

# Notes on Colossians

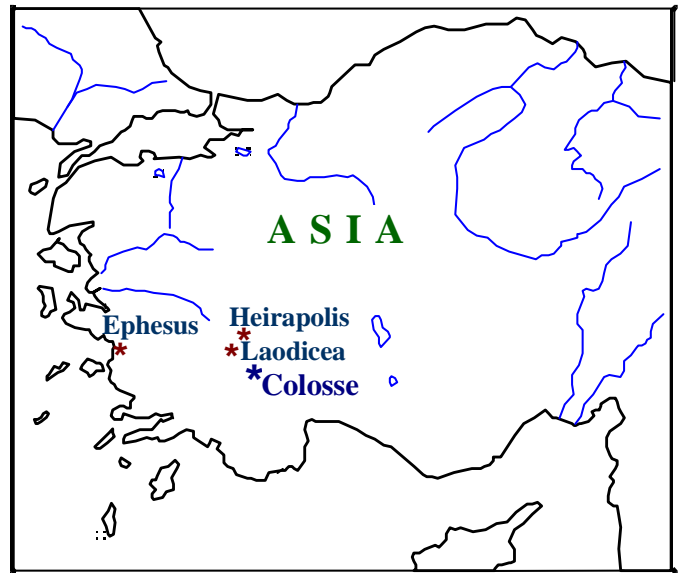
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Dr. Thomas L. Constable

## Introduction

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The city of Colosse lay in the beautiful Lycus Valley about 100 miles east of Ephesus. It had been an important town during the Greek and Persian War of the fifth century B.C. Since then new trade routes had carried most traffic to its neighboring towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis and had left Colosse only a country village. Unlike Laodicea and Hierapolis, archaeologists have never excavated the site of Colosse.<sup>1</sup> The inhabitants were mainly Greek colonists and native Phrygians when Paul wrote this epistle, though there were many Jews living in the area as well. Antiochus the Great (223-187 B.C.) had relocated hundreds of Jewish families from Mesopotamia to this region. They seem to have been more liberal Jews than those in the neighboring province of Galatia to the east.



"In the bordering province of Galatia the infant faith was threatened by legalism, a Judaizing heresy; here, as in Ephesus (cf. Acts 19:14, 18), the danger lay in a Jewish-Hellenistic religious syncretism."<sup>2</sup>

"Without doubt Colossae was the least important church to which any epistle of St Paul is addressed."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup>E. Earle Ellis, "The Epistle to the Colossians," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1333.

<sup>3</sup>J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 16.

Churches had taken root in Colosse, Laodicea (4:16), and probably Hierapolis (4:13). Paul had not visited the Lycus Valley when he wrote this epistle (1:4; 2:1), but he had learned of the spread of the gospel there through Epaphras (1:8) and probably others.<sup>4</sup>

Epaphras seems to have been the founder or one of the founders of the Colossian church (1:7; 4:12-13). He was a Colossian and had instructed the Christians there (1:7) and probably in Laodicea and Hierapolis. Perhaps Paul led him to Christ, maybe at Ephesus (cf. Acts 19:10). His more formal name was probably Epaphroditus.

Epaphras may have traveled to Rome to meet with Paul to secure his help in combating the influence of false teachers that were preaching in Colosse. Archippus may have stood in for Epaphras during his absence (4:17; Phile. 2).

The only information available to help us reconstruct the heresy threatening the church comes from indirect allusions and the emphases in this epistle. We conclude that the false teachers were not giving the person and work of Christ proper interpretation or emphasis. They were distorting and minimizing these doctrines. The false teaching also contained a philosophic appeal, whether Oriental or Hellenistic we cannot be sure (2:8). Notwithstanding there was an emphasis on higher knowledge of the cosmic order. There were also elements of Judaistic ritualism and traditionalism present (2:8, 11, 16; 3:11). However, contrary to orthodox Judaism, the false teachers were encouraging the veneration of angels who they believed controlled the operations of nature to some degree (2:18-19). There was an emphasis on ascetic self-denial (2:20-23) and apparently the idea that only those with full knowledge of the truth as taught by the false teachers could understand and experience spiritual maturity (1:20, 28; 3:11). These emphases later developed into Gnosticism, though in Colosse the Jewish emphasis was more prominent than in later Greek Gnosticism.<sup>5</sup> It is easy to see how such a cult could develop and gain adherents in the Greek-Jewish culture of the Lycus Valley.

". . . given . . . various factors . . ., including the probable origin of the Colossian church from within synagogue circles, the likely presence of Israelite sectarianism within the diaspora, the lack of other evidence of Jewish syncretism in Asia Minor, and the readiness of some Jews to promote their distinctive religious practices in self-confident apology . . ., we need look no further than one or more of the Jewish synagogues in Colossae for the source of whatever influences were thought to threaten the young church there."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>For a fuller history of Judaism and Christianity in the Lycus Valley, see F. F. Bruce, "Colossian Problems," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141:561 (January-March 1984):3-15; and William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, pp. 111-14.

<sup>5</sup>See Curtis Vaughan, "Colossians," in *Ephesians-Philemon*, vol. 11 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, pp. 166-68; Roy Yates, "Colossians and Gnosis," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27 (June 1986):49-68; H. Wayne House, "Heresies in the Colossian Church," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149:593 (January-March 1992):45-59; P. T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, pp. xxx-xxxviii; Barclay, pp. 118-21; and Donald A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 523-25.

<sup>6</sup>Dunn, p. 34.

The primary purpose of the letter was clearly to combat this false teaching. The two main problems were the doctrine of Christ and how this doctrine affects Christian living. The primary Christological passages (1:14-23; 2:9-15) present Christ as absolutely preeminent and perfectly adequate for the Christian. The Christian life, Paul explained, flows naturally out of this revelation. The Christian life is really the life of the indwelling Christ that God manifests through the believer.

Paul probably wrote this epistle from Rome toward the middle or end of his first house arrest there between A.D. 60 and 62. He experienced confinement though he enjoyed considerable liberty there for about two years. Many of Paul's fellow workers were with him when he composed this epistle (4:7-14). This view of the letter's origin generally fits the facts better than the Caesarean and Ephesian theories of origin.

There are many similarities between Ephesians and Colossians. The major distinction between them is that in Ephesians the emphasis is on the church as the body of Christ. In Colossians the emphasis is on Christ as the head of the body. Also, Paul wrote Colossians primarily to respond to a particular problem, whereas he wrote Ephesians primarily to expound correct teaching. Stylistically Colossians is somewhat tense and abrupt whereas Ephesians is more diffuse and flowing. Colossians tends to be more specific, concrete, and elliptical while Ephesians is more abstract, didactic, and general. The mood of Colossians is argumentative and polemical, but that of Ephesians is calm and irenic. The former is a letter of discussion; the latter is a letter of reflection.<sup>7</sup> Paul evidently wrote both letters about the same time. These two epistles, along with Philippians and Philemon, constitute the Prison Epistles of Paul.<sup>8</sup>

### **PURPOSE**

Three purposes emerge from the contents of this epistle. Paul wanted to express his personal interest in this church, which he had evidently not visited. He wrote to warn the Colossians of the danger of returning to their former beliefs and practices. He also refuted the false teaching that was threatening this congregation. The outstanding Christian doctrine that this letter deals with is Christology. Paul's great purpose was to set forth the absolute supremacy and sole sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

"The church today desperately needs the message of Colossians. We live in a day when religious toleration is interpreted to mean 'one religion is just as good as another.' Some people try to take the best from various religious systems and manufacture their own private religion. To many people, Jesus Christ is only *one* of several great religious teachers, with no more authority than they. He may be prominent, but He is definitely not preeminent.

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<sup>7</sup>Vaughan, p. 169.

<sup>8</sup>See S. Lewis Johnson Jr., "Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 118:470 (July-September 1961):239-50, for another brief discussion of introductory matters including the theology of the epistle.

"This is an age of 'syncretism.' People are trying to harmonize and unite many different schools of thought and come up with a superior religion. Our evangelical churches are in danger of diluting the faith in their loving attempt to understand the beliefs of others. Mysticism, legalism, Eastern religions, asceticism, and man-made philosophies are secretly creeping into churches. They are not denying Christ, but they are dethroning Him and robbing Him of His rightful place of preeminence."<sup>9</sup>

### OUTLINE

- I. Introduction 1:1-14
  - A. Salutation 1:1-2
  - B. Thanksgiving 1:3-8
  - C. Prayer 1:9-14
- II. Explanation of the person and work of Christ 1:15-29
  - A. The preeminent person of Christ 1:15-20
    - 1. In relation to God the Father 1:15a
    - 2. In relation to all creation 1:15b-17
    - 3. In relation to the church 1:18-20
  - B. The reconciling work of Christ 1:21-29
    - 1. As experienced by the Colossians 1:21-23
    - 2. As ministered by Paul 1:24-29
- III. Warnings against the philosophies of men ch. 2
  - A. Exhortation to persevere in the truth 2:1-7
    - 1. Paul's concern 2:1-5
    - 2. Paul's exhortation 2:6-7
  - B. The true doctrine of Christ 2:8-15
  - C. The false doctrines of men 2:16-23
- IV. Exhortations to practical Christian living 3:1—4:6
  - A. The basic principle 3:1-4
  - B. The proper method 3:5-17
    - 1. Things to put off 3:5-11
    - 2. Things to put on 3:12-17
  - C. The fundamental relationships 3:18—4:1
    - 1. Wives and husbands 3:18-19
    - 2. Children and parents 3:20-21
    - 3. Slaves and masters 3:22—4:1
  - D. The essential practice 4:2-6

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<sup>9</sup>Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2:105.

- V. Conclusion 4:7-18
  - A. The bearers of this epistle 4:7-9
  - B. Greetings from Paul's companions 4:10-14
  - C. Greetings to others 4:15-17
  - D. Paul's personal conclusion 4:18

Norman Geisler's outline of Colossians is also helpful.<sup>10</sup>

- I. Doctrinal: Deeper life in Christ 1:1—2:7
- II. Polemical: Higher life in Christ 2:8-23
- III. Spiritual: Inner life in Christ 3:1-17
- IV. Practical: Outer life in Christ 3:18—4:18

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<sup>10</sup>Norman L. Geisler, "Colossians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, pp. 668-69.

## Exposition

### I. INTRODUCTION 1:1-14

Paul introduced this epistle with a salutation, a word of thanksgiving, and a prayer. In this introduction he gave clues as to his purpose in writing, as he typically did in the introductions to his epistles.

#### A. SALUTATION 1:1-2

Paul began his letter with this salutation to introduce himself to his readers and to wish God's blessing on them.

1:1 Paul cited his apostolic calling and office to lend authority to what follows.

"Here, right at the outset of the letter, is the whole doctrine of grace. A man is not what he has made himself, but what God has made him. There is no such thing as a self-made man; there are only men whom God has made, and men who have refused to allow God to make them."<sup>11</sup>

"Paul" was the name the apostle used of himself in the Hellenistic-Roman world in place of his Jewish name, "Saul."

"Jews in the Greek-speaking areas took names which closely approximated to the sound of their Hebrew and Aramaic names, e.g. Silas:Silvanus; Jesus:Jason . . ."<sup>12</sup>

Timothy was not an official apostle but simply a Christian brother. He was with Paul when the apostle wrote this letter, though he was not a co-author (cf. 1:23-25, 29; 4:18, et al.).

Dunn argued from some small stylistic features of Colossians that differ from Paul's other writings that Timothy wrote this epistle having received an outline of Paul's thought from the apostle.<sup>13</sup> Dunn could write that this was a Pauline letter, even though he believed Timothy was the writer, because he believed that Timothy interpreted Paul's theology and that Paul was the primary influence over Timothy in his writing. Some other modern scholars hold a similar view, but most believe that Paul was its writer.

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<sup>11</sup>Barclay, p. 123.

<sup>12</sup>O'Brien, p. 2. Cf. Adolph Deissmann, *Bible Studies*, pp. 314-15

<sup>13</sup>Dunn, pp. 35-39.

Paul linked Timothy with himself in the introductions to 2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon. He also mentioned Timothy in Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 1 and 2 Timothy. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews also referred to Timothy.

- 1:2 The Colossian believers were "saints" (Gr. *hagios*, those set apart to God) in their position and "faithful brethren" (Gr. *pistis adelphois*) in their practice. They lived in Colosse, a city located beside the Lycus River in the Lycus Valley in the geographical district called Phrygia. This district lay in the Roman province of Asia in western Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Colosse was about 100 miles east of Ephesus, 11 miles east of Laodicea, and 13 miles southeast of Hierapolis.

The "grace" (Gr. *charis*) of God is His unmerited favor and supernatural enablement. This word is very prominent in the New Testament occurring about 155 times, mostly in Paul's writings. God's "peace" is the inner confidence He gives.

"In general, the New Testament letters begin like the secular letters of the time. The formula used frequently was 'A to B, greetings' (cf. Acts 23:26; 15:23-29). There are, however, some significant differences. In the first place, the Christian salutations direct the readers' thought immediately to the work of God in behalf of men (cf. Col. 1:1-2). In the second place, the salutations frequently prepare for the letter by allusion to its major themes (cf. Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:2)."<sup>14</sup>

### **B. THANKSGIVING 1:3-8**

Paul gave thanks to God for his readers frequently. He told them so to enable them to appreciate the fact that he knew of their situation and rejoiced in their good testimony.

- 1:3-4 Whenever Paul and Timothy prayed for the Colossians they gave thanks to God for them. Note the many references to thanksgiving in this letter (1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:15, 16, 17; 4:2).

"Paul could have meant that every time he prayed he remembered his various churches. Perhaps he maintained the Jewish practice of prayer three times a day (cf. Dan. 6:11; Acts 3:1; *Didache* 8:3), or perhaps he used the long hours of travel and of work in stitching to hold his churches before God (see also on 1:9 and 4:2)."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Johnson, 473:335.

<sup>15</sup>Dunn, p. 56.

Specifically Paul and Timothy rejoiced over the continuing demonstration of their trust in Christ as contrasted with their initial acceptance of Him as their Savior. This is clear from the Greek preposition *en*, translated "in." Furthermore the Colossians manifested self-sacrificing love for other Christians.

