. Balancing the *instruction* to be submissive to their husbands, Paul *encourages*¹⁰ the husbands to *love*, ἀγαπάτε, their wives. Zodhiates explains that the verb “ἀγαπάω, *agapáō*, means to esteem highly, indicating a direction of the will and finding one’s joy in something or someone. It differs from *philéō* which means to love, which indicating feelings, warm affection, the kind of love expressed by to have love for someone or something, based on sincere appreciation and high regard—‘to love, to regard with affection, loving concern a kiss *philēma*.” Louw and Nida add that ἀγαπάω, *agapáō* means “to have love for someone or something, based on sincere appreciation and high regard—‘to love, to regard with affection, loving concern.”¹¹

Theological dictionaries are replete with extensive discussions of the two basic words for love in the New Testament, *agapáō*, *philéō*. Primarily, all agree that the words have a wide range of applications speaking of love for God, love for one another, love

⁹ Moo, *Colossians*, pp. 301f.

¹⁰ I have deliberately translated the two verbs in the imperative mood, *submit*, ὑποτάσσεσθε, and *love*, ἀγαπάτε, as an *instruction encouraging* the wives and the husband to act in a certain manner. Verbal imperatives have a degree of moods ranging from command to entreaty, the mood of volition. Dana and Mantey write regarding the mood of imperative and entreaty, “Often the imperative does not convey the finality of command, but has the force of urgency or request.”

¹¹ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on Semantic Domains* p. 292.

for enemies, etc. *Agapáō* refers to a cognitive decision in favor of doing good for another, a decision in favor of a benevolent love. *Philéō* refers to an emotional feeling for others as in love between lovers and within the family. Hence, when Paul encourages love for the wife he has in mind a cognitive decision to act toward the wife in a kind benevolent manner.

Bird addresses the relationship between wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters in the same context of mutual Christian respect and behavior:

The obverse charge to the Husbands is to love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Love is the most supreme ingredient in Christian ethics for Paul (see 3: 14). What love in action means is best spelled out by reference to the parallel passage in Ephesians where husbands are commanded to “love your wives as Messiah loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5: 25). In addition, a further admonition upon husbands is to not be harsh with her, which is a clear command against brutish and abusive behavior towards wives. The topic shifts from husbands/ wives to parents/ children. The children of the household are to obey your parents in every respect, and this pertains to all matters since parents, especially fathers and guardians, had legal rights over their children. The justification for this attitude is that it is pleasing in the Lord, which is a key motivation for the Christian life according to Paul (Rom 12: 1– 2; 14: 18; 2 Cor 5: 9; Eph 5: 10; Phil 4: 18; see esp. Col 1: 10), and honoring one’s parents is commanded in the Decalogue (Exod 20: 12; Deut 5: 16; cf. Matt 15: 4– 5; 19: 19). The command applied to fathers, do not antagonize your children, lest they become disheartened, mirrors the relation of husbands/ wives where the call for submission is matched by a subsequent command for husbandly authority not to be abused. In regards to children, this means the specific avoidance of

behavior that rouses anger and demoralizes rather than builds up ... The slave/ master relationship is addressed next in the Colossians household code. Among the Colossian Christians relations between slaves and masters had not always been amicable as the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus shows. Paul affirms not the institution of slavery, which is simply assumed, but how it was to be lived out in Christian community ... The instructions here must be seen in light of 3: 11; the authority of masters over slaves must be situated as part of a wider christological reality of unity in Christ. Unlike 1 Pet 2: 18– 25, the issue here is not about Christian slaves owned by non-Christians, but more probably Christian slaves (Christian sometimes by virtue of group conversion, e.g., Acts 11: 14; 16: 15, 31, 34; 18: 8) within Christian households. Paul calls on slaves to obey in all matters their earthly masters and he makes the point with a number of qualifications. First, they are to serve not only when they are watching, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. The service rendered is not to be like that of a person constantly checking to see if their master is around so effort and work can be feigned at appropriate moments. Instead, it is to be genuine and sincere service.¹²

Dunn's remarks of the relationship of submission and love are well expressed in the context of Christ's love for the Christian.

3:19. Οἱ ἄνδρες, ἀγαπᾶτε τὰς γυναῖκας καὶ μὴ πικραίνεσθε πρὸς αὐτάς. The corresponding responsibility of the husband is to love his wife. The ideal of a husband being tenderly solicitous for his wife was not distinctively Christian ... though how far reality matched the ideal in

¹² Bird, *Colossians*, Kindle Locations 2744-2754.

either case we are not in a position now to say. But again a distinctive Christian note comes through in the use of the verb *agapáō*, which, as elsewhere in the Paulines (Rom. 8:37; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 2:4; 5:2, 25), gains its characteristic emphasis from Christ's self-giving on the cross (see on 1:4 and 3:14).²⁰ Thus *agapáō* plays the role in 3:19 of "in the Lord" in 3:18 and 20 and is itself sufficient to refer the reader back to the traditions of Jesus as the Christ and Lord (2:6-7). This is one of the points in the parallel treatment of Ephesians at which the author "takes off" into a lyrical account of the love of Christ for his church (Eph. 5:25-33). The allusion to Christ as the model of love in action, it is true, did not alter the subordinate role attributed to the wife in 3:18, however much it might have conditioned that role and prevented abuse of the power of the paterfamilias. But it does remain significant that the talk here is not of authority and rights but of obligations and responsibilities (Schrage, "Haustafeln" 15). "It is humility and kindness, not superiority of status ... which ought to dictate the conduct of the baptized" ...¹³

Col 3:20. *Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.* ²¹ *Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.*

As in the case with *wives* and *husbands* the coupling of *children* with *father* is interesting. The instructions are complimentary; the second one, fathers, providing a basis for the behavior of the other, children. The children will learn to be obedient from the example of the fathers. Brutal parenting will inevitably result in rebellious attitudes from the children!

Interestingly, the reaction of the wives should be subjection, or *submission*, ὑποτάσσεσθε, whereas the reaction from the children should be obedience, ὑπακούετε, *hupakouete*, from ὑπακούω

¹³ Dunn, *Colossians*, Kindle Locations 3481-3493.

hupakouō ... *hupó*, under, beneath and *akouō*, to hear, to hearken, obey, hence, to listen carefully and to consequently be obedient.¹⁴

O'Brien discusses the heightened understanding of *obedience* (children) and *submission* (wives):

The injunction to children, like that to slaves, is put rather more strongly than the one to wives. While the latter was expressed in the middle voice (ὑποτάσσομαι, “be subordinate”), suggesting voluntary submission, the admonitions to children and slaves are in the active imperative denoting absolute obedience (cf. Hinson, *RevExp* 70 [1973] 499, 500). The absoluteness of the command is strengthened by the phrase “in all things” (κατὰ πάντα, cf. v 22). Also the verb ὑπακούω (to “obey”) is employed rather than ὑποτάσσομαι (“be subordinate”) which may only sometimes imply obedience. The former term in Paul had special reference to one’s submission to Christ, the gospel and the apostolic teaching (Rom 6:17, 10:16; Phil 2:12; 2 Thess 1:8, 3:14; cf. Matt 8:27; Mark 1:27; 4:41; Luke 8:25; Acts 6:7; Heb 5:9; 11:8; cf. ὑπακοή, “obedience,” Rom 1:5; 5:19; 6:16; 15:18; 16:19, 26; 2 Cor 10:5, 6). The obedience of Christian children to their parents is all of a piece with their submission to Christ as the following words make plain. The unequivocal nature of this admonition to children is reminiscent of the OT. In the Decalogue they are commanded to honor their parents and the promise of long life is attached (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16; note how this is taken up at Eph 6:1–3). The expanded code of Exodus (21:15) ordered the death penalty for any child striking father or mother. In Judaism and in early Christianity the care of aged parents was regarded as a religious duty (1 Tim 5:4), their neglect, behavior worse than that of pagans ... But in antiquity generally the

¹⁴ Zodhiates ὑπακούω *hupakouō*..

emphasis on children's duties toward their parents was widespread, although in non-Christian parallels the demand was for honor rather than obedience (cf. Crouch, *Origin*, 114, for examples).¹⁵

Notice the additional phrase *in everything, for this pleases the Lord* which adds a strong degree of urgency and a theological dimension to the instruction.

By using the present imperative verb, ὑποτάσσεσθε, *hupotassethe*, *obey*, which implies constant, or continuing action, it is not *occasional* obedience that Paul calls for, but *constant* obedience!

Fathers are not to *provoke* ἐρεθίζω, *erethizō*, *to stir to anger, to excite, anger, provoke, irritate*¹⁶, which would incite or stimulate obedient action their children in a negative reactionary attitude. *Inconsistent parenting* can confuse children, leading them to frustration and disobedience.

Col 3:22-25. Slaves and masters.

In this pericope, Paul discusses at some length his instruction to slaves and their masters. Obviously, in a culture in which the relationship between slaves and masters, mutual respect and understanding would be tenuous. However, living in Christ as slaves and masters would be clearly seen and heard by many.

The *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* explains the extent and nature of slavery *circa* the time of Christ in both the gentile and Jewish era.

By Roman times Slavery was so extensive that in the early Christian period one out of every two people was a slave. From at least 3000 bc. captives in war were the primary source of slaves (Gen 14:21; Nm 31:9; Dt 20:14; Jgs 5:30; 1 Sam 4:9; 2 Kgs 5:2; 2 Chr 28:8).