1:5-6 Third, Paul gave thanks for the hope of blessings ahead that his readers possessed but had not yet experienced. They demonstrated their hope in their living by presently manifesting faith (v. 4) and love (v. 8). The Colossians had heard of this hope when they had heard the gospel preached to them. Paul reminded his readers that the gospel had not come to them exclusively but was spreading through the whole world. Reference to "the whole world" is probably hyperbole, though some take it literally.<sup>16</sup> Paul may have intended this reference to contrast the gospel with the exclusive message that the false teachers in Colosse were trying to get the Christians to adopt. Paul further glorified the gospel message by referring to its dynamic power to change lives and to its uniquely gracious content (v. 6).

1:7-8 Epaphras had evangelized the Colossians. It is unlikely that this Epaphras is the same man that Paul referred to as Epaphroditus in Philippians 2:25 and 4:18 and 23 since this Epaphras appears to have been from Asia Minor and that Epaphroditus was evidently from Macedonia. Since evangelizing Colossae Epaphras had come to Rome and was now ministering to the apostle during his first Roman imprisonment (v. 7; cf. 4:12). It appears that Epaphras' bondage was in God's will, not in jail, with Paul (cf. Phile. 23). He had given Paul a good report of the Colossian Christians even though false teachers were trying to make inroads into the church. Paul mentioned him here to pass along some good word about their father in the faith and to associate Epaphras with himself. He probably did this so his readers would realize that the founder of their church shared the views Paul presented in this letter. This would have made them more persuasive to the Colossians.

The Holy Spirit had created love for Paul in the Colossians. This is the only reference to the Holy Spirit in this epistle. In Colossians Paul ascribed the activities of God that he normally associated with the Holy Spirit to Christ. He probably did this to glorify Jesus Christ before the Colossians who were being taught that Christ was less than He is.

"As in the other Pauline letters, the themes and language of the thanksgiving are echoed in the rest of the letter . . ."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup>E.g., J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 5:335-36.

<sup>17</sup>Dunn, p. 55. Cf. P. T. O'Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul*, p. 69; and T. Y. Mullins, "The Thanksgivings of Philemon and Colossians," *New Testament Studies* 30 (1984):291.

### C. PRAYER 1:9-14

Paul told his readers that he prayed for their full perception and deepest understanding of God's will for them and for all believers. He did this so they would be able to glorify God in their conduct. He told them this to remind them that their understanding must come through the working of God's Spirit in them and that correct understanding is foundational to correct behavior.

"It so often happens that in prayer we are really saying, 'Thy will be changed,' when we ought to be saying, 'Thy will be done.' . . .

"We pray, not in order to escape life, but in order to be better able to meet life. We pray, not in order to withdraw ourselves from life, but in order to live life in the world of men as it ought to be lived."<sup>18</sup>

1:9 In view of the Colossians' trust in Christ, Paul and his companions had been praying consistently for them. They had prayed both thanksgivings and petitions since they had heard of the Colossians' reception of the Word and their consequent love, which the Holy Spirit produced in them. Specifically they asked that God would give them full and exact knowledge of all His desires for them. The Greek word translated "knowledge" is *epignosis*. This word can mean either full knowledge or more precise knowledge.<sup>19</sup> Probably Paul prayed for greater knowledge in both respects. This word always describes moral and religious knowledge in the New Testament. Especially it refers to full and comprehensive knowledge of God's will that rests on the knowledge of God and of Christ.<sup>20</sup> *Gnosis* ("knowledge") was a favorite term of the gnostic philosophers, and Paul undoubtedly had them in mind when he prayed for *epignosis* for his readers.

The "will" (*thelematos*) of God is what God has revealed in His Word to be correct regarding both belief (faith) and behavior (works, morality; cf. 4:12; Acts 22:14; Rom. 12:2). In the broadest sense, the will of God is the whole purpose of God revealed in Christ.<sup>21</sup>

"For a theist who believes that God's active purpose determines the ordering of the world, lies behind events on earth, and shapes their consequences, one of the most desirable objectives must be to know God's will."<sup>22</sup>

This knowledge included wisdom (the broadest term covering the whole range of mental faculties) and understanding (how to apply wisdom in specific cases).

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<sup>18</sup>Barclay, p. 130.

<sup>19</sup>Lightfoot, p. 136; J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, pp. 248-54.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Lightfoot, p. 138.

<sup>21</sup>Vaughan, p. 177.

<sup>22</sup>Dunn, p. 69.

"'Wisdom' and 'understanding' probably should not be treated separately but should be looked on as expressing a single thought, something like practical wisdom or clear discernment."<sup>23</sup>

This interpretation takes the words as a hendiadys. This knowledge would come to them only by the illumination of the Holy Spirit ("spiritual wisdom"). The false teachers in Colosse were evidently promoting what they called a deeper knowledge attainable only by the privileged few.

"The false teachers promised the Colossian believers that they would be 'in the know' if they accepted the new doctrines. Words like *knowledge*, *wisdom*, and *spiritual understanding* were a part of their religious vocabulary; so Paul used these words in his prayer."<sup>24</sup>

"The true antidote to heresy is always a deeper and richer knowledge of the truth concerning Jesus Christ."<sup>25</sup>

1:10-12a The goal of understanding God's will fully was that the Colossians would be able to live one day at a time in a manner that would glorify and please their Lord. The metaphor "walk," signifying conduct in the progress of life, has its origin in Jewish rather than Greek culture. The Hebrew verb *halak*, translated "walk," gave rise to the technical term "halakhah," which denotes the rabbinic rulings on how the Jews were to interpret the law in their daily lives.<sup>26</sup> "Please" (Gr. *aresko*) refers to an attitude that anticipates every wish (cf. 2 Cor. 5:9).

"In my pastoral ministry, I have met people who have become intoxicated with 'studying the deeper truths of the Bible.' Usually they have been given a book or introduced to some teacher's tapes. Before long, they get so smart they become dumb! The 'deeper truths' they discover only detour them from practical Christian living. Instead of getting burning hearts of devotion to Christ (Luke 24:32), they get big heads and start creating problems in their homes and churches. All Bible truths are practical, not theoretical. If we are growing in knowledge, we should also be growing in grace (2 Peter 3:18)."<sup>27</sup>

Four characteristics (each a present participle) mark this worthy walk (an aorist infinitive in the Greek text, vv. 10-12). First, it includes continuously bearing fruit in character and conduct in every type of good

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<sup>23</sup>Vaughan, p. 177.

<sup>24</sup>Wiersbe, 2:110.

<sup>25</sup>Johnson, 472:341.

<sup>26</sup>See Dunn, p. 71.

<sup>27</sup>Wiersbe, 2:111.

work (cf. Gal. 5:22-23). Second, it includes growing. Paul's idea was that the Christian can continue to grow in his knowledge of God's will revealed in Scripture. As he does so, he not only bears fruit but grows in his ability to bear fruit, as a fruit tree does.

"What rain and sunshine are to the nurture of plants, the knowledge of God is to the growth and maturing of the spiritual life."<sup>28</sup>

Third, it includes gaining strength manifested in steadfastness (endurance under trial, "the capacity to see things through").<sup>29</sup> It also includes patience (longsuffering restraint), and joy (cf. Phil. 4:13; 2 Tim. 2:1). Fourth, it includes expressing gratitude to God consistently.

"There is a kind of patience that 'endures but does not enjoy.' Paul prayed that the Colossian Christians might experience *joyful* patience and longsuffering."<sup>30</sup>

Three causes for thankful gratitude follow in verses 12b-13.

1:12b-13

God qualifies the believer by His grace. He makes us heirs of an inheritance (cf. 1 Pet. 1:4).<sup>31</sup> The qualification to receive an inheritance took place at conversion, though actual possession of most of it is future. Second, He delivers us from Satan's domain (v. 13a). This, too, took place at conversion but will become more evident in the future. Third, He transferred us to Christ's kingdom (v. 13b). The verb translated "transferred" (*metestesen*) described the relocation of large groups of people such as captured armies or colonists from one country to another.<sup>32</sup> This kingdom is probably a reference to Christ's domain as opposed to Satan's domain of darkness.<sup>33</sup>

The apostle probably used these figures because the false teachers in Colosse seem to have been promoting a form of Gnosticism that became very influential in the second century. Gnosticism made much of the light-darkness contrast in its philosophic system. "Darkness" is also a prominent figure in biblical symbolism where it represents ignorance, falsehood, and sin (cf. John 3:19; Rom. 13:12; et al.). It is also common in the Qumran material (1QS 1:9; 2:5, 16; 11:7-8; 1QM 1:1, 5, 11; 4:2; 13:2; 1QH 11:11-12).

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<sup>28</sup>Vaughan, p. 178.

<sup>29</sup>F. W. Beare, *The Epistle to the Colossians*, p. 158.

<sup>30</sup>Wiersbe, 2:113.

<sup>31</sup>See John A. Witmer, "The Man with Two Countries," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 113:532 (October-December 1976):338-49.

<sup>32</sup>Johnson, 472:344.

<sup>33</sup>See Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, pp. 107-10; idem, "The Presence of the Kingdom and the Life of the Church," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145:577 (January-March 1988):42-43; and Charles A. Bigg, *The Messiah of the Apostles*, pp. 211-12.

1:14 Perhaps Paul explained redemption because the false teachers were redefining that term too. Redemption is a benefit of union with Christ (v. 13b). "Emancipation" expresses this aspect of Christ's work for us.

"The real redemption [*apolutrosis*, lit. ransoming away] needed by men is not a redemption from fate by gnostic aeons [intermediate deities]; it is a redemption from sin by a Divine-human Mediator."<sup>34</sup>

"Redemption and forgiveness are not exactly parallel or identical concepts, but by putting the two terms in apposition to each other, the apostle teaches that the central feature of redemption is the forgiveness of sins."<sup>35</sup>

Forgiveness of sins is an important motif in this epistle (cf. 2:13; 3:13).

This pericope contains a beautiful picture of Christian growth that is God's will for every believer. Paul alluded to the same concept later (2:7). The Christian grows more as a fruit tree than as a stalk of wheat. We do not just bear fruit and then die. We continue to grow in our ability to bear fruit as we increase in the knowledge of God. Each passing year should see both growth in the Christian's spiritual life and an increase in his or her fruitfulness.

## **II. EXPLANATION OF THE PERSON AND WORK OF CHRIST 1:15-29**

Paul next proceeded to reiterate the "full knowledge" about Jesus Christ, which the false teachers in Colosse were attacking. He did so to give his readers fuller knowledge of God's will so they would reject the false teaching of those who were demeaning Christ and continue to grow.

"The doctrine of Christ was the principal truth threatened by the false teaching at Colossae, and this is the doctrine Paul presents to his readers before dealing specifically with the false teaching."<sup>36</sup>

### **A. THE PREEMINENT PERSON OF CHRIST 1:15-20**

In this section Paul revealed in what senses Christ is preeminent. One writer observed that this passage "represents a loftier conception of Christ's person than is found anywhere else in the writings of Paul."<sup>37</sup> Another wrote, "No comparable listing of so many characteristics of Christ and His deity are found in any other Scripture passage."<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup>Johnson, 472:345.

<sup>35</sup>Vaughan, p. 180.

<sup>36</sup>Bruce, 562:99.

<sup>37</sup>E. F. Scott, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, p. 20.

<sup>38</sup>Geisler, p. 672.

Paul described Jesus Christ in three relationships: to deity, to creation, and to the church. Some writers understood this passage to be an early Christian hymn.<sup>39</sup>

"There are given here nine marks of identification of Christ which make Him different from and superior to any other person who has ever lived."<sup>40</sup>

I believe there are thirteen.

### **1. In relation to God the Father 1:15a**

The concept of "image" involves three things: likeness (Christ is the exact likeness of God, a mirror image [cf. Heb. 1:3]), representation (Christ represents God to us), and manifestation (Christ makes God known to us [cf. John 1:18]).<sup>41</sup> While God made man in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), Christ *is* the image of God (cf. John 1:18; 14:8-9; 2 Cor. 4:4).

The Greek word translated "image" (*eikon*), ". . . does not imply a weakening or a feeble copy of something. It implies the illumination of its inner core and essence."<sup>42</sup>

"To call Christ the image of God is to say that in Him the being and nature of God have been perfectly manifested—that in Him the invisible has become visible."<sup>43</sup>

### **2. In relation to all creation 1:15b-17**

1:15b "First-born" (Gr. *prototokos*) may denote either priority in time or supremacy in rank (cf. v. 18; Exod. 4:22; Ps. 89:27; Rom. 8:29; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 1:15). It may also denote both of these qualities. Both seem to be in view here. Christ was before all creation in time, and He is over all creation in authority. In view of the context (vv. 16-20), the major emphasis seems to be on His sovereignty, however.<sup>44</sup> What "first-born" does *not* mean is that Christ was the first created being, which ancient Arians believed and modern Jehovah's Witnesses teach. This is clear because verses 16-18 state that Christ existed before all things and is the Creator Himself. Other passages also affirm His responsibility for creation (cf. John 1:3; 3:16; Rom. 8:29; Heb. 1:6; 11:28; 12:23). In John 3:16 the word "only begotten" (Gr. *monogenes*) means alone of His kind, not "first-created" (*protoktiskos*).

<sup>39</sup>E.g. Dunn, pp. 85-86.

<sup>40</sup>McGee, 5:338.

<sup>41</sup>Lightfoot, pp. 143-44; Vaughan, p. 182.

<sup>42</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "The Greek use of *eikon*," by Hermann Kleinknecht, 2:389.

<sup>43</sup>Bruce, 562:101.

<sup>44</sup>O'Brien, *Colossians* . . . , p. 44.

"Though it is grammatically possible to translate this as 'Firstborn *in* Creation,' the context makes this impossible for five reasons: (1) The whole point of the passage (and the book) is to show Christ's superiority *over* all things. (2) Other statements about Christ in this passage (such as Creator of all [1:16], upholder of Creation [v. 17], etc.) clearly indicate His priority and superiority over Creation. (3) The 'Firstborn' cannot be part of Creation if He created 'all things.' One cannot create himself. (Jehovah's Witnesses wrongly add the word 'other' six times in this passage in their *New World Translation*. Thus they suggest that Christ created all other things after He was created! But the word 'other' is not in the Gr.) (4) The 'Firstborn' received worship of all angels (Heb. 1:6), but creatures should not be worshiped (Ex. 20:4-5). (5) The Greek word for 'Firstborn' is *prototokos*. If Christ were the 'first-created,' the Greek word would have been *protoktisis*."<sup>45</sup>

1:16 Christ is the *originator* of creation ("in Him," v. 16a). All things—in every place, of every sort, and of every rank—originated with Him. God mediated the life of the entire universe through His Son (cf. John 1:3, 10; Heb. 1:2). He is the architect of creation. Paul listed various ranks of angelic beings, namely, invisible rulers and authorities. He may have been using the terminology of the false teachers who taught many gradations within the angelic sphere.<sup>46</sup> Or these gradations really may exist. In Gnosticism, and in its primitive development in Colossae, angels received veneration depending on their supposed rank. Probably ranks of heavenly powers are in view here (v. 16).<sup>47</sup> Thus Paul claimed that Christ is superior to all angelic beings (cf. Heb. 1:1-14).

"If it is asked whether the spiritual forces which Christ vanquished on the Cross are to be regarded as personal or impersonal, the answer is probably 'both.' Whatever forces there are, of either kind, that hold human souls in bondage, Christ has shown Himself to be their Master, and those who are united to Him by faith need have no fear of them."<sup>48</sup>

Christ is the *agent* of creation ("through Him," v. 16b). He accomplished creation (cf. John 1:3; Heb. 1:2). He is the builder of the creation.

Christ is the *goal* of creation ("for Him," v. 16b). History is moving toward a goal when the whole created universe will glorify Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 15:25; Phil. 2:10-11; Rev. 19:16).<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup>Geisler, pp. 672-73.

<sup>46</sup>Vaughan, p. 182.

<sup>47</sup>Dunn, p. 92.

<sup>48</sup>Bruce, 564:299.

<sup>49</sup>See Handley C. G. Moule, *Colossian Studies*, p. 78.

"Several steps are involved in the construction of a substantial building. First, an architect is obtained to design the building and prepare plans and specifications in accordance with the expressed desires of the owner. Then the plans are submitted for bids by builders or contractors, and a builder secured. After the completion of the edifice, it is occupied by the owner and devoted to its intended use. Our Lord is not only the builder of the universe; He is also its architect and owner. All things have been created *in Him* (the eternal plans for the creation abide in Him), *by Him* (He acted as builder), and *for Him* (the creation belongs to Him and is to reflect His glory)."<sup>50</sup>

"For centuries, the Greek philosophers had taught that everything needed a primary cause, an instrumental cause, and a final cause. The primary cause is the plan, the instrumental cause the power, and the final cause the purpose. When it comes to Creation, Jesus Christ is the primary cause (He planned it), the instrumental cause (He produced it), and the final cause (He did it for His own pleasure)."<sup>51</sup>

Paul used the verb "created" twice in verse 16. In the first instance it is in the Greek aorist tense and refers to creation as an act. In the second it is in the Greek perfect tense picturing ". . . the universe as still remaining the monument and proof of His creative might."<sup>52</sup>

1:17 Christ is the *antecedent* of creation ("before all things," v. 17a). This revelation clearly separates Christ from every created entity. "He" has the force of "He and no other" in the Greek text. The word is an intensive pronoun. He is before all temporally (preexistent) and authoritatively (sovereign).<sup>53</sup> This assertion, combined with the earlier one that He is the first-born of all creation (v. 15b), proves that Christ is no creature. If He were, He would have had to create Himself. To do that He would have had to exist before He existed, which is absurd and impossible.

"The phrase 'before all things' sums up the essence of His designation as 'Firstborn before all creation' and excludes any possibility of interpreting that designation to mean that He Himself is part of the created order (albeit the first and chief part)."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Johnson, 473:15.

<sup>51</sup>Wiersbe, 2:116.

<sup>52</sup>John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians*, p. 56.

<sup>53</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*, p. 74.

<sup>54</sup>Bruce, 562:104.

Christ is the *sustainer* of creation ("hold together," v. 17b). Christ is the Person who preserves and maintains the existence of what He has created.

"He is the principle of cohesion in the universe. He impresses upon creation that unity and solidarity which makes it a cosmos instead of a chaos."<sup>55</sup>

"Every law of science and of nature is, in fact, an expression of the thought of God. It is by these laws, and therefore by the mind of God, that the universe hangs together, and does not disintegrate in chaos."<sup>56</sup>

"So the thought passes from creation to preservation."<sup>57</sup>

Verse 17 sums up the thought of verses 15-16 and completes the statement of Christ's relation to creation.

### **3. In relation to the church 1:18-20**

So far everything Paul had written about Christ other New Testament writers also revealed, but what follows in verse 18 is uniquely Pauline.

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 and Romans 12:4-8 Paul used the human body to illustrate the unity and diversity present in the church. Here he used it to illustrate the sovereignty of Christ over Christians (cf. Eph. 4:11-13). Our Lord supplies authority and direction for His body.<sup>58</sup>

1:18        The term "head" (Gr. *kephale*) here does not point to Christ as the ruler of the church, though He is that, but to His being the beginning and the principle in creation and redemption.<sup>59</sup>

"In St. Paul's day, according to popular psychology, both Greek and Hebrew, a man reasoned and purposed, not 'with his head,' but 'in his heart' . . ."<sup>60</sup>

He is sovereign because He is the first-born from the dead. Christ is the "beginning" of the church in that He is its power and source of spiritual life. He became this at His resurrection when He became the first-born from the dead in time. Christ was the first Person to rise from the dead with a glorified body never to die again. He broke death's hold on humanity (1 Cor. 15:20, 23). Thus Christ became preeminent also in the new creation, the church, as well as in the old creation (vv. 16-17).

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<sup>55</sup>Lightfoot, p. 154.

<sup>56</sup>Barclay, p. 144.

<sup>57</sup>Johnson, 473:16.

<sup>58</sup>See O'Brien, *Colossians* . . . , pp. 57-61, for a discussion of the term *ekklesia* ("church") in Colossians and Philemon.

<sup>59</sup>Stephen Bedale, "The Meaning of *kephale* in the Pauline Epistles," *Journal of Theological Studies* NS5 (1954):213.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 212.

"Paul did not say that Jesus was the first person to be raised from the dead, for He was not. But He is the most important of all who have been raised from the dead; for without His resurrection, there could be no resurrection for others (1 Cor. 15:20ff.)."<sup>61</sup>

"*Prototokos* ["first-born"], used in both parts of the passage (vv. 15, 18) unites His supremacy in the two realms, creation and salvation (cf. Acts 26:23)."<sup>62</sup>

1:19 The reason for His preeminence in the new creation is the Son's work of reconciliation (v. 20). Verses 19-23 give the reason Paul could say what he just did about Christ's supremacy.

Later in Gnostic literature "fullness" (Gr. *pleroma*) referred to the entire series of angelic emanations that supposedly mediated between God and humankind.<sup>63</sup> Here Paul used this word of the totality of Christ's saving grace and power (cf. Acts 5:31, 17:31). His point was that all divine power resides in Christ as a result of His resurrection (v. 18) and there are no other mediating agents (cf. 2:9; Eph. 1:23; 3:19; 4:13; 1 Tim. 2:5).

". . . the importance of the language is to indicate that the completeness of God's self-revelation was focused in Christ, that the wholeness of God's interaction with the universe is summed up in Christ."<sup>64</sup>

The Greek word translated "dwell" (*katoikesai*) means to dwell permanently. This contradicts the idea that Christ possessed divine power only temporarily, which the Christian Science religion teaches. In short, "fullness" here probably refers to Christ's official power given Him following His resurrection rather than to His essential power that was always His by virtue of His deity.

1:20 God's ultimate purpose in all of this was to reconcile all things to Himself. The Cross made reconciliation possible. Now it is up to people to accept God's provision and "be reconciled" to God by faith in Christ (2 Cor. 5:20).

"The implication is that the purpose, means, and manner of (final) reconciliation have already been expressed by God, not that the reconciliation is already complete."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Wiersbe, 2:117.

<sup>62</sup>Johnson, 473:18. Cf. Rom. 1:4; 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:20.

<sup>63</sup>Lightfoot, pp. 255-71.

<sup>64</sup>Dunn, p. 101.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

". . . Paul never looks at reconciliation as mutual concession after mutual hostility. Reconciliation is *manward*, not Godward, in its direction. It is God's reconciling of man 'unto himself' (v. 20). God never has had need to be reconciled to man; He has always loved man. It is easy to see the importance of holding right views here, since our attitude to Christ's work and our very idea of God are affected."<sup>66</sup>

"All things" would include the angelic world and the rest of creation besides humanity. Christ's death has dealt with the defilement sin caused as well as with its guilt.

In what sense did Christ reconcile all things in heaven to Himself, including Satan and his angels? He did not do so in the ordinary sense of bringing them into salvation but in the wider sense of bringing them into subjection to His will.<sup>67</sup> Christ's death has pacified Satan and his angels. They now have to submit to Him (cf. 2:15) even as He created them.<sup>68</sup>

This passage (1:15-20) contains one of the greatest Christologies in the Bible.<sup>69</sup> Scholars have often referred to verses 15-18 as "The Great Christology."<sup>70</sup> They have also called verses 15-20 "The Christ Hymn."<sup>71</sup> The form of these verses is probably Hebrew rather than Greek poetry.<sup>72</sup> One writer argued that Paul took the Christological statements in 1:9-23 and 2:6-15 from Jewish sources rather than from his own store of theological ideas or from early Christian hymns.<sup>73</sup> Probably he did. Another scholar suggested that Christ's supremacy in this passage should be understood as over the Torah, Adam, and Israel.<sup>74</sup> This seems unnecessarily limited to me.

"The Christ-hymn of Colossians 1:15-20 is a powerful statement about the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Christ's supremacy is seen at every turn.

<sup>66</sup>Johnson, 474:143. See also James S. Stewart, *A Man in Christ*, pp. 204-72; and Barclay, p. 147.

<sup>67</sup>See Gary L. Shultz Jr., "The Reconciliation of All Things in Christ," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 167:668 (October-December 2010):442-59.

<sup>68</sup>For a critique of the universalist position, based on this verse, that, because God's great purpose is reconciliation, no one will ultimately be lost, see P. T. O'Brien, "Col. 1:20 and the Reconciliation of all Things," *Reformed Theological Review* 33:2 (May-August 1974):45-53.

<sup>69</sup>For a review and evaluation of recent views on this passage, see Larry L. Helyer, "Cosmic Christology and Col 1:15-20," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37:2 (June 1994):235-46; idem, "Colossians 1:15-20: Pre-Pauline or Pauline?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26:2 (June 1983):167-79; idem, "Arius Revisited: The Firstborn Over All Creation (Col 1:15)," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31:1 (March 1988):59-67; idem, "Recent Research on Col 1:15-20 (1980-1990)," *Grace Theological Journal* 12:1 (1992):51-67; and Jeffrey S. Lamp, "Wisdom in Col 1:15-20: Contribution and Significance," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41:1 (March 1998):45-53.

<sup>70</sup>E.g., Johnson, 473:12

<sup>71</sup>E.g., Bruce, 562:99.

<sup>72</sup>Steven M. Baugh, "The Poetic Form of Col. 1:15-20," *Westminster Theological Journal* 47:2 (Fall 1985):227-44.

<sup>73</sup>J. C. O'Neill, "The Source of the Christology in Colossians," *New Testament Studies* 26:1 (October 1979):87-100.

<sup>74</sup>T. E. Pollard, "Colossians 1:12-20: a Reconsideration," *New Testament Studies* 27:4 (July 1981):572-75.

The first portion focuses on His preeminent role in creation, while the second emphasizes His work as Redeemer. To any Christian, in Colosse then or elsewhere today, who may have been or is confused about Christ's role in the world, these six verses testify to Christ's absolute authority, which is not to be shared with any person, angel, or demon."<sup>75</sup>

<b>THIRTEEN ASSERTIONS ABOUT CHRIST IN COLOSSIANS 1:15-20</b>	
1.	He is the image of the invisible God (v. 15).
2.	He is the first-born of creation (v. 15)
3.	He is the originator of creation (v. 16).
4.	He is the agent of creation (v. 16).
5.	He is the goal of creation (v. 16).
6.	He is the antecedent of creation (v. 17).
7.	He is the sustainer of creation (v. 17).
8.	He is the head of the church (v. 18).
9.	He is the first-born from the dead (v. 18).
10.	He is the preeminent one (v. 18).
11.	He is the fullness of God (v. 19).
12.	He is the reconciler of all things to Himself (v. 20).
13.	He is the maker of peace (v. 20).

### **B. THE RECONCILING WORK OF CHRIST 1:21-29**

Paul continued his exposition of Christ's superiority with emphasis on His reconciling work. He did this to ground his readers further in the full truth of God's revelation so the false teachers among them would not lead them astray.

#### **1. As experienced by the Colossians 1:21-23**

The apostle moved on next to the application of Christ's reconciliation.

1:21-22      The church at Colosse was predominantly a Gentile congregation as is evident from Paul's description of his readers' pre-conversion condition. Paul's reference to Christ's "fleshly body" may have helped him distinguish it from His spiritual body, the church (v. 18). He may also have mentioned it to contradict the false idea that Christ did not have a genuine physical body.<sup>76</sup> One of the heresies of the early church was Docetism. Docetists taught that Jesus only appeared to have a physical body. They based this view on the incorrect notion that physical flesh is inherently evil.

<sup>75</sup>H. Wayne House, "The Doctrine of Christ in Colossians," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149:594 (April-June 1992):187.

<sup>76</sup>Vaughan, p. 187.

". . . such an emphasis would have been a bulwark against any Gnostic tendencies that attempted to question the reality of Christ's death: the firstborn of all creation attained his status as firstborn from the dead by experiencing the full reality of physical death."<sup>77</sup>

"Holy" means set apart from sin. "Blameless" means without blemish or defect. "Beyond reproach" means totally without occasion for criticism. Paul was not speaking about the Christian's personal conduct but about his or her position in Christ.