Slaves could be purchased locally from other owners, or from foreign traveling merchants who sold slaves along with cloth, bronzeware, and other goods (Jl 3:4–8). Joseph

¹⁵ O'Brien, *Colossians*, p. 224

¹⁶ Zodhiates, ἐρεθίζω, *erethizō*.

was sold by Midianites and Ishmaelites to an Egyptian (Gn 37:36; 39:1) in this manner. Debt was the basic cause for many families being reduced to slavery; an entire family could be subject to slavery (2 Kgs 4:1; Neh 5:5–8). The law code of Hammurabi stipulated V 2, p 1972 p 1972 a maximum of three years of slavery for the family (Section 117), as opposed to a maximum of six years under Hebrew law (Dt 15:18). Voluntary slavery was widespread as a means of escape from abject poverty and starvation (Lev 25:47, 48). Selling a kidnapped person into slavery, the crime of Joseph's brothers (Gen 37:27, 28), was a capital offense under the law code of Hammurabi (Section 14) and the Mosaic law (Ex 21:11; Dt 24:7). In Greek and especially in Roman times, when the number of slaves increased dramatically, household slaves remained the best treated. Many became servants and confidants; some even established good businesses to their own and their masters' benefit.

Information from Ur, Nuzi, and the Book of Genesis shows that where a wife was childless, the female slave could bear the master's child (Gen 16:2–4). Legally a Hebrew master could agree to marry a young female slave, have his own son marry her, or establish her as a concubine. If subsequently she was discarded, or the agreement was not fulfilled, she would be released from her slavery (Ex 21:7–11). Conquered people were required to perform forced labor for the state (2 Sam 12:31; 1 Kgs 9:15, 22, 23), including the Israelites themselves in Lebanon (1 Kgs 5:13–18). Temple slaves recruited from the same source included Midianites (Nm 31:28, 30, 47) and Gibeonites (Jos 9:23–25), and the practice continued through the reigns of David and Solomon (Ezr 2:58; 8:20). Nehemiah records that foreign slaves helped make repairs on the walls of Jerusalem (Neh 3:26, 31).

The NT attitude toward slavery indicates that the status of the slave was more like that of a servant and that the

institution of slavery generally was declining. There was no strong opposition to slavery from Jesus or the apostles, but an admonition that slaves and servants should serve their masters faithfully and that masters should treat their slaves humanely and fairly (Eph 6:9; Col 4:1; 1 Tm 6:2; Phlm 16). Frequently masters and servants as a household became Christians (Acts 16:31, 32), and worked together to the glory of God (Eph 6:5–8; Col 3:22).¹⁷

Martin, while acknowledging the awful nature of slavery in the word, obviously both in the ancient and modern world, comments on the attitude toward slavery in the early Christian age, observes:

Slavery was endemic in the ancient world. The slaves propped up the social order by their sheer strength of numbers but were regarded (at least theoretically) as no better than “a thing, a living property” (Aristotle, *Politics* 1.2.4–5, 1253b) or a “living tool.” They had no legal rights, and their basic freedoms, notably to work where they chose and to move freely, were denied. True, not all slavery was debasing and painful, since slaves managed households, ran businesses for their masters, and did secretarial duty as well as toiled in the mine and the galley. Yet slavery did impose an essential loss of liberty. There is no hint in the New Testament that slavery is morally wrong. Rather, the lines of evidence assume that the social conventions and their economic support in slavery will remain in force. In place of any summons to revolt (rather, “stay in your station” is Paul’s advice, I Cor. 7:17–24), the exhortation is to be honest and hardworking (cf. Philem. 18 for Onesimus’s failure here, on the usual interpretation: see commentary later), to be encouraged by future recognition on the part of the heavenly master whose service on earth is what really

¹⁷ *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 2, pp. 1971–1972.

counts, and to do one's daily chores as an expression of Christian vocation. Nor are the slave owners left out of the picture. They are told to be fair and scrupulous in their dealings, with the reminder that they too (as believers) live under the eye of God (4:1) and so are subordinate to God.¹⁸

From a careful study of the New Testament writings, notably Roman, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, and Revelation, supported by an extensive study of most of the Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic literature, the attitude toward slavery, military and political oppression, found in Scripture was not one of a military or revolutionary response, but one of faithfulness to God and Christ, and the kingdom of God.

A possible exception would be the historical account of the Maccabean revolution as reflected in I Maccabees, but although this work was treasured by Israel as an expression of faithful resistance, I Maccabees was not perceived as *prophetic instruction to revolution*. Repeated revolutions by the Jews against Babylonian, Seleucid, and Roman oppression had changed little.

The circumstances covered in the book of Revelation reveal no call to revolution, only a call to Christians for faithful resistance to the temptation of Satan, the Beast, who under severe oppression challenged the saints to compromise their faith in God.

An excellent example of early Christian response to Roman persecution ca 2nd century CE is found in a letter by Ignatius of Antioch. It was written during his transport from Antioch to his execution in Rome. His letter *To the Romans* contains Ignatius' most detailed explanation of his views on martyrdom.

Ignatius's letter was one of seven letters credited to Ignatius that are generally accepted as authentic.

The letter to the Romans was written shortly before his martyrdom under the Romans. It is usually dated ca 100 CE to 120 CE. We have no firm evidence for a precise date of Ignatius' martyrdom, but his letter almost immediately became part of the

¹⁸ Martin, *Colossians*, p. 128.

early Christian's treasured literary tradition. Our most reliable evidence regarding Ignatius' journey from Antioch to Rome comes primarily from the fourth-century church historian Eusebius of Caesarea.¹⁹

Ignatius is attributed as providing for all Christians a beautiful understanding of faithfulness to Christ under the direst circumstances, suffering martyrdom or faith in Jesus Christ. For Ignatius, death by martyrdom was the purest example of discipleship of Christ, and the purest form of living peacefully for Christ in the worst cultural, sociological, and persecution possible. Ignatius explains that the appropriate form of response to suffering was a peaceful living for Christ under the most severe conditions.

Scripture presents a world under Satanic powers of persecution, oppression, and slavery with the appropriate attitude Christians should take to such persecution and oppression. John in Rev 2:10, called for Christians in Ephesus, living under the worst kind of persecution, to face death and be:

Be not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation.

Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Likewise, in his letter to the Romans Paul wrote at Rom 8:35 to be willing to die for Christ:

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?*³⁶ *As it is written,*

“For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor

¹⁹ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, Translated by Kirsopp Lake, Lob Classical Library, 1926, pp. 281 f.

depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In this pericope, in a profoundly concise manner, Paul included instruction in his house code addressing the delicate need for an appropriate demeanor between slaves and masters. The relationship between Philemon, a Christian slave owner in Colossae, and his runaway slave Onesimus,²⁰ obviously occasioned the need for Paul's inclusion of the slave-master relationship in our text!

²²Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord. ²³Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, ²⁴knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you are serving the Lord Christ. ²⁵For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. ¹Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Col 3:22. The Greek word δοῦλος, *doúlos*, primarily carried the meaning of a *bonded servant* or *slave*. Zodhiates observes that it primarily carried the sense of *one who is in a permanent relation of servitude to another* ...generally one serving, bound to serve, in bondage.²¹

Rengstorf in an extensive article in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* observes regarding the Greek root meaning:

Hence we have a service which is not a matter of choice for the one who renders it, which he has to perform whether he likes or not, because he is subject as a slave to an alien will, to the will of his owner.²²

²⁰ Cf. Paul's beautiful companion letter to Colossae which we know as *Philemon*.

²¹ Zodhiates, δοῦλος, *doúlos*.

²² Rengstorf, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* vol. 2, p. 261.

Rengstorf continues to show how in a Jewish context the meaning came to be modified slightly to carry the sense:
... of dependence or service which may be forced, *or sometimes voluntary*, but which is always felt to be restrictive, it is the usual linguistic form for the relation of the subject to the king in the despotic monarchies of the ancient Orient. In this respect the usage of the OT and the LXX simply follows the relations common throughout the ancient East.²³

In regard to the use of the word group surrounding δοῦλος, *doulos* in the New Testament and Christian context Rengstorf observes:

It is only with some reservation that one can speak of a secular usage of the word group in the NT. In most cases, if one excludes the passages in which it occurs in religious connexions (sic), it is used improperly, i.e., in figures of speech and comparisons, especially in the parables of Jesus. A strict usage is for the most part found only in the epistles, e.g., where there is reference to the attitude of Christian slaves to Christian or non-Christian masters (Col. 3:22 ff. etc.), or the attitude of Christian masters to their slaves (Col. 4:1; Eph. 6:8 f.), or the position of slaves in the community ... It thus follows that in the NT the δοῦλος is the classical picture of bondage and limitation. This being so, it is the more remarkable that he is never spoken of in the disparaging and contemptuous fashion common in the Greek and Hellenistic world. In this respect there is a clear distinction even between the NT and current Judaism. The judgment on the slave is always material, and it remains so even when it is severe. The δοῦλος is never despised or rejected simply because he is a slave ... The way in which slaves were integrated into the Christian community

²³ Rengstorf, *TNDT*, vol. 2., p. 266.

accords with the manner in which Jesus, and indeed the NT as a whole, thought and spoke of them. If slavery was not rejected from the Christian standpoint, every effort was made to bring it to an end. When a slave had the chance of freedom, he was to seize it joyfully,⁸⁶ though recognising that in the last analysis it made no difference whether he was bond or free (1 C. 7:21). More important, indeed, the only important factor, is the active and passive subordination of slaves also to the rule which fashions the life of the community. This is the rule of love, which is rooted in the fact that all members of the community stand in the same relationship to Christ and are thus united on the same level in Him. It is obvious that this must finally lead to the abolition of slavery amongst Christians.⁸⁸ Later developments necessarily took this direction, especially when Christian ideas began to acquire normative significance for civilisation (sic) generally.²⁴

From what the Apostle Paul wrote in our text, Col 3:22f, as well as in Eph 5:5-9, of this slave-master relationship we see the Christian ethic expressed in *how* the two persons relate to one another in the Christian household

Col 3:22, 23. *22*Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord. The service of the Christian slave must not be superficial, and should be held, as was that of the wife and husband, *with an eye on their relationship with Jesus*. In this text, the slave or bond servant's service is to be ἐν ἀπλότῃ καρδίας φοβούμενοι τὸν κύριον *in sincerity of the heart out of deep respect for the Lord*. Zodhiates explains the full meaning of *sincerity*, ἀπλότης, *haplótēs* ... *not having an ulterior or double motive. Simplicity, purity, sincerity, faithfulness.*²⁵

²⁴ Rengstorf, *TNDT*, vol. 2, p. 270-273.