1:23 "If" introduces a condition the writer assumed was true to reality for the sake of his argument (a first class condition in Greek). We could translate it, "Since." Paul assumed his readers would do what he described because perseverance is *normal* for genuine believers (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17; Phil. 1:6; 1 John 2:19).<sup>78</sup> However perseverance in the faith is not *inevitable*. Apostasy is a real possibility to which he alluded here (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1-2; et al.). It is necessary to abide in the faith to obtain a good report from the Lord at the judgment seat of Christ. This was Paul's concern for his readers here.<sup>79</sup>

Paul was thinking of his readers as a building "firmly established" on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20). He saw them steadfastly rigid, not blown off their base by the winds of false doctrine (cf. Eph. 4:14). Since earthquakes were not uncommon in the Lycus Valley, Paul's statement may have reminded the Colossians of their security in another sense.<sup>80</sup>

". . . the addressees are to remain as firmly seated on the gospel as a god in his temple or a skillful rider on a spirited horse."<sup>81</sup>

The gospel had had wide circulation. "In all creation under heaven" must be hyperbole meaning it had gone everywhere in a general sense. Paul was contrasting the wide appeal and proclamation of the gospel with the exclusive appeal and comparatively limited circulation of the false teachers' message. "Minister" is servant (Gr. *diakonos*).

## **2. As ministered by Paul 1:24-29**

Paul had received a unique function to fulfill in the body of Christ. He ministered the gospel of reconciliation to unevangelized Gentiles primarily (v. 25). He explained his

<sup>77</sup>Dunn, p. 109.

<sup>78</sup>Herbert M. Carson, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon*, p. 48.

<sup>79</sup>See Bob Wilkin, "Is Continuing in the Faith a Condition of Eternal Life?" *Grace Evangelical Society News* 6:3 (March 1991):2; and Charles C. Bing, "The Warning in Colossians 1:21-23," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164:653 (January-March 2007):74-88.

<sup>80</sup>Wiersbe, 2:120-21.

<sup>81</sup>Dunn, p. 111.

ministry to his readers so they would appreciate the reconciling work of God more deeply and to stimulate them to press on to maturity.

### Paul's sufferings 1:24

This verse is ". . . probably the most controversial in the letter."<sup>82</sup>

It might have seemed ironical that Paul was in prison, in view of what he had just said about the success of the gospel. Therefore he quickly explained that his afflictions were part of God's plan, and he rejoiced in them. Paul could rejoice because he knew his imprisonment would benefit his readers through his ministry to them in this letter if in no other way. Furthermore he regarded his sufferings as what any servant of Christ could expect in view of the world's treatment of his Master.

". . . the word *thlipseon* (AV [NASB and NIV], 'afflictions') is never used in the New Testament of the atoning sufferings of Christ. We, therefore, must reject any conception of a treasury of merit, such as Roman Catholics allow, composed of Christ's sufferings plus the sufferings of the saints and dispensed as indulgences.

"If we also dismiss the interpretations which understand Paul to be referring to sufferings demanded by Christ or suffered for His sake (the natural sense of the genitive is opposed to this), we are still left with several alternatives."<sup>83</sup>

One view is that the phrase "Christ's afflictions" refers to the quota of sufferings the church must undergo corporately before the end of the age (cf. Matt. 24:6; Heb. 11:40; Rev. 6:11).<sup>84</sup> However this idea is foreign to the context that stresses the contribution Paul's sufferings made to the Colossian's welfare. Paul's point was not that his sufferings relieved the Colossians of their share of sufferings for Christ (cf. 1:28-29; 2:1-2).

A second view is that Paul was saying his sufferings were similar to Christ's. Both he and Christ suffered for believers, Christ on the cross and Paul presently.<sup>85</sup> Yet Paul wrote here of Christ's sufferings. They were His own.

A third view is that the sufferings of Christ to which Paul referred are those sacrificial works the Lord left for believers to perform.<sup>86</sup> As Christ suffered during His ministry, so Christians suffer during our ministries. However if this is what Paul meant, why did he speak of them as Christ's afflictions? This view, as the preceding two views, expresses a Scriptural revelation, but that revelation does not seem to be Paul's point here.

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<sup>82</sup>Johnson 475:229.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 475:229-30. Cf. Carson, p. 50.

<sup>84</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 76.

<sup>85</sup>T. K. Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, p. 232; Ellis, p. 1339.

<sup>86</sup>Lightfoot, p. 163; McGee, 5:343-45.

A fourth view, the one I prefer, regards the afflictions of Christ as Christ's actual sufferings now, not on the cross but in and through Paul whom He indwelt (cf. 2 Cor. 11:23-28).<sup>87</sup> When believers suffer, Christ also suffers because He indwells us (cf. Acts 9:4).

"It is no wonder, then, that Paul rejoiced in his sufferings. Seen in the light of his union with Christ, they were transfigured and made an occasion for fellowship with Him, as well as a benefit to the body, the church."<sup>88</sup>

### Paul's message 1:25-27

1:25 Paul's role in the household of God (the meaning of "stewardship") was that of a servant who fully expounded God's revelation for the benefit of his Gentile readers.

"He was a servant of the church, but in the deepest sense he was a steward of God."<sup>89</sup>

1:26 This revelation included a "mystery." This term refers to a truth previously unknown but now revealed by God. In the Greek world it also referred to the secret ceremonies of pagan cults that only the initiated knew. Paul's use was similar with the difference that God had now revealed this secret.

"The movement of world history is a linear progression which has also been directed by a secret purpose determined from the beginning by the one God."<sup>90</sup>

God had hidden this new revelation from human understanding for ages past. Paul expounded it more fully in Ephesians 3:3-9 and only gave its essence here as "Christ in [among] you [Gentiles]" (cf. Rom. 8:10; 2 Cor. 13:5; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 1:13-14; 3:17).

"For Christ to be *among* the Gentiles involved being *in* those who believed. And He was and is for them *the hope of glory*, the pledge that they shall share in His glory to come (cf. 3:4)."<sup>91</sup>

"The mystery was not *that* Gentiles would be saved but *how* they could be 'fellow-heirs' (Eph. 3:6, KJV), on the same level with Jews, with no middle wall of partition between them (Eph. 2:12-14)."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>Johnson, 475:230-31; Dunn, p. 114.

<sup>88</sup>Johnson, 475:231.

<sup>89</sup>Vaughan, p. 191.

<sup>90</sup>Dunn, p. 120.

<sup>91</sup>Johnson, 475:233.

<sup>92</sup>Geisler, p. 675. Cf. McGee, 5:346.

1:27 That God would save Gentiles was no new revelation (e.g., Isa. 49:6), but that He would dwell in them and deal with them on the same basis as He did Jews was new revelation. Those who rejected this revelation insisted that Gentiles had to become Jews before they could become Christians (cf. Acts 15:1).

"At least four defining characteristics of the church are described as a mystery. (1) The body concept of Jewish and Gentile believers united into one body is designated as a mystery in Ephesians 3:1-12. (2) The doctrine of Christ indwelling every believer, the Christ-in-you concept, is called a mystery in Colossians 1:24-27 (cf. Co. 2:10-19; 3:4, 11). (3) The church as the Bride of Christ is called a mystery in Ephesians 5:22-32. (4) The Rapture is called a mystery in 1 Corinthians 15:50-58. These four mysteries describe qualities that distinguish the church from Israel."<sup>93</sup>

Progressive dispensationalists, along with non-dispensationalists (i.e., covenant theologians), interpret the mystery of Christ in us as the realization of the Old Testament promise that God would put His Spirit within believers (Ezek. 36:27; cf. 37:14).<sup>94</sup> Normative dispensationalists take this mystery as new revelation that Christ would indwell believers in the church.<sup>95</sup> The difference is not in the Spirit and Christ distinction; both positions see unity between the Spirit and Christ. The difference is the concept of the church, though both progressive and normative dispensationalists see the church as distinct from Israel. Progressives view the church as the present predicted phase of the messianic (Davidic) kingdom. Normatives see the church as distinct from the messianic (Davidic) kingdom and not predicted in the Old Testament.

"It is striking that for the third time in these opening paragraphs the theme of hope is given central place in the gospel (1:5, 23, 27 . . .). This is an appropriate note on which to wind up this brief reference to the mystery of God's purpose shaped from before the ages and generations and now moving toward its eschatological climax."<sup>96</sup>

### Paul's purpose 1:28

Paul proclaimed this new revelation as a completed fact. The word *katangellomen*, translated "proclaim," implies its completed character.

<sup>93</sup>Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, "Israel and the Church," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, pp. 117-18.

<sup>94</sup>See Saucy, *The Case . . .*, pp. 167-73.

<sup>95</sup>Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 135; idem, *Dispensationalism*, pp. 124-25; Wiersbe, 2:122.

<sup>96</sup>Dunn, p. 123.

"'Counseling' (*nouthetountes*) and 'teaching' (*didaskontes*) describe two attendant circumstances of Paul's preaching. The former word . . . has to do with the will and emotions and connotes warning. Here it relates to non-Christians, the thought probably being that the apostle sought to awaken each of them to his need of Christ. . . . 'Teaching,' which probably refers to a ministry for converts, stresses the importance of instruction in proclaiming the Word. 'With all wisdom' seems to express the way the teaching was done."<sup>97</sup>

Negative admonitions and positive teaching presented through wise (appropriate) methods were necessary to bring all people, not just the privileged few, as in Gnosticism, to full maturity in Christ. Paul had the imminent return of Christ in view as the time when he desired to present every person mature in Christ (cf. Eph. 4:13). Paul proclaimed a Person, not a philosophy. Note that he did not just preach the gospel message but the whole counsel of God. His goal was not just to get people saved but to lead them to maturity in Christ (cf. Matt. 28:20).

"Here again there may be a gentle reminder that any of the Colossian recipients tempted to look elsewhere for a 'fuller' experience and wisdom need to look, and should look, no further than Christ for their 'completion.'"<sup>98</sup>

"Paul took time to minister to individuals; note the repetition of 'every man' in Colossians 1:28. If we minister to only a few believers, we are helping the whole church."<sup>99</sup>

### **Paul's power 1:29**

Paul had to expend physical, mental, and spiritual energy toiling to this end. Sometimes he had to strive and contend with adversaries in the world as well as with his own flesh and the devil. Nevertheless the supernatural power of the indwelling Christ energized him.

"The root [of the Greek word translated "works," *energoumenen*] generally refers to supernatural power, whether God's or Satan's."<sup>100</sup>

"The entire statement shows that through faith in Christ we can link our life with a source of strength that enables us to rise above our natural limitations."<sup>101</sup>

Paul's view of his ministry was certainly a high one. He would have despaired had he not learned the sufficiency of God's grace in his life (2 Cor. 12:9).

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<sup>97</sup>Vaughan, p. 193.

<sup>98</sup>Dunn, p. 126.

<sup>99</sup>Wiersbe, 2:123.

<sup>100</sup>Johnson, 475:234.

<sup>101</sup>Vaughan, p. 193.

### **III. WARNINGS AGAINST THE PHILOSOPHIES OF MEN CH. 2**

The apostle proceeded to exhort his readers to persevere in the truth. He then clarified the true doctrine of Christ and contrasted it with the false doctrines of men. His aim was to establish them in the truth about Christ.

"The believer who masters this chapter is not likely to be led astray by some alluring and enticing 'new-and-improved brand of Christianity.'"<sup>102</sup>

#### **A. EXHORTATIONS TO PERSEVERE IN THE TRUTH 2:1-7**

Paul exhorted his readers to continue to believe and practice the truth of God's revelation. He did this to prevent them from accepting the erroneous instruction of the false teachers who were seeking to turn them away from God's will.

##### **1. Paul's concern 2:1-5**

2:1 Paul used an athletic metaphor to describe his anxieties and deep concerns for his readers and their neighbor Christians. His strivings (1:29) included specific struggles and conflicts for them. Laodicea was about 11 miles west of Colosse, also in the Lycus Valley. Another town nearby was Hierapolis. Evidently the false teachers were promoting their views in that entire region. Paul felt concern for all the Christians under this influence including the Colossian and Laodicean believers. He may have meant that he was struggling in prayer for them.<sup>103</sup>

"The Lycus Valley was not evangelized by Paul himself; it is plain from Colossians 2:1 that he was not personally acquainted with the churches there."<sup>104</sup>

2:2-3 The "heart" includes everything in the inner man including the mind (cf. Prov. 23:7). The Christian's wealth is his or her thorough understanding of God's truth. The essence of God's revelation is Christ (cf. 1:27). The better a Christian understands God's true revelation concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ the better he or she will be able to recognize and refute false doctrine.

"Only a love which penetrates to the heart and wells up from the heart can sustain the sort of unity that Paul sought (see also . . . 1:4)."<sup>105</sup>

God has revealed in Christ all that a person needs to know to establish a relationship with God. Thinking that the source of true spiritual wisdom is somewhere other than in Christ can produce terrible disorder in the

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<sup>102</sup>Wiersbe, 2:105.

<sup>103</sup>Vaughan, p. 194.

<sup>104</sup>Bruce, 561:8.

<sup>105</sup>Dunn, p. 130.

Christian life. "Knowledge" is genuine understanding and "wisdom" genuine truth (cf. 1:9).

"Knowledge is the apprehension of truth; wisdom is its application to life. Knowledge is prudent judgment and wisdom is prudent action. Both are found in Christ (cf. Rom. 11:33; 1 Cor. 12:8)."<sup>106</sup>

"The word *apokruphoi* (AV [and NASB], 'hidden') is emphatic by position, and in the light of this it is just possible that Paul may have in mind something similar to the mystery religions. In them the initiate, after a long period of training and instruction, was allowed to be present at a performance similar to a passion play. By means of the performance the initiate was to have an experience of identification with his god. The instruction given previously enabled the initiate to understand the play. To outsiders the ritual would have been a mystery."<sup>107</sup>

2:4-5 Paul's description of the Colossian church pictures a company of well-disciplined soldiers standing at attention in straight lines. The Greek word *stereoma* occurs only here in the New Testament and means "stability."

It ". . . points out that feature in the faith of the Colossians which specially commended it to the notice and eulogy of the apostle, to wit, its unyielding nature, or the stiffness of its adherence to its one object—Christ."<sup>108</sup>

So far the believers were holding their position against the false teachers, but Paul feared that this condition might change. He did not want the false teachers to talk them into believing something false by deceptive arguments.