²⁵ Zodhiates, ἀπλότης, *haplótēs*.

The word *fear* is from the Greek φοβέω, *phobéō* which has a range of meanings ranging from *fear*, to *reverence*, *deep respect*, *awe*, and *honor*.²⁶ Paul's emphases was not simply on fear as *anxiety*, *apprehension*, *dread*, or *horror*, but as *deep respect* for Jesus as the Lord. All Christians, slaves and masters, live their lives *in the Lord*, that is *in the sphere of the Lord*, pleasing to the Lord.

Col 3:23-25. Paul adds the thought that in whatever service they offer they should do so working *heartily, as serving the Lord and not men*,²⁴ *knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you are serving the Lord Christ*.²⁵ *For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality*. The guiding principle of all Christian service, regardless of whether it be to men or masters, should be seen as service to the Lord Christ! Their ultimate reward would be their inheritance in the promises of God to Abraham, the Jews, and the Gentiles. Without elaborating on this, Paul obviously had in mind all of the rewards, and more, that the pagan philosophies could offer. All of these would be found in Christ including eternal or heavenly glory.

In contrast to this Christin inheritance the *wrongdoer*, those who did not respect one another as they respected the Lord, would also receive their *reward for wrongdoing without partiality*.

Col 4:1. *Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven*. Although most translations set Col 4:1 as the beginning of a new paragraph, this is not the case! Col 4:1 merely introduces and closing a new thought! It brings the instruction to slaves and masters to conclusion. The Masters must remember that although in a slave-master relationship they have a heavenly Lord who is master of all!

O'Brien observes that this principle was well known among Jews, Greeks, and the Hellenistic world:

²⁶ Zodiates, φοβέω, *phobéō*.

At the conclusion of the household table the exhortation to slaves is balanced by a brief message to masters (οἱ κύριοι). Probably the Colossian congregation had fewer slaveowners among its converts than slaves. Yet the former had their responsibilities too. If slaves like Onesimus had their duties, then masters like Philemon had reciprocal responsibilities: they must treat their slaves justly and fairly (τὸ δίκαιον καὶ τὴν ἰσότητα τοῖς δούλοις παρέχεσθε). This admonition finds parallels in both Hellenistic and Jewish ethics. On the Greek side these appear as early as Plato ... and Aristotle ... while during the Roman period Seneca was the most ardent advocate of the humane treatment of slaves ... He does not attack the institution of slavery as such but accepts it as part of the existing social order. He feels great pity for slaves, expresses keen censure of the way they are treated and condemns the misuse of slaves for all kinds of contemptible tasks even though he recognizes some slaves are anything but faultless ... Palestinian Judaism accepted the institution of slavery, and slaves were viewed as the property of their masters ... Hellenistic Jewish circles knew and used current Hellenistic appeals to masters to treat their slaves properly (so Ecclesiasticus [*Sirach*, IAF] 4:30, “Be not like a lion in your home, and tyrannous and terrible toward your slaves,” also 7:20, 21; 33:31.²⁷

²⁷ O’Brien, *Colossians*, pp. 231–232.

Chapter 11: Concluding Comments: Col 4:2-18

² Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving; ³ and pray for us also, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison, ⁴ that I may make it clear, as I ought to speak.

⁵ Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. ⁶ Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.

⁷ Tychicus will tell you all about my affairs; he is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸ I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, ⁹ and with him Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of yourselves. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.

¹⁰ Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, receive him), ¹¹ and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. ¹² Epaphras, who is one of yourselves, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always remembering you earnestly in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. ¹³ For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in La-odicea and in Hierapolis. ¹⁴ Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you. ¹⁵ Give my greetings to the brethren at La-odicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. ¹⁶ And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from La-odicea. ¹⁷ And say to Archippus, “See that you fulfil the ministry which you have received in the Lord.”

¹⁸ I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my fetters. Grace be with you.

Colossians closes with the traditional Pauline prayers, mention of shared friends and acquaintances, concluding exhortations, and benediction.

Col 4:2-4. ² *Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving;* ³ *and pray for us also, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison,* ⁴ *that I may make it clear, as I ought to speak.*

Any cursory examination of Paul's epistles will indicate that prayer was a fundamental key to understanding Paul's pastoral relationships with churches of his acquaintance or ministry.

Paul's prayers for his fellow Christians indicate a deep pastoral concern that lies deeper than his profound theological principles entrenched in each of his epistles. They emphasize the heart of one who has come to realize the depth of the mind of Christ in his ministry.

1 Cor 1:4:

⁴ *I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus,* ⁵ *that in every way you were enriched in him with all speech and all knowledge—* ⁶ *even as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you—* ⁷ *so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ;* ⁸ *who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.* ⁹ *God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Another fine example would be 1 Thess 1:2-5:

² *We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers,* ³ *remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.* ⁴ *For we know, brethren beloved by God, that he has chosen you;*

⁵ for our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

One of my favorites is Phil 1:3-11:

³ I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵ thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷ It is right for me to feel thus about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

In the case of his conclusion to the Colossian e[istle Paul indicates a deep concern for the missio dei god has commissioned him to, *that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ.* He recognizes the difficulty of making this mystery known to unbelievers, and his own personal weakness, but in this stresses the point that whatever success he might have it will be as a result of prayer and God's power.

Col 4:5-6: *Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. ⁶ Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.* Paul closes by stressing in clear terms the importance of leading a wise life before the Colossian neighbors. We notice here a similar comment he had made in his Ephesians epistle at Eph 5:15ff:

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, ²⁰ always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.

The Greek words lying behind the English translation *making the most of the time* ἐξαγοραζόμενοι τὸν καιρὸν, *exagoradzomenoi ton kairon* are the same in Eph 5:15 and Col 4:5, only in slightly different order which makes no difference in the translation. A literal translation would be *buying up the time as a valuable commodity*, hence, *making the most of the time!* Paul knew that every move made by Christians in Colossae would “be under close observation” by the pagans. In his Ephesian thought he enlarged this into not being engaged in pagan orgy’s and celebrations. Their singing in worship should not be the result of drunkenness, but the overflowing of a spirit filled life. The parallels between Eph 5:15-19 and Col 3:16 and Col 4:5, 6 have been recognized by most good New Testament scholars.¹

Col 4:7-9. *Tychicus will tell you all about my affairs; he is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸ I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, ⁹ and with him Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of yourselves. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.*

John Gillman in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* says of Tychicus;

¹ Cf. the discussion of this in this commentary at Col 3:16ff, and my commentary on Ephesians at Eph 5:19ff.

Tychicus. A Christian from Asia Minor who traveled with Paul on his third missionary journey (Acts 20:4) and who was later sent to the Colossians (Col 4:7–9) and Ephesians (Eph 6:21–22). In the context of the third missionary journey, Tychicus is mentioned with Trophimus, along with several others who accompanied Paul as he returned from Corinth to Macedonia (Acts 20:4). From there, Tychicus and the others went ahead and waited for Paul to catch up with them at Troas, where Paul then spent seven days (20:6). Some commentators have suggested that Tychicus was delegated by one or more of the churches to carry the collection from them to Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:3–4) (Lightfoot 1879: 233–34; Bruce *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians* NICNT, 176). However, while Acts relates that Trophimus went on with Paul to Jerusalem (cf. 21:6), it is not clear whether Tychicus did also.²

Tychicus is described by Paul in his conclusion as “a beloved brother, faithful minister, and fellow servant in the Lord”, Col 4:7.

Paul was sending Tychicus to Colossae with the Colossian letter and to bring the Christians there up to date on Paul’s ministry as a prisoner presumably in Rome, and to encourage the Colossians. Accompanying Tychicus was one, Onesimus, a runaway slave from Colossae and Philemon who had been converted by Paul while in prison, and who was returning home to Philemon with Tychicus to make restitution for some harm he had caused Philemon, a citizen of Colossae. The details of the Onesimus and Philemon sage are covered in Paul’s beautiful letter to Philemon, a prized epistle in our Christian canon, and the fourth epistle in the four Pauline prison epistle grouping. Note that Paul refers to Onesimus as a beloved brother. In Colossae Paul made this statement regarding Onesimus, *perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back for ever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and*

² Gillman, J. “Tychicus”, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, p. 682

in the Lord. ¹⁷ *So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me,* Phil vs 15-17. In this statement we learn several touching lessons, i) Paul's feelings for Onesimus, ii) How Paul expected Philemon and the Colossian church to receive Onesimus, and iii) the impact that this act of Christian brotherhood and forgiveness would have on Philemon's pagan neighbors.

Col 4:10-14. *Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, receive him),* ¹¹ *and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.* ¹² *Epaphras, who is one of yourselves, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always remembering you earnestly in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.* ¹³ *For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in La-odicea and in Hierapolis.* ¹⁴ *Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you.*

In this long paragraph Paul mentions fellow Christians that were with him in Rome who would be known by the Colossians.

O'Brien has an excellent extensive discussion of this long greeting which for the sake of space I have abbreviated as follows:

Greetings are now sent to the Colossian congregation by six of Paul's companions who are with him at the time of writing: three are of Jewish birth (Aristarchus, Mark and Jesus Justus) and three of Gentile birth (Epaphras, Luke and Demas). This list of greetings is surprisingly long and should be compared with Romans 16, although in the latter passage the greetings are, in the main, mostly from Paul to various individuals at Rome ... Aristarchus (the name was a common one ... is the first-mentioned associate who passes on his greetings to the Colossians ... Aristarchus appears in the narrative of Acts as a native of Thessalonica and a traveling companion of Paul (Acts 19:29; 20:4). His

Christian origins may be traced back to Paul's ministry in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–9). He was with the apostle at Ephesus and exposed to danger in the riot in the theater (19:29). Later he went to Jerusalem with Paul as one of the two delegates from the church at Thessalonica (20:4) and accompanied Paul and Luke when they sailed from Caesarea to Rome (27:2). Although Acts does not state explicitly that he journeyed with Paul all the way to Rome it is probable that he did ... and then returned home to Thessalonica. Certainly if Colossians was written from Rome (see Introduction xlix–liv) then the reference to Aristarchus here could be taken to mean he remained with Paul on the journey and after reaching Rome. He is described as ὁ συναιχμάλωτός μου, which means literally “my fellow-prisoner of war,” and perhaps we are to understand he was actually in prison with Paul (at Phlm 23 Epaphras receives this designation although Aristarchus is mentioned in the same sentence ... It has been suggested that Aristarchus may have shared Paul's captivity voluntarily ... The word could also be used in a figurative sense meaning “a prisoner of Christ,” that is, one who has been taken captive by Christ to become a Christian and a fellow-worker of Paul ...

Mark, the cousin of Barnabas (ὁ ἀνεπιός means “cousin,” not “nephew” or “sister's son” as in kjv) joins Aristarchus in sending greetings. The name no doubt refers to John Mark, who was from Jerusalem (Acts 12:12, 25) and who traveled with Paul and Barnabus (sic) to Cyprus on the first missionary journey. When they arrived in Perga on the mainland of Asia, Mark defected and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). Paul, judging this to be a weakness in Mark, refused to take him along with them again on the next journey. Barnabas and Paul had a sharp disagreement over the issue which resulted in the former taking his

younger cousin back to Cyprus while Paul set off with Silas (Acts 15:36–41). Under the careful guidance of Barnabas, Mark redeemed his reputation so that here he and the apostle to the Gentiles are again on friendly terms, for Mark is with Paul in his imprisonment. He is mentioned again at Philemon 24 as Paul’s “fellow-worker” (συνεργός) while at 2 Timothy 4:11, in a clear display of reconciliation, he is unhesitatingly commended as a faithful Christian worker. Elsewhere Mark appears as Peter’s companion (1 Pet 5:13; note the tradition that Mark was Peter’s attendant and the author of the second Gospel, the substance of which is Peter’s preaching: Eusebius, H.E. 3. 39).

The third person to send his greetings was Jesus, who is surnamed Justus. He is quite unknown to us apart from this reference to him as a Jewish Christian who was with Paul ...

These three men are said to be the only Jewish Christians who have remained faithful fellow-workers of Paul for the kingdom of God ... At any rate the apostle is grateful for their faithful presence: they are “fellow-workers for the kingdom of God” (συνεργοὶ εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ) who have proved to be a comfort (παρηγορία) to him. συνεργοί are “helpers” or “fellow-workers”

Epaphras also sends a special greeting to the congregation. The apostle has already mentioned him earlier in the letter as the one from whom the Colossians had learned the truth of the gospel (1:7). As a native of Colossae (ὁ ἐξ ὑμῶν) he had been the evangelist in his home town, as well as at Laodicea and Hierapolis, apparently having been sent there by Paul (see on 1:7). The latter calls Epaphras “a slave of Christ Jesus” (δοῦλος Χριστοῦ [Ἰησοῦ]), a term which he elsewhere applies only to himself (Rom 1:1) and to Timothy (Phil 1:1). Epaphras is given this title of honor which speaks of him as an obedient slave of his Lord in the

same service as Paul (at 1:7 he is called σύνδουλος, “a fellow-servant,” a term also applied to Tychicus, 4:7) ... Epaphras was intimately acquainted with the affairs of the congregation. He, perhaps as no other, knew of the destructive nature of the false teaching and responded in regular, urgent intercession ... From the conjunction of the three names (Hierapolis, Laodicea, and Colossae, IAF) it is probable that Epaphras was the evangelist of all three congregations. He is commended by Paul to all three for his future ministry in the Lycus valley ... We know little about the character of the churches in Hierapolis and Laodicea ... Apparently there were well-established churches in both cities and Epaphras had, under God, substantially contributed to their life and growth ...

[Paul adds that] Luke and Demas add their greetings. Both names recur in Philemon 24 as Paul’s fellow-workers and at 2 Timothy 4:10, 11. Only here is Luke ... called “the beloved physician” (ὁ ἰατρὸς ὁ ἀγαπητός) ... Luke’s profession was an unusual one so Paul mentions it, yet without further emphasis ... Little is known about Demas. In 2 Timothy 4:10 he is mentioned: “For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me.” This statement seems to suggest that some temporal interest took Paul’s fellow-worker (Phlm 24) off to Thessalonica at a time when the apostle would have valued his continued presence

...

Col 4:15-17. *Give my greetings to the brethren at La-odicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.* ¹⁶ *And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from La-odicea.* ¹⁷ *And say to Archippus, “See that you fulfil the ministry which you have received in the Lord.”*

Paul now asks the Colossians to convey his greetings to their fellow-Christians at Laodicea, which lay ten miles to the west. We are not certain why Paul included this greeting to the Laodicean church other than to include them in the fellowship of Colossae

and other churches in the region. We know from studies of the early church that the churches copied the Pauline epistles and circulated them to other churches, cf 2 Pet 3:15, 16. It has also been suggested Paul simply wished to cement relations between the two churches in this way.

Archippus was a Christian greeted in the salutation of the two letters, Colossians and Philemon. Paul refers to him as a “fellow soldier” at Philemon 2, possibly that Archippus was involved in some ministry of the house church at Colossae. At Col 4:17 Paul urged Archippus to fulfill the “ministry” he had received in the Lord. Since Archippus is mentioned immediately after Philemon and Apphia in Philemon 2, he is usually taken to have been a member of Philemon’s household, perhaps a close relative of Philemon and Apphia, such as a son or a brother.³

Col 4:18. *I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my fetters. Grace be with you.* Regarding Paul’s closing greeting Moo observes that using a scribe or amanuensis to write or script a letter or document then signing the document with the author’s own signature sign was the common practice of the Graeco-Roman scholars and leaders of the day, From what Paul writes it was a practice he used in all his letters.

Paul concludes his letter to the Colossians with (1) an apostolic “signature”; (2) a final prayer request; and (3) a grace wish. All three are found in the closing sections of Paul’s letters. Letters in the ancient world were often dictated to a trained scribe who could form letters that were small (to conserve valuable papyrus) and neat. The practice of adding a brief note in the author’s own hand to authenticate the letter is known from the Greco-Roman world generally and is done by Paul also in 1 Corinthians (16:21), Galatians (6:11), and 2 Thessalonians (3:17) (Philemon also has a signature [v. 19], but it functions slightly differently.) In the latter text, Paul even claims that

³ Gillman, “Archippus”, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 368.

it is “the distinguishing mark in all my letters,” so perhaps he typically took stylus in hand even when he did not explicitly indicate it.

Paul’s very brief prayer request — remember my chains — is quite poignant. Some think that Paul’s point is to “hold up his manacled wrists to impress the readers with his authority as a suffering apostle.” But it is more likely that Paul wants his readers to “bring to remembrance” his “chains” as a stimulus to pray for him. The verb “remember” has this sense elsewhere in Paul (1 Thess. 1:3) and in Hebrews (13:7; in 13:3, though with a different Greek verb), and Paul frequently uses the noun “remembrance” (*mneia*) to refer to prayer (Rom. 1:9; Eph. 1:16; Phil. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:3; Phlm. 4).⁴

I close this commentary with Paul’s own words:

Grace be with you!

⁴ Moo, *Colossians* pp. 352-354).

Philemon

Introduction

LIGHTFOOT VOICES THE OPINION of many who delight in this brief letter: “As an expression of simple dignity, of refined courtesy, of large sympathy, and of warm personal affection, the Epistle to Philemon stands unrivalled.” Knox lauds it as “one of the most charming letters ever written.” Guthrie says that it “breathes the great-hearted tenderness of the apostle,” and Jewett calls it “one of the most subtle letters in world history, an expression of Paul’s ambassadorial style.”⁴¹

Philemon is a short personal letter from Paul who was in prison, most likely in Rome, to his dear friend and church leader in Colossae, Philemon. In all probability it was received by Philemon with the letter to the Colossians.

The letter to Philemon is set in both the religious and socio-political setting of Colossians and should be read in conjunction with Colossians. We will analyze Philemon noting its cultural, social, political, and religious background, and Paul’s purpose of writing this letter.

The primary objective of this study will be to discuss the unique nature of this short but beautiful epistle, noting the manner in which Paul made his theological argument in the context of the theological needs of Philemon, the church in Colossae, and Philemon’s socio-political pagan society. The reader will be able to identify the unique theology of the epistle and make application of this to contemporary situations faced by Christians in their sociological and community contexts and their relationship with other Christians, especially in the local congregation.

Content of the letter

Paul’s purpose in writing this letter to Philemon was to help a new Christian convert and run-away slave, Onesimus, receive forgiveness from his master, Philemon, a citizen of Colossae and a

¹ Garland, *Colossians, Philemon*, “Introduction to Philemon”, kindle location, 6940.

faithful member of the church that met in his house. In addition, Paul discussed several salient Christian principles in establishing and developing Christian relationships between individuals and in a community of believers such as a local congregation.