"The implication that Paul can actually see the state of affairs at Colossae ('rejoicing and seeing your good order . . .') is, of course, intended more as an expression of what he would hope to see were it possible."<sup>109</sup>

"This final recall to faith forms an inclusio with 1:4 and thus brackets the whole of the intervening thanksgiving and personal statement as an exposition of that faith . . ."<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup>Geisler, p. 676.

<sup>107</sup>Johnson, 475:236.

<sup>108</sup>Eadie, p. 123.

<sup>109</sup>Dunn, p. 134.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid., p. 135.

## **2. Paul's exhortation 2:6-7**

"Verses 6 and 7 occupy a pivotal position in the letter. They serve as the basis of Paul's interaction with the Colossian heresy (vv 8-23) having summarized much of what has already been written in the epistle."<sup>111</sup>

2:6 In particular, Paul encouraged his readers to continue following Christ in harmony with the sound teaching that had resulted in their conversion.<sup>112</sup> His point was not that as the Colossians had become Christians by faith in Christ they should continue to walk by faith. This is clear from Paul's word translated "received." It usually refers to the reception of truth through transmission (cf. 4:6; 1 Cor. 11:23; 15:1, 3; Gal. 1:9, 12). It is also clear from the expression "as you were instructed" (v. 7) and the context (vv. 4-5, 8).

"Christ Jesus the Lord," a phrase that Paul used nowhere else, counteracts three false conceptions of the Savior. These are His deity ("Christ") that Judaism denied, His humanity ("Jesus") that Docetists denied, and His sovereignty ("Lord") that many varieties of false teaching denied.

". . . Paul here meets the two forms of Gnostic heresy about the Person of Christ (the recognition of the historical Jesus in his actual humanity against the Docetic Gnostics, the identity of the Christ or Messiah with this historical Jesus against the Cerinthian Gnostics, and the acknowledgment of him as Lord)."<sup>113</sup>

"Since the basic sense of *kurios* ["lord"] is that of superior to inferior (master to slave; king to subject; god to worshiper), with formally acknowledged rights of the former to command or dispose of the latter (see also 3:22 and 4:1), all would have recognized that acceptance of Christ Jesus as Lord included within it submission of the believer to this Christ and unconditional readiness to act in obedience to him."<sup>114</sup>

Advocates of "lordship salvation" get into trouble when they go beyond this statement. Their position is that unless a person consistently obeys—they never specify how consistent one must be—he or she never truly accepted Christ.

<sup>111</sup>O'Brien, *Colossians* . . . , p. 108. For further discussion of the Colossian heresy, see Barclay, pp. 115-18.

<sup>112</sup>See H. Wayne House, "The Christian Life according to Colossians," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151:604 (October-December 1994):440-54.

<sup>113</sup>A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 4:489.

<sup>114</sup>Dunn, p. 140.

2:7 Four characteristics describe the healthy Christian in this verse. First, he or she stands firmly rooted as a tree, "born again." Second, he or she is being built up as a building (cf. 1 Pet. 2:2). Third, he or she is becoming increasingly stable in the faith. Fourth, he or she demonstrates the fruit of thankfulness constantly. Four participles in the Greek text describe these characteristics. The first is in the perfect tense indicating the initial reception of new life. The last three are in the present tense revealing the ways in which new life should continually express itself.

"The present passage may imply that those who lack a deep sense of thankfulness to God are especially vulnerable to doubt and spiritual delusion."<sup>115</sup>

"A thankful spirit is a mark of Christian maturity. When a believer is abounding in thanksgiving, he is really making progress!"<sup>116</sup>

"As in Rom. 1:16-17 and Gal. 1:11-12, these two verses provide a brief summary sentence of the main point to be made in the body of the letter, to serve as a heading to what follows . . ."<sup>117</sup>

### **B. THE TRUE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST 2:8-15**

Paul revealed what his readers enjoyed in Christ in this pericope to encourage them to remain faithful to the true revelation they had received and believed.

"The apostle now makes his most direct attack against 'the Colossian heresy.' The entire passage bristles with exegetical difficulties, and calls for closer attention to its wording and argument than any other part of the Epistle."<sup>118</sup>

"2:8 functions as a heading and initial statement of the section's theme, in chiasmic form:

8a	polemical denunciation	16-23
8b	in accordance with Christ	9-15" <sup>119</sup>

"The one thing that is clear is that the false teachers wished the Colossians to accept what can only be called *additions to Christ*."<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>115</sup>Vaughan, p. 196.

<sup>116</sup>Wiersbe, 2:125.

<sup>117</sup>Dunn, p. 138.

<sup>118</sup>Vaughan, p. 197.

<sup>119</sup>Dunn, p. 144.

<sup>120</sup>Barclay, p. 161.

2:8 "Philosophy"—this is the only occurrence of the word in the New Testament—here does not refer to the study of basic questions concerning God, man, and the meaning of life. It refers to the speculations and ideas of false teachers not rooted in divine revelation. These ideas had come down by merely human tradition.

"Much depends on our semantics at this point. If by philosophy we mean the search for clarity and understanding regarding the whole of reality, then the Christian must in a sense philosophize. He must think clearly, and he must strive for a self-consistent view of life. In his quest, however, he must always submit to the guidance, limitation, and criticism of the light of divine revelation. On the other hand, if by philosophy we mean human speculation regarding man's basic questions without due respect for the revelation of God, then the Christian, no doubt, will accord this philosophy a greatly diminished relevance to his life and calling. . . .

"I seriously question the view that Paul, as Tertullian after him, is to be understood as condemning all study of philosophy [cf. 1 Cor. 15:1-58; Acts 17:22-30]. . . .

"I take the word, then, to be limited by the context; the Colossian philosophy is in mind, as well as any other, of course, which is not in harmony with divine revelation."<sup>121</sup>

"Empty deception" describes "philosophy." This is clear from the fact that the two nouns are the objects of one preposition, "through" (Gr. *dia*), and there is no article before "empty deception." The idea is that the particular philosophy Paul had been warning his readers about was empty deception ("vain deceit," AV). These are not two separate dangers. This had come down to his readers as pagan tradition.

"Although the context of Col 2:8 probably has reference to a proto-gnostic type of philosophy at Colosse that had a disastrous mix of legalism, asceticism, and mysticism with Christianity, the implications of Paul's exhortation to 'beware of philosophy' are appropriately applied to other alien systems of thought that have invaded Christianity down through the centuries since then."<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup>Johnson, 476:302-03, 307. See David L. Mosher, "St. Paul and Philosophy," *Crux* 8:1 (November 1970):3-9.

<sup>122</sup>Norman L. Geisler, "Beware of Philosophy: A Warning to Biblical Scholars," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42:1 (March 1999):3.

". . . We cannot properly beware of philosophy unless we be aware of philosophy."<sup>123</sup>

The "elementary principles (Gr. *stoicheia*) of the world" probably refer to the religious practices the false teachers were promoting that were simply external and physical (v. 20; cf. Gal. 4:3, 9). The view of many commentators is that this false religious system of worship had the elemental spirits as its subject matter (cf. v. 18).<sup>124</sup> These practices probably involved observance of the Law of Moses. Christ was neither the source nor the content of these teachings.

"The context makes it clear that these prohibitions refer to things that are ethically neutral, not to things that are inherently sinful. . . . Voluntary self-denial in matters of food can be a helpful spiritual exercise, and may on occasion be recommended by considerations of Christian charity; but what is deprecated here is a form of asceticism for asceticism's sake, cultivated as a religious obligation. . . .

"As has been said, the Colossian heresy was basically Jewish. Yet the straightforward Judaizing legalism of Galatians was not envisaged in Colossians. Instead it was a form of mysticism which tempted its adepts to look on themselves as a spiritual elite. . . .

"To look to movements within Judaism for the source of the Colossian heresy is a wiser procedure than to postulate direct influences from Iranian [Mesopotamian] or Greek culture."<sup>125</sup>

"It is best to recognize that both Jewish and Gentile elements were present in the Colossian heresy, many of which were generally shared by the populace in the highly charged world of the first century, especially in the syncretistic and Hellenistic mood of Achaia and western Asia Minor. Many of the elements developed into the Gnosticism of the second century but with far more elaborate philosophical-religious views than are found in Colossians. The most one can say of the error in Colossians is that it was a syncretism of Jewish, Gentile, and Christian features that diminished the all-sufficiency of Christ's salvation and His personal preeminence."<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>124</sup>See O'Brien, *Colossians* . . . , pp. 129-32, for further discussion.

<sup>125</sup>Bruce, 563:196-97, 200-1.

<sup>126</sup>House, "Heresies in . . . ," p. 59.

2:9-10a "For" introduces another reason for abandoning the false teaching. What his readers had in Christ was completely adequate. He is the very essence of deity in whom this "fullness" permanently resides (cf. 1:19). The Greek word translated deity (*theotetos*) refers to the unique essence of God (cf. John 1:1). Divinity (*theiotes*, Rom. 1:20; Acts 17:25), on the other hand, refers to the divine quality of God, which other beings may share (cf. John 1:14).

"Paul here disposes of the Docetic theory that Jesus had no human body as well as the Cerinthian separation between the man Jesus and the aeon Christ. He asserts plainly the deity and the humanity of Jesus Christ in corporeal form."<sup>127</sup>

This fullness was present in Christ's bodily form during His earthly ministry. He did not give up His deity when He became a man. It continues in His resurrected bodily form.<sup>128</sup> As those in Christ we, too, partake of His fullness. We have no essential need that He does not supply.

"This statement crowns Paul's argument. Because Christ is fully God and really man, believers, in union with him, 'are made full' (ASV), that is, share in his fullness."<sup>129</sup>

"In the mystery cults which flourished in the apostolic age the great promise which was held out was salvation through enlightenment."<sup>130</sup>

2:10b-12 Christ is the head over all spirit beings ("rule and authority"). Christ's sufficiency is evident in three things that God has done for us in Him: spiritually circumcised us (vv. 11-12), forgiven our sins (vv. 13-14), and given us victory over the forces of evil (v. 15).

Our spiritual circumcision (v. 11) took place when God regenerated us (cf. Gal. 5:24). It involved Christ cutting off the domination of our sinful nature (flesh), which slavery characterizes the unregenerate person (cf. Rom. 7:24-25). "Baptism" (v. 12) is Spirit baptism.

"Paul turned [in verse 11] from the theological errors of the false teachers to their practical errors—from 'Gnosticism' to legalism."<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup>Robertson, 4:491.

<sup>128</sup>See Johnson, 476:309-10.

<sup>129</sup>Vaughan, p. 199.

<sup>130</sup>Carson, p. 17.

<sup>131</sup>Geisler, "Colossians," p. 677.

2:13-14 Unbelievers are sinners by nature ("uncircumcision of your flesh," i.e., sinful nature), and practice ("transgressions," i.e., violations of God's standards). Nevertheless, God has forgiven believers. He has cancelled our bill of debt. This is true if as Jews we violated the Law of Moses (special revelation).<sup>132</sup> And it is also true if as Gentiles we violated the law of God written on our hearts (general revelation, Rom. 2:14-15).

The Greek term translated "cancelled out" (v. 14, *exaleipsas*) suggests the smearing of letters written on wax.<sup>133</sup> Our certificate of debt was hostile to us in that it hounded us through a guilty conscience and scriptural warnings. Christ erased the debt and removed the certificate. God crucified this certificate with Christ on the cross. The final phrase in verse 14 may be an allusion to the superscription above Jesus' cross.

"What the metaphor says is that Jesus took the damning indictment and nailed it to His cross—presumably as an act of triumphant defiance in the face of those blackmailing powers that were holding it over men and women as a means of commanding their allegiance. If there is an analogy here, it may lie in the fact that Jesus' own accusation was fixed to His cross. Just as His own indictment was fastened there, says Paul, so he takes the indictment drawn up against his people and nails it to His cross. His victorious passion sets them free from their bankruptcy and bondage."<sup>134</sup>

Christ really died as our substitute under the charge of the broken Mosaic Law, not under the supposed charge that He falsely claimed to be the King of the Jews.<sup>135</sup>

2:15 The disarming of the angelic rulers probably refers to Christ's defeat of the evil angelic powers by His death and resurrection.<sup>136</sup> This seems better than His retiring a mediatorial function of the good angels such as their giving the Law.<sup>137</sup>

"Christ divested Himself at the cross of the evil powers which had struggled with Him so strongly throughout His ministry in attempts to force Him to abandon the pathway of the cross (cf. Luke 4:1-13; Matt. 16:22-23; Luke 22:53, etc.)."<sup>138</sup>

<sup>132</sup>See Hal Harless, "The Cessation of the Mosaic Covenant," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160:639 (July-September 2003):349-66.

<sup>133</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles . . .*, p. 98. Cf. Barclay, pp. 170-71.

<sup>134</sup>Bruce, 564:296. Cf. O'Brien, *Colossians . . .*, p. 124.

<sup>135</sup>F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians* in *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians* by E. K. Simpson and F. F. Bruce, pp. 238-39.

<sup>136</sup>Lightfoot, pp. 187-89.

<sup>137</sup>Homer Kent Jr., *Treasures of Wisdom*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>138</sup>Johnson, 477:20.

The public display probably refers to Jesus' disgracing the powers of evil when He died on the cross by bearing the sin that was their claim and hold on human beings. Christ triumphed over Satan's hosts at the cross (cf. 2 Cor. 2:14). "It" seems better than "Him."

"It is more natural to view the principalities and powers here as the defeated foes, driven in front of the triumphal chariot as involuntary and impotent witnesses to their conqueror's superior might."<sup>139</sup>

"The picture, quite familiar in the Roman world, is that of a triumphant general leading a parade of victory. . . . To the casual observer the cross appears to be only an instrument of death, the symbol of Christ's defeat; Paul represents it as Christ's chariot of victory."<sup>140</sup>

This passage is another (cf. 1:15-20) that emphasizes the supremacy of Jesus Christ and accounts for the strong Christological flavor of this epistle.

### **C. THE FALSE DOCTRINES OF MEN 2:16-23**

Having revealed what believers have in Christ, Paul next pointed out the errors of the false teachers more specifically to help his readers identify and reject their instruction.