Furthermore, and equally as significant, was Paul instruction to Philemon as to how Philemon should respond to Onesimus in a brotherly Christian manner.

The Author

The Apostle Paul in association with his young co-worker, Timothy. We are adopting the view that the Apostle Paul was the author of all four of what are commonly known as the Prison Epistles. We are aware that there are those scholars who question the Pauline authorship of Ephesians and Colossians, but as we have commented elsewhere in the study of the Pauline Epistles, we are not convinced that the arguments in favor of rejecting Pauline Epistles is convincing.²

Date

Possibly ca 60-62 CE, at the same time as Paul's letter to the Colossians. It was delivered to Philemon with the Colossian letter by Tychicus, Paul's scribe and co-worker.

Recipients

Philemon, a church leader in Colossae, and the church meeting in Philemon's house. The letter was also intended to be read to the church in Colossae, and possibly even in Laodicea since the Colossian letter was also intended to be read in Laodicea, cf. Col 4:13ff.

² For detailed discussion of the authorship of Colossae cf. Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians*, pp. 98ff; N. T. Wright, *Colossians*, pp. 31ff; Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians*, pp 114ff; F. F. Bruce, *Colossians*, pp 28ff; Douglas J. Moo, *Colossians*, pp. 28ff. 2008; David Garland, *Colossians*; Clinton Arnold, *Ephesians*, G. K. Beale, *Colossians*.

Occasion

Onesimus, a run-away Gentile slave from Philemon in Colossae, had found his way to Rome and in some manner had met the Apostle Paul. We will note below that there is a question in the mind of some as to whether the Prison Epistles were possibly written from Ephesus. We will adopt the more traditional source of written from Rome. Paul had converted Onesimus to Christ and in doing so had learned that Onesimus had possibly stolen something from Philemon when he ran away from Philemon. Paul explained to Onesimus that the Christian life involved repentance, and where possibly recompense or repayment. In order to assist Onesimus return to Colossae and Philemon Paul wrote this letter to Philemon encouraging Philemon to forgive Onesimus, a slave and Gentile, receiving him back no longer as a slave, but as a brother in Christ, thus setting an example of Christian love and forgiveness, and in building and maintaining Christian relationships.

There are two possible routes for Onesimus to have taken on his return journey from Rome to Colossae. We have no specifics but can make a conjecture or two!

The first would be similar to a reverse trip to the one Paul had made to Rome described carefully and accurately by Luke at Acts 27 and 28. What we can learn from Luke's account, this was a normal oft travelled route, but one filled with hazards.

This reverse trip Onesimus could have taken would have left from Rome by land south to Puteoli, from by sea to Rhegium at the southern point of Italy, then again by sea to Syracuse on Sicily, then on to Malta, then eastward to Crete and finally to Cnidus on the coast of Asia, with a shorter land trip north to Colossae. Approximately 1,000 miles. A long and dangerous journey, but from what we learn from others in the New Testament who travelled to and from Rome (Aquila and Priscilla, *et al*), not an uncommon journey!

An alternate journey could have been East from Rome to Brundisium on the South East coast of Italy, across the Adriatic Sea toward Dyrrachium in Macedonia, East along the Egnatian Highway, through Thessalonica/Philippi, Samothrace, and

Neapolis, then South across the Aegean Sea toward Troas on the coast of Asia, then South by road to Ephesus and Colossae.

Whichever route was taken it would have been approximately 900 - 1,000 hazardous miles especially for a run-away slave.

In light of the length and danger of the Rome to Colossae journey, some scholars prefer Ephesus as the place of Paul's imprisonment, arguing that the journey from Rome to Colossae was extreme, and unlikely. Their view is that the journey from Ephesus to Colossae was more likely and credible. That may be true, but we have record that several people made the lengthy journey from Ephesus to Rome and the reverse journey from Rome to Ephesus, Corinth, etc.

Of interest at this point are Aquilla and Priscilla. We read of them in the *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*:

Aquila was a Jew and a native of Pontus in Asia Minor. He had been expelled from Rome by the AD 49 edict of Claudius (Acts 18:2). Suetonius records that the emperor "banished from Rome all the Jews, who were continually making disturbances at the instigation of one Chrestus." *From Rome, Aquila and Priscilla went to Corinth, where Paul (on his second missionary journey) met them. There they lived together and worked at the same trade of making tents. After such close association with Paul, they were able to instruct even the learned Apollos, a Jewish teacher who then became a Christian (Acts 18:24–28). Both were Paul's loyal friends and trusted co-workers (Rom 16:3, 4). When he left Corinth they accompanied him and remained at Ephesus when he returned to Syria (Acts 18:18, 19). When Paul wrote the first letter to Corinth they were still at Ephesus, where their home was used as a place for Christians to gather (1 Cor 16:19). Since the decree of Claudius was temporary, Priscilla and Aquila were again in Rome when Paul wrote to the Roman Christians (Rom*

16:3). When the second letter to Timothy was written, they were again in Ephesus (2 Tm 4:19).³

Also noteworthy, is the case of Onesiphorus who Paul himself records as having made such a journey. Note the comment by F. M. Gillman:

Onesiphorus is referred to in 2 Tim 1:16–18 as one who had rendered much service at Ephesus and who later had eagerly searched for and found Paul in his captivity in Rome. This Ephesian, not being “ashamed of [Paul’s] chains” (1:16), had often “refreshed” him (1:16).⁴

Note Paul’s own comment at 2 Tim 1:16f regarding Onesiphorus:

May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me; he was not ashamed of my chains,¹⁷ but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me eagerly and found me—¹⁸ may the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that Day—and you well know all the service he rendered at Ephesus.

My point here is that if Onesiphorus made such a dangerous journey and found Paul in Rome. Surely Onesimus, who could have known of Paul through Philemon, could also have made such a journey, if not necessarily to find Paul, but to hide in the obscurity of a city in which half the population were slaves.

The Church in Colossae

We know little about the church in Colossae other than what we read in Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians, and this letter to Philemon. It was most likely a small house church that met in Philemon’s house. Jerome Murphey-O’Connor has succinctly demonstrated that most churches in the 1st and 2nd centuries were

³ Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J., “Priscilla and Aquila”, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 2, p. 1765. Some italics emphases IAF.

⁴ Gillman, F. M. “Onesiphorus”, D. N. Freedman (Ed.), *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5, p. 22.

small house churches, and that few other than one or two early churches were able to meet in school halls or such facilities⁵

We encounter the following Christians in Paul's epistles to the Colossians and Philemon who were from Colossae, or involved in the ministry to the Colossians: Philemon, a leader in the church in Colossae, a brother in Christ, and close friend of Paul's; Apphia, a sister in Christ, and possibly Philemon's wife; Archippus⁶, who was possibly a minister in Colossae who Paul identified as a "fellow soldier". Aristarchus was with Paul in Rome, and likewise from Colossae, is mentioned on Philemon. Epaphras, whom Paul identified as having been a special servant in Colossae, cf Col 4:12, was also with Paul in Rome. Finally, we meet Onesimus, the lead character in *Philemon*. He was a runaway slave from Colossae and Philemon's house.

As mentioned above, the Colossian church most likely met in Philemon's house.

The Theology and Emphasis of Philemon

This is a beautiful and serious gem of an epistle. In Philemon Paul underscored the point that the gospel of Christ reconciles all people, not only to God, but also to one another, even Jews to Gentiles, and slaves to masters. All Christians in Christ, regardless of ethnic and social status, are related and united to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, divinely called children of God. They should maintain healthy "brotherly" relations regardless of racial, social, economic, or political persuasions.

⁵ Murphy-O'Connor, Jerome, *Keys to First Corinthians: Revisiting the Major Issues* Kindle Edition.

⁶ Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, observes regarding Archippus, "The third person is Archippus. Because of the family context, many assume he was the son of Philemon and Apphia. Paul called him a "fellow soldier," applying a military metaphor to this Christian brother. He seldom referred to Christians at large by that designation, cf. Col 4:17". There are several other possibilities regarding Archippus mentioned by scholars, but these are more speculation than firm evidence.

Notes on Slavery in the Philemon Epistle and the New Testament

Under no excuse or sense should slavery as experienced in Africa and the Western world over the last three centuries be excused, covered over, or ignored. It was clearly sinful and should be condemned, as should all racial and ethnic hatred and injustice today be condemned. But we should note that we are exploring the practice of slavery in ancient times.

Nevertheless, even cruel and inhuman practices in slavery in ancient times was not condoned by either the Jews or the early Christians, to which both the Old and New Testaments testify.

Slavery was a common practice in ancient times, often practiced abusively in extreme control situations as of a nation defeated in war, or the underprivileged due to economic crises.

However, slavery was also seen under certain circumstances in a positive manner as a practice for good of those who were underprivileged and needed economic help. Under Sumerian slavery laws slaves had legal rights, could borrow money and engage in business.

Dandamayev in the *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* observes:

Slavery is the institution whereby one person can hold ownership rights over another. In the biblical world, this institution took on forms quite unlike the New World slavery practiced in the West particularly in the 18th and 19th century. ⁷

Grant Osborne and others record in the *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*:

In Greek and especially in Roman times, when the number of slaves increased dramatically, household slaves remained the best treated. Many became servants and confidants; some even established good businesses to their own and their masters' benefit.

⁷ Freedman, D. N. (Ed.). (1992). "Slavery", *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, p. 58.