"Sad to say, there are many Christians who actually believe that some person, religious system, or discipline can add something to their spiritual experience. But they already have everything they ever will need in the person and work of Jesus Christ."<sup>141</sup>

2:16-17      The false teachers were encouraging the Colossians to place their Christian freedom under their control. They wanted to limit it by prohibiting certain perfectly legitimate activities. The five items mentioned in verse 16 were all part of Judaism. Therefore it is very probable that the legalistic false teachers were to some extent Jewish (i.e., advocating obedience to the Law of Moses for justification and sanctification).

"The believing Gentiles in Colossae never were under the Law of Moses since that Law was given only to Israel (Rom. 9:4). It seems strange that, now that they were Christians, they would want to submit themselves to Jewish legalism!"<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup>Bruce, "Colossians Problems," 563:298-99. For a brief explanation and evaluation of the three major theories of the atonement of Christ, see Johnson, 477:21-22.

<sup>140</sup>Vaughan, p. 202.

<sup>141</sup>Wiersbe, 2:105.

<sup>142</sup>Ibid., 2:128-29.

The dietary and festival observances were like shadows of Christ.

They were ". . . a dim outline, a sketch of an object in contrast with the object itself. . . . The offerings were reflections of the one genuine saving offering at the cross, the priesthood was a foreshadowing of the priestly ministry of Christ, and the kings of Israel faintly suggested the coming King of kings and Lord of lords. The new age, then, is not the extension of Judaism; rather, Judaism was a mere shadow of the present age projected into the past."<sup>143</sup>

When Christ came, He explained that the Mosaic Law was no longer binding (e.g., Mark 7:18-19; Luke 16:16; cf. John 1:17; Acts 10:12; Rom. 7:6; 10:4; 14:17; 1 Cor. 8:8; 2 Cor. 3:6-11; Gal. 3:19, 23; 4:9-11; 5:1; Heb. 7:12; 9:10). This failure of the false teachers really amounted to a failure to appreciate Christ.

"The new religion [Christianity] is too free and exuberant to be trained down to 'times and seasons' like its tame and rudimental predecessor [Judaism]. Its feast is daily, for every day is holy; its moon never wanes, and its serene tranquillity is an unbroken Sabbath."<sup>144</sup>

2:18-19

A second error was mysticism. Whereas Colossian legalism (vv. 16-17) was primarily Jewish in origin, Colossian mysticism (vv. 18-19) seems to have been mainly Gnostic and pagan. Paul's readers were in danger of becoming diverted as they ran the Christian race and not staying on the track. Thus they could lose the prize that God will give those who run the race well (cf. 2 Tim. 4:7-8). "Self-abasement" is the practice of denying oneself with the idea that this will gain merit with God. Specifically fasting is in view.

The false teachers also advocated the worship of angels probably with the idea that they were the proper mediators of prayer and worship to God. Similarly many Roman Catholics so regard dead Christians, some of whom they have labeled "saints." The basis of such claims was personal experience, not revelation from God.

Some translators added "visions" (v. 18) to give the idea of some superior experience. However the contrast intended is between humanly generated ideas and divine revelation. Such ideas gave those who had them a false sense of pride. Rather Christians should get our direction from Christ by divine revelation and enjoy growth that He brings to pass rather than growth that is not genuine. The "joints and ligaments" probably refer to

<sup>143</sup>Johnson, 478:112. Cf. Heb. 10:1.

<sup>144</sup>Eadie, p. 177.

believers in Christ's body of which He is the Head (cf. 1:18; Eph. 4:7-16).<sup>145</sup>

"Precedent for this approach to spirituality in Judaism [that Paul was countering in this epistle] is seen in a movement that came to be known as 'Merkabah mysticism.' The Merkabah refers to Ezekiel 1 and the throne chariot of God that Ezekiel saw. This teaching spoke of days of fasting to prepare for a journey to the heavens to see God and have a vision of Him and His angelic host in worship (Philo, *Die Somniis* 1.33-37; *De Vita Mosis* 2.67-70; 1QH 6:13; 1 Enoch 14:8-25; 2 Baruch 21:7-10; Apocalypse of Abraham 9:1-10; 19:1-9; Ascension of Isaiah 7:37; 8:17; 9:28, 31, 33). One could withdraw and eventually go directly into God's presence. Thus this false teaching emphasized the humility of ascetic practice, visions, the rigors of devotion, treating the body harshly, and rules about what should not be eaten or what days should be observed (2:16-23). All this activity was aimed to help prepare individuals for the experience that took them beyond what Jesus had already provided, so they could see God and His angels in heaven."<sup>146</sup>

2:20-23 In these verses Paul developed the third error he already alluded to, namely, asceticism. The ascetic practices ("elementary principles," *stoicheai*, v. 8) he referred to seem to have been extensions of Mosaic Law. "If" (v. 20) could read "Since." It is a first class condition in Greek that in this case is a condition true to reality. Christians "died" to merely human ordinances of Judaism and Gnosticism at conversion (cf. Rom. 6:1-4; 7:1-6; 2 Cor. 5:14; Gal. 2:19). Nevertheless it is possible to put oneself under these and live like unbelievers in the world. The false teachers were in effect forcing the Colossians to live by the world system by placing ascetic requirements on them. The specific decrees cited as examples (v. 21) have to do with food, but these are only representative of many such laws. These laws are inadequate for three reasons. The things prohibited perish through normal usage, the laws are of human origin, and they do not solve the real problem, namely, the desires of the flesh.

"There is only one thing that will put the collar on the neck of the animal within us, and that is the power of the indwelling Christ."<sup>147</sup>

<sup>145</sup>See Michael P. V. Barrett, "Complete in Christ," *Biblical Viewpoint* 13:1 (April 1979):27-32.

<sup>146</sup>Darrell L. Bock, "A Theology of Paul's Prison Epistles," in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, p. 305.

<sup>147</sup>Alexander Maclaren, "The Epistles of St. Paul to the Colossians and Philemon," in *The Expositor's Bible*, p. 255.

The emphases of these false teachers are still with us today. The first is "higher" knowledge (Gnosticism). The second is the observance of laws to win God's love (legalism). The third is the belief that beings other than Christ must mediate between people and God (mysticism). The fourth is the practice of abstaining from things to earn merit with God (asceticism).

"When we make Jesus Christ and the Christian revelation only *part* of a total religious system or philosophy, we cease to give Him the preeminence. When we strive for 'spiritual perfection' or 'spiritual fullness' by means of formulas, disciplines, or rituals, we go backward instead of forward. Christian believers must beware of mixing their Christian faith with such alluring things as yoga, transcendental meditation, Oriental mysticism, and the like. We must also beware of 'deeper life' teachers who offer a system for victory and fullness that bypasses devotion to Jesus Christ. In all things, He must have the preeminence!"<sup>148</sup>

Reformed theology has historically taught that a true Christian will never renounce faith in Christ. The fact that Paul wrote this epistle to Christians who were in danger of doing precisely that should prove that this teaching is wrong. Nowhere in the epistle did he make a distinction between professing Christians, who were supposedly the objects of his warnings, and true Christians. Rather he appealed to the Colossians as genuine Christians to watch out for this real danger. Genuine Christians can be deceived by false teaching, even teaching concerning Christ.

#### **IV. EXHORTATIONS TO PRACTICAL CHRISTIAN LIVING 3:1—4:6**

Paul moved from doctrine to practice, from the truth to its application in daily living. He began this next major section of the epistle by setting forth a basic principle. Then he explained the proper method of living. This led him to discuss the Christian's fundamental relationships. He concluded this section by summarizing the essential practice.

##### **A. THE BASIC PRINCIPLE 3:1-4**

To encourage his readers to turn away from their false teachers, Paul reminded them of their union with Christ. He also urged them to continue living in keeping with their position in Christ.

3:1-2            Again we could translate "If" as "Since" (first class condition). It introduces another situation Paul assumed to be true for the sake of his argument (cf. 2:20). Paul returned to his thought about the believer's union with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection (2:9-15). Two present imperatives identify the Christian's responsibilities: "seek" (v. 1) and "set your affection on" (v. 2). Since God raised us with Christ and we are already as good as seated with Him in heaven, we should "keep seeking" heavenly things.

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<sup>148</sup>Wiersbe, 2:104.

"The description of Christ as 'seated at the right hand of God' is another implied rejoinder to those who were seeking to diminish Christ's role as mediator, inasmuch as the right hand of God is a metaphor for the place of supreme privilege and divine authority."<sup>149</sup>

Second, we should continually "set" our minds on the things of heaven (our spiritual blessings and hope, our Savior's desires, etc.) rather than on the things that are only physical and temporal. They should occupy a large place in our thought lives.

"You must not only *seek* heaven; you must also *think* heaven."<sup>150</sup>

". . . from now on the Christian will see everything in the light and against the background of eternity. He will no longer live as if this world was all that mattered; he will see this world against the background of the larger world of eternity. . . .

"He will, for instance, set giving above getting, serving above ruling, forgiving above avenging. The Christian will see things, not as they appear to men, but as they appear to God."<sup>151</sup>

"The Christian has to keep his feet upon the earth, but his head in the heavens. He must be heavenly-minded here on earth and so help to make earth like heaven."<sup>152</sup>

This is the legitimate mysticism of Paul. The two commands differ in that the first emphasizes the more practical pursuits of life whereas the second stresses the whole bent of the life. The first is outward and the second inward.

Jesus Christ's present rule on His Father's throne over the church is not the same as His rule on David's throne over David's kingdom, which will begin when He returns to earth.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>149</sup>Vaughan, p. 209.

<sup>150</sup>Lightfoot, p. 209.

<sup>151</sup>Barclay, p. 177.

<sup>152</sup>Robertson, 4:500.

<sup>153</sup>See Cleon L. Rogers Jr., "The Davidic Covenant in Acts-Revelation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151:601 (January-March 1994):81-82; John F. Walvoord, "Biblical Kingdoms Compared and Contrasted," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, especially pp. 89-90; David A. Dean, "A Study of the Enthronement of Christ in Acts 2 and 3" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1992); John A. McLean, "Did Jesus Correct the Disciples' View of the Kingdom?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151:602 (April-June 1994):215-27; Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, pp. 81-82; and John F. Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*, pp. 224-26.

3:3 Our life is hidden away with Christ. This statement that the believer died with Christ in the past (aorist tense in Greek) and continues to live with Christ in the present (perfect tense) suggests three thoughts. Our life draws nourishment from secret springs (cf. John 14:19; Phil. 3:20). Our life is as safe as a deposit locked in a bank vault. Our life is one with Christ who is in the bosom of the Father.<sup>154</sup>

"The aorist is simply a powerful metaphor for the fact that when they believed in Christ in baptism they were putting their previous way of life to death and having it buried out of sight. Consequently, it should no longer be a factor in their new way of life."<sup>155</sup>

For the false teachers, the treasures of wisdom were hidden in their secret books (Gr. *apokryphoi*), but for believers Christ is the treasury of wisdom, and our life is hidden (Gr. *kekryptai*) in Him.

3:4 "Sometimes we say of a man, 'Music is his life—Sport is his life—He lives for his work.' Such a man finds life and all that life means in music, in sport, in work, as the case may be. For the Christian, Christ is his life. Jesus Christ dominates his thought and fills his life."<sup>156</sup>

"Whenever" indicates that a revelation of Christ in the future is certain, but its time is unknown. The Greek word *phaneroo* ("revealed") stresses the open display of Christ at His coming. This is probably a reference to the Rapture. When He is revealed to us then, our lives will no longer be hidden in Him but revealed for what they are in our glorification. The Rapture will be a glorious revelation of Him to us and us in our glorified state. Now our eternal life is hidden (v. 3), but then it will be manifest.

"In Colossians . . . there is an emphasis on realized eschatology. Within the 'already—not yet' tension the stress falls upon the former, called forth by the circumstances of the letter. . . . The 'already' of salvation needed to be asserted repeatedly over against those who were interested in the heavenly realm but who had false notions about it, believing it could be reached by legalistic observances, knowledge, visionary experiences and the like. . .

"But if the 'already' pole received the emphasis, the 'not yet' of salvation still needed to be mentioned, and here in verse 4 we find a clear future reference."<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup>Johnson, 479:212-13.

<sup>155</sup>Dunn, p. 206.

<sup>156</sup>Barclay, p. 179. Cf. Phil. 1:21.

<sup>157</sup>O'Brien, *Colossians* . . . , pp. 171-72.

In view of this prospect the Colossians and we need not pursue another system that claims to provide more than we have in Christ. God has provided all we need for acceptance with Him and godly living in Christ. All we need to do is act on the implications of these truths, which Paul proceeded to help his readers do.

### **B. THE PROPER METHOD 3:5-17**

"3:1-4 has provided the perspective from which the daily life of the Colossian Christians should be lived out. Now follows more specific advice that should help them the better to carry out the thematic exhortation to 'walk in him' (2:6)."<sup>158</sup>

#### **1. Things to put off 3:5-11**

On the basis of their position in Christ, Paul urged his readers to separate from the practices of their former way of life. He did this to enable them to realize in their experience all that Jesus Christ could produce in and through them. Three imperatives indicate Paul's main points: consider as dead (lit. put to death, v. 5), put aside (v. 8), and do not lie (v. 9).

3:5            In view of our actual position (v. 1) we should adopt a certain attitude toward our present phase of experience. This will help us to become what we are. The key word translated "consider . . . as dead" is an aorist imperative and means "put to death." There must be a decisive initial act (aorist tense) that introduces a settled attitude (present tense).<sup>159</sup>

"Despite the power of their having been identified with Christ in his death, there were still things, parts of their old lives, habits of hand and mind, which tied them 'to the earth' and hindered the outworking of the 'mind set on what is above.'"<sup>160</sup>

To put something to death is never pleasant.

"This practice of reckoning dead finds an excellent illustration in the gardener's practice of grafting. Once the graft has been made on the old stock the gardener is careful to snip off any shoot from the old stock that may appear. So, in the believer's life, since he has now been grafted into the Last Adam and His new life, he must by the Spirit put to death any products of the old life that may appear (cf. Rom. 8:13)."<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>158</sup>Dunn, p. 211.

<sup>159</sup>Bruce, *Commentary on . . .*, p. 267.