Information from Ur, Nuzi, and the Book of Genesis shows that where a wife was childless, the female slave could bear the master's child (Gn 16:2–4). Legally a Hebrew master could agree to marry a young female slave, have his own son marry her, or establish her as a concubine. If subsequently she was discarded, or the agreement was not fulfilled, she would be released from her slavery (Ex 21:7–11). Conquered people were required to perform forced labor for the state (2 Sm 12:31; 1 Kgs 9:15, 22, 23), including the Israelites themselves in Lebanon (1 Kgs 5:13–18). Temple slaves recruited from the same source included Midianites (Nm 31:28, 30, 47) and Gibeonites (Jos 9:23–25), and the practice continued through the reigns of David and Solomon (Ezr 2:58; 8:20). Nehemiah records that foreign slaves helped make repairs on the walls of Jerusalem (Neh 3:26, 31).⁸

In the Old Testament, God set strict laws and conditions for slavery with the provision of freedom according to laws of the Jubilee schedule when land would be returned to its original owners, debts were forgiven, and slaves set free.⁹

Slavery is discussed in the New Testament, but it is neither condoned nor overlooked. The teachings of the New Testament are replete with instructions to Christians on how to respect, treat, and include all people, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, into the church, the body of Christ as persons of equal value and

⁸ Grant Osborn, *et al*, "Slave, Slavery", *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 2, p. 1972. Cf. also A.G. Barrios, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*; R.H. Barrow, *Slavery in the Roman Empire*; W.W. Buckland, *The Roman Law of Slavery*; R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, pp 80–90; M.I. Finley (ed), *Slavery in Classical Antiquity*; I. Mendelsohn, *Slavery in the Ancient Near East*; W.L. Westermaann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity*; T. Wiedemann, *Greek and Roman Slavery*.

⁹ Cf Exodus 21:1-11, 20-21, 26-27, 32; Exodus 22:1-3; Exodus 23:12; Leviticus 19:20-22; Leviticus 25:39-55; Deuteronomy 5:14, 15; Deuteronomy 15:12-18; Deuteronomy 21:10-14; Deuteronomy 23:15-16; Deuteronomy 24:7

importance. The teachings of the church, guided by the codes of the Old Testament and the New Covenant introduced by Jesus and the apostolic leadership, set out clear principles for the equal treatment of peoples, slaves included. This principle will be clearly demonstrated in Paul's instruction to philemon in Colossae.

Richard R. Melick, Jr, and several commentators have addressed this topic well and are a good reference for additional study.¹⁰

Christianity was founded in an age when Gentiles, notably Romans, controlled the "civilized" world. To openly oppose slavery in revolt would not have negated the practice. Christianity by being founded in an age of slavery established the fact that the Gospel of Christ and the church could flourish under any political or cultural condition. Christians were encouraged to live faithfully to their God, even under slave conditions, to set an example to all regarding how to live as a Christian under all conditions, and even to incorporate slave owners and slaves in the one body of Christ.

Jesus as reflected in the gospels addressed this principle and we see it carried out in the churches in Asia in the seven churches during the close of the first century CE. Christians were encouraged to live peaceably under all political conditions. Aggressive revolution was not an option in winning the battle for Christ! Being willing to suffer and die for Christ in an example of the higher values of the Kingdom of Christ is clearly seen in several of the New Testament Epistles, and notably so in the Book of Revelation. Cf *Conquering With Christ*, my commentary on Revelation.

God and Jesus decided to take the high road of establishing the fact that in Christ and his death and resurrection God had conquered the powers of Satan, evil, and slavery, and that

¹⁰ Melick, Richard R. Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1991, pp. 344ff. Cf also Michael F. Bird, *Colossians and Philemon*, Cambridge, England: The Lutterworth Press, 2009, Kindle locations, 3025ff; David Garland, *Colossians/Philemon*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1998, Kindle location 7032ff.

Christians in Christ could likewise conquer the evil powers of the world. Note Rom 8:31 ff:

What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; ³⁴ who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, "For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Eventually after three centuries of Christian faithfulness under the worst conditions of oppression, Christianity won out and even Rome under Emperor Constantine became a "Christian" world, cf the Edict of Milan, CE 313.¹¹ Attitudes toward slavery began to change.

Paul, Jesus, the *Torah*, and the New Testament do not directly engage the harsh and sociological sinful issue of slavery other than to address how God's people should relate to others in their world! Paul neither condemned it, nor ignored it! His purpose was to stress the Christian response to the sociological sins of the time and explain how Christians should relate to all men, regardless of their racial, social or political standing. One merely needs to note Paul's teachings in Eph 5 and 6, and Col 3 and 4, to follow Paul in this approach.

Without question, Christians should condemn and address all social injustices such as slavery, racism, and genocide, in any and every form. But this will not be the purpose of this commentary. That challenge is the responsibility of every Christian, preacher,

¹¹ For those interested in pursuing the Biblical view on slavery cf. the articles on slavery in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* and the *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*.

church leader, and teacher, in their own contemporary culture and socioreligious context.

This commentary will pursue the *theological principles* encountered in Paul's Epistle to Philemon and Colossae, and to encourage Christians to inculcate them into their daily lives, especially in their social, and ethnic behavior..

As discussed above, the New Testament neither condones nor condemns slavery, but does set principles for the equal treatment of all peoples, including slaves. Christianity was founded in an age when Gentiles, notably Romans, controlled the "civilized" world. To openly oppose slavery in revolt would not remove the practice.

Christianity, by being founded in an age of notable political and a cultural inequality which included slavery *established the principle and fact that the Gospel of Christ and the Church of Christ could flourish under any political or cultural condition.* Christians were encouraged to live faithfully to their God, even under slave conditions, to set an example to all regarding how to live as a Christian under all conditions, and even to incorporate slave owners and slaves on the one body of Christ. Jesus, in the gospels, addressed this principle, and we see it carried out in churches spreading throughout the world during the close of the first century CE.

Paul in his epistles discussed how Christians in the family of God, as well as in the nuclear family, should behave toward one another. Note especially Col 3:18-4:1 and Eph 6:1-9:

¹ *Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.* ² *"Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise),* ³ *"that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth."* ⁴ *Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.*

⁵ *Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ;* ⁶ *not in the way of eye-service, as men-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart,* ⁷ *rendering service with a good will as to the Lord*

and not to men, ⁸ knowing that whatever good any one does, he will receive the same again from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. ⁹ Masters, do the same to them, and forbear threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

God and Jesus decided to take the high road of establishing the fact and principles that through and in Christ and his death and resurrection *Christians could conquer all evil in Christ.* Note Rom 8:31 ff:

What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; ³⁴ who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

“For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Eventually, after three centuries of Christian faithfulness under the worst conditions of oppression, Christianity won out and even Rome under Emperor Constantine became a “Christian” world, cf the Edict of Milan, CE 313.

Commentary of Philemon

Praescript and Salutation

Phm 1-3

¹*Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,*

To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, ²and the church in your house:

³*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul, the prisoner, and Timothy

It is assumed by most that the author of this beautiful little letter is Paul, the apostle, the same Paul who wrote the other three Prison Epistles, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. The authorship is discussed in reasonable detail in my commentaries to the Ephesians and the Philippians, as well as above in the Colossian section.

Here Paul adds he interesting comment, he is *a prisoner for Jesus Christ*. O'Brian observes in addition to introducing himself by the name Paul, which Philemon and all in his house would recognize, he adds a specific intentional thought :

While Paul (on the name see Col 1:1) elsewhere commences his letters with the designations “a slave of Christ Jesus” (Rom 1:1; cf. Phil 1:1; Tit 1:1) and “called to be an apostle” (Rom 1:1; cf. 1 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:1, 2) or “an apostle of Christ Jesus” (2 Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Tim 1:1; 2 Tim 1:1), in Philemon 1 he calls himself δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ, “*a prisoner of Christ Jesus.*” This unusual expression was corrected in the later manuscript tradition to bring it into line with the customary Pauline openings, but this text is certainly original (note vv 9 and 13 where the thought is repeated), δέσμιος (“prisoner,” also Eph 3:1; 4:1; 2 Tim 1:8; Philem 9, as well as δέσμιος, “bond,” “fetter,” at

Phil 1:7, 13, 14, 17; Col 4:18; 2 Tim 2:9) is best understood of a literal imprisonment (so Kittel, TDNT 2, 43, asserts: “*there can be no doubt that the actual imprisonment of Paul everywhere underlies the usage [of these references]”*; see also ... Martin NCB, 158 ... from which Paul hopes soon to be released (v 22), rather than a metaphorical bondage (E. R. Goodenough, “Paul and Onesimus,” HTR 22 [1929] 181–83) or a religious imprisonment (Reitzenstein sought to explain the meaning from parallels drawn from the mystery religions in which the devotee in the temple is “detained” by his god; for a critique see Lohse, 189). So at the outset reference is made to the apostle’s situation: Paul is “in prison for the gospel” (ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, v 13; the genitive Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ in the expression “prisoner of Christ Jesus” is best understood, with most commentators, *to signify Paul has been imprisoned “for Christ’s sake”*; von Soden, 73, adds p 272 that the genitive shows Christ is the owner of the prisoner and the cause of his imprisonment). The authoritative title of “apostle” is dropped, not because Paul has suddenly ceased to be an apostle, but because he has no intention of appealing to his apostolic authority. He desires to entreat Philemon (vv 8, 9) rather than command, and substitutes for the term “apostle” a “designation which would touch his friend’s heart” (Lightfoot, 331, cf. Caird, 218; the reference to Paul’s bonds is not to stress the apostle’s authority as so many continental scholars argue).¹

Dunn mentions another unique characteristic of Paul’s epistle to Philemon:

The first obvious difference from Paul’s church letters is the self-description appended to the name. Elsewhere, from Galatians on, it was Paul’s almost unvarying practice

¹ O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, pp. 271–272.

to “pull rank” by stressing his apostleship (see again on Col. 1:1). The same is true, somewhat surprisingly, in the personal letters which constitute the Pastorals (a sign that Paul’s apostolic authority was being evoked to back up Timothy and Titus). The only other exception among the post-Thessalonian correspondence is Philippians—the most uncomplicatedly friendly of all the churches to which Paul wrote. Here, however, wholly unusually, Paul introduces himself simply as “prisoner of Christ Jesus” (so also v. 9; Eph. 3:1; 4:1; 2 Tim. 1:8). Almost certainly Paul had in mind his current physical imprisonment (as most agree; see, e.g., Dibelius 102; Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* 158; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* 271 with bibliography; hence RSV’s “for Christ Jesus” and GNB’s “for the sake of Christ Jesus”), not the otherwise plausibly Pauline idea that Christ had taken him prisoner (but cf. 2 Cor. 2:14; Stuhlmacher 29–30). He mentions his imprisonment at once since he evidently wishes to introduce a theme on which he will play several times in the letter, no doubt because of its emotive and persuasive power (vv. 9, 10, 13, 23; see also on Col. 4:18).²

Paul includes Timothy as co-greeter in the letter. Including Timothy adds an interesting thought! Timothy, like Onesimus, was a “son” to Paul by his having taught both Timothy and Onesimus and converted them to Christ and *into the Christian family of God*. We will notice later at vs 10 that Paul refers to Onesimus as my child using the Greek term τέκνον from “τέκνον, τέκνον ... from tíktō ... to bring forth, bear children.”³ This certainly implies a loving filial parental relationship of endearment stressing Paul’s relationship with Timothy as an analogy to his new relationship with Onesimus, a wayward runaway slave.

Dunn Observes:

² Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 310-311.

³ Zodhiates, τέκνον, τέκνον.

As in Colossians, Paul adds the name of "Timothy, the brother" as coauthor (see on Col. 1:1). This is more noteworthy here since Philemon is such a personal letter. Why is Timothy named? Most likely because he was such a close intimate of Paul and therefore fully privy to and supportive of Paul's position in the delicate affairs which form the main subject of the letter; quite possibly he had also come to know Philemon at the time of the latter's conversion through Paul (v. 19), most likely in Ephesus (cf. Acts 19:22). Does the appearance of his name here, in such close parallel with Col. 1:1, throw any more light on the relation between the two letters? Certainly it must strengthen the case for seeing the two letters as written at the same time and in the same circumstances (see pp. 37f. above). On the other hand, Timothy is named in the greetings of several other letters (see on Col. 1: 1), which would seem to diminish the significance of the parallel at this point. If, however, the two letters were written at the same time and the arguments for the strictness of Paul's current imprisonment hold, we would have to assume that, as with Colossians, the writer was Timothy himself, even though the sentiments were Paul's (otherwise Binder 44).⁴

Beal has some interesting observations regarding the relationship between Paul, Timothy, Philemon, Onesimus, and others in Paul's circle of relationships:

This letter reveals that he (Philemon, iaf) is the slave owner of Onesimus and that Paul is appealing to him for Onesimus's release. Paul calls Philemon "beloved" and a "coworker." Often Paul calls believers in Christ "beloved" (e.g., see Rom. 1: 7; 16: 5, 8– 9, 12). The term conveys a family relationship. 13 Onesimus himself is a "beloved brother" (Col. 4: 9; Philem. 16) and "child" who is

⁴ Dunn. *Colossians and Philemon*, kindle location 4299.

“begotten by” Paul (v. 10), and Timothy is a “beloved son” (2 Tim. 1: 2). Already Paul is laying the groundwork for his appeal to Philemon to free Onesimus, since they both are equally “beloved” members of Christ’s family. That Philemon is also Paul’s “coworker” might derive from his being “beloved,” since the close family relationship with Paul would naturally entail that they work closely together in that family. Indeed, “coworker” is found inextricably linked with family terms elsewhere in Paul (cf. “brother” and “coworker” in Phil. 2: 25; 1 Thess. 3: 2). God as “Father” is the authoritative head of the family (v. 3).⁵

As noted above, the letter is addressed Philemon, but Paul also includes Apphia, and Archippus as initial addressees. Apphia was possibly either Philemon’s wife or sister. Archippus was probably the local evangelist or minister who would be able to assist Colossae in Philemon’s decision regarding Onesimus, and the transition for which Paul would be requesting for Philemon and the church to be making.⁶

Beale discusses the focus of the addressees commenting:

Though Paul also addresses his letter to Apphia, Archippus, and the church in Colossae, Philemon is the addressee of focus, as the remainder of the letter in verses 5– 21 reveals. Yet in verses 22– 25 Paul returns to the second-person plural pronoun “you,” including all of the recipients again. Why does Paul begin with naming multiple addressees and conclude in the same way, but focus only on the individual Philemon in the body of the letter? It is clear that Paul wants Apphia, Archippus, and the church body in Colossae to be aware of his appeal to Philemon, since the whole congregation will hear the letter

⁵ Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 515.

⁶ Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 515. Some commentators suggest that the church may have been meeting in Archippus’ house but the flow of the epistle makes this unlikely.

read. Therefore, even the body of the letter, while focusing on Philemon, is secondarily addressed to the entire church. Since they are all part of the same family, the whole family (“brothers,” “sisters,” and “beloved” ones) needs to be addressed (D. Moo 2008: 384–85).⁷

Garland makes a good case for Apphia being Philemon’s wife.

Timothy, the cosender of the letter, is identified simply as “the brother” (v. 1); and Apphia is identified only as “the sister.” These are normal terms in the New Testament for Christians (see Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 7:15; 9:5; James 2:15).¹⁰ Apphia is probably Philemon’s wife. As the *paterfamilias*, the male head of the family, Philemon had absolute authority over all others in his household, and Paul need only deal with him. But since wives were charged with running the affairs of the household, Apphia would have a stake in the disposition of the case concerning their slave. Apphia must also be convinced that this is the right thing to do.⁸

Obviously, this greeting also included the members of the church that were meeting in Philemon’s house. Beale observes an interesting fact of this letter, which draws attention to the unique nature and importance of this brief epistle, for “Philemon is mentioned nowhere else in the NT.”⁹ The unique nature of this brief but beautifully sensitive letter of relationships between a slave owner and a newly converted slave, and the only reference to Philemon in the New Testament, highlights the reason for this letter being included in the canon of books and epistles in the New Testament.

Paul normally introduced himself in various ways in his epistles, most likely in a form in keeping with the tone or theology he would be addressing his recipients. We find such addresses referring to Paul as *an apostle* (Gal 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1), *a servant/slave*

⁷ Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 515.

⁸ Garland, *Colossians, Philemon*, vs 1-3.

⁹ Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 515.

(Rom 1:1; Phil 1:1), or on occasion, simply as *Paul* (1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1).

Timothy, like Onesimus, was a convert of Paul's evangelistic ministry whom Paul considered to be a child, τέκνον, *téknon*, of his in a deep filial relationship. Cf. Paul's comment regarding Timothy being a child of his by conversion, 1Tim 1:2, to Timothy, *my true child in the faith*, emphasizes Paul's maintaining a close filial relationship with his converts which would be relevant for Paul including Timothy in his greeting to Philemon and his comments regarding Onesimus at vs 10, *I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment.*

Paul's prayerful greeting

Paul's prayerful greeting to Philemon and his church is typical of his epistolary greetings, but in this case due to the letter's special sensitive nature, perhaps even more so!

³ *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Garland observes:

In this context, Paul's greeting, "*Grace . . . and peace,*" are not meaningless words. They remind Philemon that he has already experienced God's grace through Jesus Christ. He is now expected to extend grace to a slave, now a brother, who has wronged him. If he does so, he will know more fully the peace of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Peace does not just appear out of the blue; Christians must make it. Philemon has an exceptional but difficult opportunity to do just that.¹⁰

The word grace, from χάρις, *cháris*, is a theologically loaded term! In context it relates to the divine attitude it carries stemming from God's unlimited favor for his creation. Zodhiates observes:

χάρις *cháris* ... from *chaírō* ... to rejoice. Grace, particularly that which causes joy, pleasure, gratification,

¹⁰ Garland, *Colossians, Philemon*, vs 3.

favor, acceptance, for a kindness granted or desired, a benefit, thanks, gratitude. A favor done without expectation of return; the absolutely free expression of the loving kindness of God to men finding its only motive in the bounty and benevolence of the Giver; unearned and unmerited favor. Cháris stands in direct antithesis to érga ... works, the two being mutually exclusive. God's grace affects man's sinfulness and not only forgives the repentant sinner, but brings joy and thankfulness to him. It changes the individual to a new creature without destroying his individuality (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:8, 9).

- (I) Cháris, when received by faith, transforms man and causes him to love and to seek after the righteousness of God. Cháris is initially regeneration, the work of the Holy Spirit in which spiritual life is given to man and by which his nature is brought under the dominion of righteousness. The maintenance of this condition requires an unbroken and immense supply of grace. Grace remains constant in, and basic to, a believer's fight without against the devil and his struggle within against sin. Renewal is stimulated and impelled by God's illuminating and strengthening of the soul, and will continue and increase so long as the soul perseveres. God's grace insures that those who have been truly regenerated will persevere until the end of life. This entire work is called sanctification, a work of God "whereby we are renewed in the whole man and are enabled more and more to die daily unto sin and to live unto righteousness" as is stated by the

Westminster Shorter Catechism (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 4:16; Eph. 4:23; Col. 3:10).¹¹

Continuing his favored greeting Paul adds another theological concept that likewise is most expressive in the context of the request Paul will make on Philemon and his church group! *Peace from God!* Paul did not say peace with God which certainly is included in this concept! *This is a peace that come from God and the Lord Jesus Christ!* Surely the sentiment expressed almost at the same point in Paul's prison experience at Phil 4:4ff must have been on Paul's mind!