<sup>160</sup>Dunn, p. 212.

<sup>161</sup>Johnson, 481:24.

Paul's first list deals with sexual practices. Lists of virtues and vices were common in the ethical systems of the ancient world, and the imagery of putting off and on was also well-known.<sup>162</sup>

Immorality (Gr. *porneia*) refers to illicit sexual intercourse.

Impurity (*akatharsia*) in any form is in view, especially moral impurity in this context.

Passion (*pathos*) means uncontrolled illegitimate desire.

Evil desire (*epithymian kaken*) means any evil desire in a more general sense.

Greed (*pleonexian*, lit. "desire to have more") is any materialistic desire, including lust, that disregards the rights of others. It is "the arrogant and ruthless assumption that all other persons and things exist for one's own benefit."<sup>163</sup>

3:6-9 Such behavior will bring God's wrath eventually. That is, God will discipline Christians as well as non-believers who practice these things. These activities normally characterize the unsaved, so Christians are to lay them aside (v. 8; cf. Matt. 5:29-30; Rom. 8:13; Eph. 5:3-14).

"The Christian must kill self-centeredness; he must regard as dead all private desires and ambitions. There must be in his life a radical transformation of the will, and a radical shift of the centre. Everything which would keep him from fully obeying God and fully surrendering to Christ must be surgically excised."<sup>164</sup>

The phrase "the wrath of God" (v. 6) is usually eschatological in the New Testament and refers to the Tribulation period (cf. 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9; Rom. 5:9). That is probably its reference here too.

Paul's second list deals with sins of speech.

Anger (Gr. *orge*) is a settled attitude of hostility.

Wrath (*thymos*) means a verbal outburst of evil passion.

Malice (*kakia*) is ill will, a vicious disposition that results in hurt to one's neighbor.

Slander (*blasphemia*) refers to insulting, injurious, malicious speech in general.

Abusive speech (*aischrologia*) means filthy, disgraceful, dishonorable speech.

Lying (*pseudesthe*) refers to deceptive, distorting, untruthful speech.

<sup>162</sup>Dunn, p. 211; O'Brien, *Colossians* . . . , pp. 179-81. Cf. Rom. 1:29-32; 1 Cor. 5:9-11; 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-23; Phil. 4:8; 1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Pet. 4:3; et al. See René A. López, "A Study of Pauline Passages with Vice Lists," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168:671 (July-September 2011):301-16.

<sup>163</sup>G. B. Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison*, p. 205.

<sup>164</sup>Barclay, pp. 180-81.

The imperative command against lying is very strong. Paul said, Never lie. The reason given (v. 9) applies to all the preceding activities. The "old self" is the person the Christian was before God united him or her with Christ.

- 3:10 The "new self" is who the Christian is after his or her union with Christ. One writer argued that "the new man" refers to the church, the body of Christ.<sup>165</sup> But this is a minority view. Verse 10 describes the process of individual sanctification. "True knowledge" (*epignosis*) is full knowledge of God and His will. Sanctification results in increasing likeness to Christ. Only by sanctification can people attain to the full image of God and Christ that God created them to bear (Gen. 1:26-28).
- 3:11 There is no national or racial distinction that determines one's acceptability to God nor is there any religious, cultural, or social distinction. Jesus Christ is essentially all that we need for new birth and growth. He indwells every believer and permeates all the relationships of life. "In all" probably means that Christ is everything (cf. 1 Cor. 15:28; Gal. 3:28).<sup>166</sup> A barbarian was one who did not know Greek; his or her language was foreign. Scythians originated from the Black Sea and Caspian Sea area, and the Greeks thought of them as the lowest type of barbarian.<sup>167</sup>

"The new man lives in a new environment where all racial, national, religious, cultural and social distinctions are no more. Rather, Christ is now all that matters and in all who believe. The statement is one of the most inclusive in the New Testament and is amply supported by the pre-eminence of Christ in New Testament theology. It is a particularly appropriate statement for the Colossians and affords an excellent summary statement of the teaching of the letter. There are three realms, relevant to the Colossians, in which He is all. He is everything in *salvation*; hence there is no place for angelic mediation in God's redemptive work (cf. 1:18-22; 2:18). He is everything in *sanctification*; hence legality and asceticism are out of place in the Christian life (cf. 2:16-23). He is our life (3:3-4). Finally, He is everything necessary for human *satisfaction*; hence there is no need for philosophy, or the deeds of the old man (1:26-28; 2:3, 9-10). He fills the whole life, and all else is hindering and harmful."<sup>168</sup>

<sup>165</sup>Darrell L. Bock, "'The New Man' as Community in Colossians and Ephesians," in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands*, pp. 158-60.

<sup>166</sup>See C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles . . .*, pp. 121-22.

<sup>167</sup>See McGee, 5:358.

<sup>168</sup>Johnson, 481:28.

## 2. Things to put on 3:12-17

Paul urged his readers not only to divest themselves of behavior that is inappropriate to their union with Christ but also to clothe themselves with attitudes and actions that are appropriate. He did so to complete their understanding of their responsibilities as Christians.

"The emphasis in this section is on *motives*. Why should we put off the old deeds and put on the qualities of the new life? Paul explained four motives that ought to encourage us to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4)."<sup>169</sup>

". . . I have written a message on this passage of Scripture, and I have called it, 'What the Well-Dressed Christian Will Wear This Year.'"<sup>170</sup>

3:12-14 Paul reminded the Colossians of who they were because an appreciation of who one is affects how he or she behaves. In doing prison evangelism, I have learned that many prisoners grew up hearing from their parent or parents that they would never amount to anything and would probably end up in prison. Thinking of themselves as "losers", they became what they thought they were. God has specially selected believers, has set them apart for great things, and has made them the objects of His love. In view of this privilege the following characteristics are only reasonable.

"They deal with a believer's treatment of others, with his estimate of himself, and with his reaction to his treatment by others."<sup>171</sup>

Compassion (Gr. *splanchna oiktirmou*) shows sensitivity to those suffering and in need.

Kindness (*chrestotes*) manifests itself in a sweet disposition and thoughtful interpersonal dealings.

Humility (*tapeinophrosyne*) means having a realistic view of oneself, "thinking lowly of ourselves because we are so."<sup>172</sup>

Gentleness (*prautes*) means not behaving harshly, arrogantly, or self-assertively but with consideration for others.

Patience (*makrothymia*) is the quality of being long-suffering, self-restraining. The following two qualities expand on the thought of patience.

Forbearing (*anechomenoi*) means putting up with others and enduring discomfort.

Forgiving (*charizomenoi*) involves not holding a grudge or grievance.

Love (*agape*) means doing what is best for another person.

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<sup>169</sup>Wiersbe, 2:137.

<sup>170</sup>McGee, 5:358.

<sup>171</sup>Carson, p. 86.

<sup>172</sup>C. J. Ellicott, *A Critical and Grammatical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistles to the Philippians, Colossians, and to Philemon*, p. 190.

All these features deal with the believer's interpersonal relationships. In this area of life especially the life of Christ should be visible in us. Love is the supremely important Christian virtue. We should put it on over all the other garments in this figure like a belt that holds the others in place (cf. Eph. 6:14).

- 3:15 Four imperatives in verses 15-17 identify the precepts believers must follow. The first of these is "let rule." When Christians need to make choices, the peace that Christ produces in our hearts should be a determining factor.<sup>173</sup> We should choose what will result in peace between us and God, and between us and one another, if such a course of action lies within God's moral will (cf. John 14:27).

"This directive forms, with the Word of God and the witness of the indwelling Spirit, one of the most important principles of guidance in the Christian life."<sup>174</sup>

When these three indicators line up we can move ahead confidently. Realization of the unity of the body and the peace of Christ results in thankfulness that should also mark our behavior. The second imperative is "be thankful."

- 3:16 The third imperative is "let dwell." The "word of Christ," used only here in the New Testament, is Christ's teachings, not only during His earthly ministry but also in all of Scripture. His Word should permeate our whole being so that we make all decisions and plans in its light.

". . . as the rabbis later pointed out, he who dwells in a house is the master of the house, not just a passing guest . . ." <sup>175</sup>

"Thus we are to submit to the demands of the Christian message and let it become so deeply implanted within us as to control all our thinking."<sup>176</sup>

"Many saved people cannot honestly say that God's Word dwells in their hearts richly because they do not take time to read, study, and memorize it."<sup>177</sup>

Teaching is the imparting of truth, and admonition is warning against error. We should perform these activities joyfully and with song. "Psalms" probably refers to the inspired Old Testament psalms. The word "psalms"

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<sup>173</sup>Lightfoot, p. 221.

<sup>174</sup>Johnson, 481:30-31.

<sup>175</sup>Dunn, p. 236.

<sup>176</sup>Vaughan, p. 216.

<sup>177</sup>Wiersbe, 2:140.

implies that the believers sang them with musical accompaniment. Hymns are songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. Spiritual songs probably refer to expressions of Christian experience set to music. Thankfulness to God is to mark our singing too (cf. v. 15).<sup>178</sup>

"Whether with instrument or with voice or with both it is all for naught if the adoration is not in the heart."<sup>179</sup>

"One of the first descriptions of a Church service which we possess is that of Pliny, the Roman governor of Bithynia, who sent a report of the activities of the Christians to Trajan the Roman Emperor. In that report he said, 'They meet at dawn to sing a hymn to Christ as God.' The gratitude of the Church has always gone up to God in Christian praise and Christian song."<sup>180</sup>

"It has often been noticed that the Colossian passage is parallel with Ephesians 5:18-20. In the latter passage the hymns and songs are the outgrowth of the filling of the Spirit, while in Colossians they are the result of the deep assimilation of the Word of God. In other words, the Word-filled Christian is a Spirit-filled Christian, and the examination of the two passages would save us from a great deal of error on this subject. Undisciplined emphasis on the Holy Spirit is accompanied too frequently by shallow grounding in the Word of God."<sup>181</sup>

3:17 This verse covers all other thoughts and actions.

"The NT does not contain a detailed code of rules for the Christian, like those which were elaborated with ever-increasing particularity in rabbinical casuistry. Codes of rules, as Paul explains elsewhere (e.g., in Gal. 3:23—4:7), are suited to the period of immaturity when he and his readers were still under guardians; the son who has come to years of responsibility knows his father's will without having to be provided with a long list of 'Do's' and 'Don't's [*sic*].' What the NT does provide is those basic principles of Christian living which may be applied to all the situations of life as they arise (cf. 1 Cor. 10:21)."<sup>182</sup>

<sup>178</sup>See David F. Detwiler, "Church Music and Colossians 3:16," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158:631 (July-September 2001):347-69.

<sup>179</sup>Robertson, 4:505.

<sup>180</sup>Barclay, p. 191.

<sup>181</sup>Johnson, 481:32.

<sup>182</sup>Bruce, *Commentary on . . .*, p. 285.

The basic principle, as opposed to a set of specific rules, is this. We should say all words and practice all deeds in harmony with the revelation of Jesus Christ, namely, under His authority and as His followers. The "name" comprehends everything revealed and known about the person bearing the name. Moreover we are to do all with thanksgiving to God. The fourth imperative is implicit in the Greek text, but the translators have supplied it in the English text: "Do."

When faced with a question about what the Christian should do, Paul taught that we should simply ask ourselves what conduct would be appropriate for one identified with Christ. "What would Jesus do?" is quite similar. This approach is vastly different from the legal one that provides a specific command for every situation. In this contrast we see a basic difference between the New and Old Covenants.

### **C. THE FUNDAMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS 3:18—4:1**

Paul next set forth certain principles to guide his readers in their most important interpersonal relationships. Geisler saw this section as containing exhortations to perfect the private life (3:18—4:1), the prayer life (4:2-4), and the public life (4:5-6). He also saw 4:7-18 as expressing Paul's concern to perfect the personal lives of the Colossian believers.<sup>183</sup> Paul wrote this instruction to enable the readers to understand what behavior is consistent with union with Christ in these relationships. This is one of several "house-rule" lists in the New Testament (cf. Eph. 5:22—6:9; 1 Tim. 2:8-15; 6:1-2; Titus 2:1-10; 1 Pet. 2:18—3:7). The writings of some Apostolic Fathers also contain such lists.<sup>184</sup> Luther referred to these sections as *haustafel*, and some scholars still use this technical term when referring to these lists.

". . . the earliest churches were all 'house churches' (see on 4:15), so that the model of the well-run household provided precedent for the well-run church . . ." <sup>185</sup>

The apostle grouped six classes of people in three pairs in the following verses. In each pair he first addressed the subordinate member and then the one in authority. Bear in mind that Paul was speaking to people who are in Christ in each case.

"The Christian ethic is an ethic of *reciprocal obligation*. It is never an ethic on which all the duties are on one side." <sup>186</sup>

#### **1. Wives and husbands 3:18-19 (cf. Eph. 5:22-33; 1 Pet. 3:1-7)**

3:18 Paul did not say all women should be subject to all men, only that wives should be to their own husbands.

<sup>183</sup>Geisler, "Colossians," p. 683.

<sup>184</sup>See O'Brien, *Colossians* . . . , pp. 214-19, for a discussion of them.

<sup>185</sup>Dunn, p. 245.

<sup>186</sup>Barclay, p. 192.

"The exhortation should not be weakened in translation in deference to modern sensibilities (cf. again 1 Cor. 14:34 . . .). But neither should its significance be exaggerated; 'subjection' means 'subordination,' not 'subjugation' . . ."187

This subjection rests on divinely prescribed authority, not on any inherent inferiority in spirituality, intelligence, worth, or anything else. This is "fitting" in that it is consistent with what God ordained at the creation of the human race (Gen. 2:18; cf. 1 Tim. 2:13).

"The thought of this passage moves in the realm of *respect* for another's position and place, not in the realm of inferiority."188

Submission is "an attitude that recognizes the rights of authority. His [Paul's] main thought is that the wife is to defer to, that is, be willing to take second place to, her husband."189

I do not think that God intends for a wife to yield to a husband who abuses her or orders her to do things contrary to God's will. She should maintain a submissive attitude toward him and defer to him, but she need not subject herself or her children to danger. Paul's point was that a wife should always relate to her husband as God's appointed leader. I take Paul's phrase "in everything" in Ephesians 5:24 to mean "in every sphere of life" (i.e., in domestic life, in church life, and in civil life).