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.
⁵ *Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand.*
⁶ *Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.* ⁷ *And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

The word chosen by Paul to express this blessing of peace is, εἰρήνη, *eirēnē*. Zodhiates expresses peace as:

Particularly in a single sense, the opposite of war and dissension (Luke 14:32; Acts 12:20; Rev. 6:4). *Among individuals, peace, harmony* (Matt. 10:34; Luke 12:51; Acts 7:26; Rom. 14:19). In Heb. 7:2, "King of peace," means a peaceful king. *Metaphorically peace of mind, tranquility, arising from reconciliation with God and a sense of a divine favor* (Rom. 5:1; 15:13; Phil. 4:7 [cf. Is. 53:5]).

By implication, a state of peace, tranquility (Luke 2:29; 11:21; John 16:33; Acts 9:31; 1 Cor. 14:33; 1 Thess. 5:3; Sept.: Judg. 6:23; Is. 14:30; Ezek. 38:8, 11).¹²

With the awareness that he was about to drop a theological bomb on the household of Philemon, and the congregation of

¹¹ Zodhiates, χάρις, *cháris*.

¹² Zodhiates, εἰρήνη, *eirēnē*.

meeting in his house, not overlooking the sociological impact this would have on the small community of Colossae, Paul prays for both a spirit of grace and of tranquility for Philemon and his church

Laudatio/Prayer

Phm 4-7

⁴ I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints, ⁶and I pray that the sharing of your faith may promote the knowledge of all the good that is ours in Christ. ⁷ For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

True to his epistolary form, Paul set the tone of his letter in his *laudatory prayer* to God on behalf of the recipients. Usually this stressed the major concern Paul has for the recipients of the letter. So, in this laudatio pericope Paul *stressed the love and faith that Philemon has for the Lord and for all the saints, hopefully now to include Onesimus*. the runaway slave now returning with Tychicus and the letter to the Colossians and Philemon (Col 4:7).

Vs 4. Paul's prayer for Philemon

Drawing on the spirit of sincere appreciation for Philemon, his family, the church meeting in his house, Paul stresses that praying for Philemon and his people was a regular practice of his, *I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers!*

In his prayer for Philemon Paul indirectly indicated the confidence he had that Philemon would do the right thing for Onesimus. Paul was requesting that Philemon would forgive Onesimus, and do more than that! He was trusting that Onesimus would enjoy full “family” acceptance now not only as a slave but as a brother in Christ! This certainly needed prayer for Philemon and his household. Paul will return to develop this theme later in the epistle at Phm 15:

Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back for ever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Vs 5, 6, 7. Love and faith the bases of all relationships

⁴ I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints, ⁶ and I pray that the sharing of your faith may promote the knowledge of all the good that is ours in Christ. ⁷ For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

We already know that *faith, hope, and love* were fundamental Pauline characteristics of the Christian faith. At least twice Paul had referenced these characteristics in his epistles to his followers, 1 Thess 1: 2, 3:

² We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Cor 13:8-13:

⁸ Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. ¹³ So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Vs 5. Paul astutely mentions his awareness of Philemon's love and faith *for all the saints!* Obviously implying that the returning Onesimus was now numbered among the saints!

⁵because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints ...

Notice that it is not only love and faith toward the Lord Jesus that Paul stresses, but the same for all saints, not only love of the saints, but also faith for, or in, all saints. Christians are not only to love one another; *they are also to trust one another.* Philemon and his household must now trust a person who is a brother who is now a saint, even though he had previously wronged them, possibly even stolen from them!

Paul introduces a favorite term of his, and of the many New Testament writers¹³, for the Christian, they are *saints*, Zodhiates observes regarding the Greek word ἅγιος *hágios*, it speaks of being:

... holy, set apart, sanctified, consecrated. It has a common root ... *hagnós*, chaste, pure. Its fundamental idea is separation, consecration, devotion to the service of Deity, sharing in God's purity and abstaining from earth's defilement.¹⁴

We might accurately add that the word *saint* is the more theological and definitive term for a Christian I that it focuses more on the action of God in Christ than on what the Christian does. In other word, saint is a "loftier" word than brother or Christian!

Vs 6. Paul hopes that the sharing of this love and faith with Onesimus would promote the character of the Christian, not only in his own household, but also in the community of Colossae.

⁶and I pray that the sharing of your faith may promote the knowledge of all the good that is ours in Christ ...

Paul touched on what is perhaps the premier and most effective evangelistic outreach message possible, the quality of

¹³ The word saint is used 62 times in the New Testament. Sanctified, the verb form is used 16 times in the New Testament. Saint is used 22 times in the Old Testament.

¹⁴ Zodhiates, ἅγιος *hágios*.

Christian example we set out before our non-Christian neighbors! He prayed specifically that “*the sharing of your faith may promote the knowledge of all the good that is ours in Christ!*”

Paul knew the implications of Philemon and his household receiving Onesimus back in a new relationship, that is, as a brother and no longer simply as a slave; forgiving, and fully accepting Onesimus him, would send a shock wave through the small community of Colossae!

Vs. 7 Paul wrapped up his greeting to Philemon and the church in Colossae with these encouraging words, “*for I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.*”

Paul’s anticipation of a positive response from Philemon and his family would be an added motivation for an encouraging behavior and welcome by the Colossian church, and possibly even the Colossian community!

Paul’s appeal for love’s sake

Phm 8-14

⁸ *Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an ambassador and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment. ¹¹ (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) ¹² I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. ¹³ I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will.*

Vss 8, 9. Paul’s introduction of this pericope with the word *accordingly* involves the interesting use of an of the Greek *logical inferential conjunction* Διὸ, *dio*, which points back to Paul’s

previous statements regarding his deep personal relationship with Philemon as in “For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you”. Philemon’s gracious faith and willingness to be a loving servant forms the basis of Paul’s request that Philemon would forgive Onesimus and accept him back as a brother in Christ in spite of his previous behavior and his being a slave. Paul’s request would be considered by most to be at least presumptuous, but even extreme in the slave-owner relationship of the time.

Paul understood that his relationship with Philemon included his being in an ambassador/elder relationship with Philemon, and one who was in addition a prisoner for his preaching of Christ. His request could have expressed an apostolic command for Philemon to obey. This would have been in keeping with Scriptural teaching, and this would have been applicable in most cases, but in this sensitive case involving a disgruntled and recalcitrant runaway slave, this may not have been felicitous, or the best way of addressing this case.

Vs 10. Therefore, or accordingly, Paul explains his personal and theological interest in his request, *I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment.*

First, the Greek for appeal is παρακαλῶ, from παρακαλέω, *parakalēō* which carries a sense of urgency, as in *exhort*, desire, *beseech*.¹⁵

Second, the depth of the request lies not only in Philemon’s appropriate Christian understanding, but is intensified by Paul’s new relationship with Onesimus, he is Paul’s son (τέκνον, *téknon*; ... *to bring forth, bear children*¹⁶) in Christ, implying not only a new spiritual relationship, but more than that, also a deep personal “familial” in relationship in that Paul had been responsible for Onesimus’ conversion to Christ as a father birthing a son.¹⁷

¹⁵ Zodhiates, παρακαλέω, *parakalēō*.

¹⁶ Zodhiates, τέκνον, *téknon*.

¹⁷ Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon, Philem vs 10*,

Vs 11, 12. Paul introduces his appeal with a play on words, then adding a personal appeal, (*formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.*)¹² *I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.* Most commentators¹⁸ see in this statement and interesting play on words! Onesimus' name in Greek, Ὀνήσιμος, *Onésimos*, means *useful*.¹⁹ The runaway slave who *as such* had been *useless* has *now in Christ* become *useful*, to both Paul and Philemon! Paul intensified his appeal with the words *I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.*

Paul's appeal on behalf of Onesimus

Phm 15-22

15 Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back for ever, 16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. 17 So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. 18 If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19 I, Paul, write this with my own hand, I will

¹⁸ Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 515. Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon, Philemon*, vs 11. Cf. also Garland and Bird in *Colossians and Philemon*.

¹⁹ Zodhiates, Ὀνήσιμος, *Onésimos*.

repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. 20 Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

21 Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. 22 At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be granted to you.

Conclusion

Phm 23-25

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, 24 and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Paul has some interesting remarks to say about Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, fellow-workers of his in Rome.

He closes with his usual benediction and prayer for the Colossian Christians in Philemon's house church.

Interesting Relationship Building Points Stressed by Paul

1. His *appreciation* of Phm. 4.
2. His *commendation* of Phm. 5.
3. His *concern* for Phm. 6, 10.
4. His *pleasure and enjoyment* he has in his remembrance of Phm. 7.
5. His *sensitivity for the situation* involving Philemon and Onesimus, Phm. 8, 9.

6. His *sincerity, no attempt at compulsion or manipulation*, Phm. 14.
7. His *confidence* that Philemon will do the right thing in regard to Onesimus, Phm. 21.
8. Is *sense of accountability*, Phm. 22.

Relationship Lessons We Learn from Paul's Letter to Philemon

An interesting feature of this letter relates to building right relationships with others. These *points build on adopting the correct attitude*:

1. When you are **right**, Paul – appeal for love's sake, do not manipulate the other person or persons.
2. When you are wrong, **Onesimus** – make every effort to correct what you have done wrong.
3. When you have been wronged, **Philemon** – Be willing to forgive, be willing to create an environment in which repentance and forgiveness can take place.

We also learn that good or right relationships:

1. Have to be *desired, passionately*.
2. Have to be *sought after*.
3. Are the result of *much effort*.
4. Are the *fruit of much love, concern, and trust*.

An important point to notice or think about in this letter.

Can you imagine the impact Philemon's forgiveness of Onesimus and receiving him back as a slave but differently now as a brother in Christ!

This would have been a major point in favor of Christianity in the small pagan village of Colossae. Everyone would have been talking about Philemon's and Onesimus' Christian example.

What a magnificent way to witness for Christ in a pagan culture!