3:19 Husbands have two responsibilities toward their wives. First, they must love them rather than treating them as subjects. Loving here involves doing what is best for the one loved, sacrificing self-interests for those of the one loved (cf. John 15:13), and behaving unselfishly (1 Cor. 13). The Greek word translated "love" is *agapao*, the "all give" type of love, not *phileo*, the "give and take" type, nor *erao*, the "all take" type.

Second, husbands must not allow a bitter attitude to develop toward their wives because of the wife's lack of submission or for any other reason. "Embittered" means irritated or cross. This attitude is a specific and all too common manifestation of lack of love.

"Both under Jewish and under Greek laws and custom, all the privileges belonged to the husband, and all the duties to the wife; but here in

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187Ibid., p. 247. Cf. Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 119; and W. Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, p. 253.

188Johnson, 482:109. See Anthonie von den Doel, "Submission in the New Testament," *Brethren Life and Thought* 31:2 (Spring 1986):121-25; and Paul S. Fiddes, "'Woman's Head is Man' A Doctrinal Reflection upon a Pauline Text," *Baptist Quarterly* 31:8 (October 1986):370-83.

189Vaughan, p. 218.

Christianity we have for the first time an ethic of mutual and reciprocal obligation."<sup>190</sup>

## **2. Children and parents 3:20-21 (cf. Eph. 6:1-4)**

3:20 Children are to obey (*hypakoute*) both parents. The Greek word for obey implies a readiness to listen to and carry out parental instructions. The Greek word for children (*tekna*) means youths in contrast to babes and toddlers. "All things" is the general principle and would cover 99 percent of the cases involved in a Christian home. However every Christian is primarily responsible to the Lord, of course. Consequently if the parent required the child to disobey God, the child should obey God rather than man (Acts 4:19; 5:29; Eph. 6:1). The reason children should please their parents by obeying them is that this behavior pleases the Lord (cf. Exod. 20:12; 2 Cor. 5:9).

"I have seen some literature that tells young married couples that they are still to go to their parents and obey them. I think that is nonsense and entirely unscriptural (see Gen. 2:24). 'Children, obey your parents in all things' is a verse for children, for minors."<sup>191</sup>

3:21 While children must obey both parents, the father (*pateron*) has the primary responsibility for his children as head of the household. For this reason Paul addressed the fathers here. What is in view here is the habitual provoking of children by insensitive parents, especially fathers. Some provocation is necessary in disciplining, but ceaseless irritation causes children to become discouraged, sullen, angry, and even hateful.

"Paul may have had in mind the regimen of 'don'ts' that loomed so large in the Colossian heresy."<sup>192</sup>

## **3. Slaves and masters 3:22—4:1 (cf. Eph. 6:5-9; 1 Pet. 2:18-25)**

3:22 Paul probably made this section longer than the preceding two because he sent this epistle to Colosse with the Epistle to Philemon. Onesimus, Philemon's run-away slave, carried them.<sup>193</sup> Moreover there may well have been more slaves in the Colossian church than masters (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26). The friction inherent in this situation probably called for extended comments on master-slave relationships in the body of Christ and in this church particularly. Note also that Paul did not argue for the abolition of slavery but urged Christians to behave as Christians within that social structure.

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<sup>190</sup>Barclay, p. 193.

<sup>191</sup>McGee, 5:361.

<sup>192</sup>Vaughan, p. 219.

<sup>193</sup>Johnson, 482:109, 113; Lightfoot, p. 226.

". . . those who live in modern social democracies, in which interest groups can hope to exert political pressure by intensive lobbying, should remember that in the cities of Paul's day the great bulk of Christians would have had no possibility whatsoever of exerting any political pressure for any particular policy or reform. In such circumstances a pragmatic quietism was the most effective means of gaining room enough to develop the quality of personal relationships which would establish and build up the microcosms (churches) of transformed communities."<sup>194</sup>

Paul's view was this. It is more important for Christians to carry out our mission as Christians, in whatever social conditions we find ourselves, than it is for us to make changing those conditions our primary concern (cf. Matt. 28:19-20; 1 Cor. 7:20-22).<sup>195</sup> "On earth" means in your physical relationships. In spiritual matters the slave and his master were equal brothers in Christ. Slaves in the Roman Empire were similar to domestic servants in Victorian Britain.<sup>196</sup>

3:23-25

Slaves should do their work primarily for the Lord. This view of work transforms a worker's attitudes and performance. Even the most servile work thereby becomes a ministry and an act of worship.

"He means, 'Don't keep your eye on the clock. Keep your eye on Christ. He is the One whom you are serving.' This is the way you ought to do your job.

"If you are lazy on the job, you are *not* dedicated to Jesus Christ."<sup>197</sup>

The Lord will reward such service with an inheritance (1 Cor. 4:5; Rev. 22:12). Imagine a slave receiving an inheritance! The title "Lord Christ" occurs only here in the New Testament. Evidently Paul coined it to stress Jesus' lordship. Jesus is the Messiah who as Lord will reward the faithful in the future. There may be an intended contrast with "Lord Caesar."

"The inheritance is a reward which is received as 'wages' for work done. Nothing could be plainer. The context is speaking of the return a man should receive because of his work, as in an employer-employee relationship. The inheritance is received as a result of work; it does not come as a gift. The Greek *antapodosis* means repayment or

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<sup>194</sup>Dunn, p. 253.

<sup>195</sup>See Wiersbe, 2:144.

<sup>196</sup>Dunn, p. 252.

<sup>197</sup>McGee, 5:361.

reward. The verb *antapodidomi* never means to receive as a gift; it is always used in the New Testament of a repayment due to an obligation."<sup>198</sup>

The New Testament revelation concerning the inheritance that believers can merit by faithful perseverance in the faith and good works is extensive. All believers will receive much inheritance simply because God chooses to bestow it on all (cf. John 3:3, 5, 16, 36; Rom. 5:1, 9; 8:1, 31-39; 1 Cor. 15:53-57; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:13-17; 1 Pet. 1:9). Nevertheless believers who remain faithful to the Lord will receive even more inheritance (cf. Matt. 5:12, 46; 6:1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 16, 18; 10:41-42; 16:27; 25:21, 23; Mark 9:41; Luke 6:23, 35; 19:17, 19; John 12:26; 15:14; 1 Cor. 3:8, 14; 6:9; 9:16-18, 25, 27; 2 Cor. 5:9-11; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5; Phil. 4:1; Col. 3:24; 1 Thess. 2:19; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:18; 2 Tim. 2:5, 12; 4:8; Heb. 11:6; James 1:12; 1 Pet. 1:7; 5:4; 2 John 8; Rev. 2:7, 10, 11, 17, 23, 26-27; 11:18; 22:12). Some passages indicate that this inheritance involves participation in the wedding banquet at the beginning of the messianic kingdom (e.g., Matt. 25; et al.). Other passages speak of it as reigning with Christ (Matt. 19:27-28; Luke 19:17-19; 22:28-30; Rom. 8:17-21) or as treasure in heaven (Matt. 6:19-21, 29; 19:21; Luke 12:32-33; 1 Tim. 6:17-19). It also involves receiving praise and honor from Jesus Christ and the Father (Matt. 6:1, 5, 16; 25:21; John 12:26; 1 Cor. 4:5; 1 Pet. 1:6-7; 2 Pet. 1:10-11). These honors are sometimes spoken of as crowns (Phil. 4:1; 1 Cor. 9:24-27; 1 Thess. 2:19; 2 Tim. 4:6-8; James 1:12; 1 Pet. 5:1-4; Rev. 2:10; 4:9-10).<sup>199</sup>

4:1 Masters should remember that they have a Master too. This view should transform how they regard and treat their slaves. Interestingly throughout history wherever Christians have constituted a significant segment of the population and have followed Paul's directions here, the slave system has died. The principles in these verses (3:22—4:1) are, of course, applicable to employer-employee relationships as well.<sup>200</sup>

William Webb offered an extensive discussion of how to apply these instructions.<sup>201</sup> I do not agree with his "redemptive-movement hermeneutic," or what I would call a "trajectory hermeneutic," because I believe it is subjective, though I believe he offers some helpful suggestions.<sup>202</sup>

The fact that the word "Lord" occurs frequently (seven times) in 3:18—4:1 highlights the importance of applying the lordship of Christ in all our interpersonal relationships.

<sup>198</sup>Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, p. 68. See also O'Brien, *Colossians . . .*, p. 231.

<sup>199</sup>See Dillow, pp. 551-83.

<sup>200</sup>Ellis, p. 1344.

<sup>201</sup>William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*.

<sup>202</sup>See Wayne Grudem, "Should We Move Beyond the New Testament to a Better Ethic?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47:2 (June 2004):299-346, for a longer analysis of Webb's book with similar criticisms as mine.

"It should be remembered that, while all Christians are on the same level in the Lord, there are still spheres in which subordination must be recognized. In fact, there are four spheres in which believers live: (a) in Christ; (b) in the household; (c) in the church; (d) in the state. In Christ there is no difference between Jew and Greek, bond and free, or male and female (Gal. 3:28). In the household, while there is intrinsic spiritual equality, there are distinctions. The husband is the head of the wife (Eph. 5:23), and children are to obey both (6:1; cf. Col. 3:20), the Lord being the supreme illustration (Luke 2:51). The slave, too, is to be subject to his master (Titus 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:18). In the church all are subject to the oversight of the elders (1 Thess. 5:12; Heb. 13:7), and to the Lord (Eph. 5:24). In the state even the believers, although God's children and heavenly citizens, are subject to the secular authorities and earthly statutes (Rom. 13:1; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13)."<sup>203</sup>

#### **D. THE ESSENTIAL PRACTICE 4:2-6**

Paul concluded his exhortations concerning Christian living with instructions pertaining to three essential practices for those in Christ. He wanted to impress their importance on his readers. One exhortation dealt with his readers' relationship to God, another dealt with their relationship to other people, and the third looked self-ward.

4:2           The most important practice to perpetuate in relation to God is prayer. That is so because in prayer we call on God to work, and we express our faith in Him. Throughout this epistle Paul's emphasis has been on the believer's union with Christ and the complete adequacy that that union produces. The Christian who does not pray is demonstrating independence from God (cf. John 15:5). It is only as we ask God to work that He will accomplish many things (James 4:2). Consequently Paul urged his readers to devote themselves to prayer, to give it constant attention and priority. Perhaps the main problem we face when we do pray is concentration. Therefore Paul reminded his readers to keep alert in prayer and to express gratitude always in view of God's goodness and grace to them.<sup>204</sup>

"This is like breathing: inhale by prayer, exhale by thanksgiving."<sup>205</sup>

The repeated emphasis on thanksgiving makes this epistle one of the most "thankful" books in the New Testament (cf. 1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:17; 4:2).

<sup>203</sup>Johnson, 482:109-10. See E. Glenn Hinson, "The Christian Household in Colossians 3:18—4:1," *Review and Expositor* 70:4 (Fall 1973):495-506.

<sup>204</sup>See Howard Tillman Kuist, "Zest for Prayer," *Theology Today* 11 (1954):48-52; and Thomas L. Constable, *Talking to God: What the Bible Teaches about Prayer*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>205</sup>McGee, 5:363.

"The accompanying exhortation to 'keep awake, be on the alert' (*gregoreo*) is drawn from the imagery of guard duty (Neh. 7:3; 1 Macc. 2:27; Mark 14:34, 37) . . ."206

- 4:3-4 Paul requested his readers' intercession for two matters in particular. He asked them to pray that God would give him and his companions opportunities for evangelism and edification. He also asked that when these came he would be able to present the gospel clearly.<sup>207</sup> "The mystery of Christ" (v. 3; 1:26-27) is the gospel. Paul had greater concern about getting the gospel out than he had with getting himself out of prison.
- 4:5 With respect to his readers' relationship to unbelievers, Paul counseled the use of wisdom as most important. This involves living life in the light of God's revelation and then applying this knowledge to specific situations (1:9). The Greek word translated "opportunity" (*kairos*, lit. time) probably implies the opportune time, as it does in some other places. The opportunity in view seems to be the opportunity to bring others into full union with Christ (cf. v. 3).
- 4:6 Paul turned from thinking about his readers' walk to their talk. The most important thing to keep in mind regarding the Colossians' own practices involved their speech. Speech most effectively expresses what is inside the believer. The Christian's speech should mirror the gracious character and conduct of his or her God by demonstrating love, patience, sacrifice, undeserved favor, etc. Salt probably represented both attractiveness, since salt makes food appealing, and wholesomeness, since salt was a preservative that retarded corruption in food (cf. Matt. 5:13; Mark 9:50; Eph. 4:29). Furthermore one should wisely suit his or her speech to each need. The words "seasoned with salt" refer to witty speech in classical Greek, but Paul probably meant attractive and wholesome speech in view of other biblical uses of the term salt.<sup>208</sup>

"A child of God should have a conversation that *deters* evil. It should withhold evil rather than promote it. I think it also means that a Christian should not be boring."<sup>209</sup>

These three exhortations in verses 2-4, 5, and 6 are extremely important and deserve more attention from Christians than they normally receive.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>206</sup>Dunn, p. 262.

<sup>207</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles . . .*, p. 132.

<sup>208</sup>Johnson, 484:314-15.

<sup>209</sup>McGee, 5:363.

<sup>210</sup>See James P. Sweeney, "The Priority of Prayer in Colossians 4:2-4," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159:635 (July-September 2002):318-33; and idem, "Guidelines on Christian Witness in Colossians 4:5-6," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159:636 (October-December 2002):449-61.

## **V. CONCLUSION 4:7-18**

Paul concluded this epistle with personal information and instructions. He did this to bond his readers more tightly to the body of Christ from which they were in danger of separating due to the influence of the false teachers.

### **A. THE BEARERS OF THIS EPISTLE 4:7-9**

4:7-8 Paul sent Tychicus with this letter for two primary purposes. He wanted to provide more information about himself and his present ministry than he felt led to record in this letter. He also wanted to encourage the Colossians. In relation to all other Christians Tychicus was a beloved brother. In relation to Christ he was a faithful servant. In relation to Paul he was a fellow-bondslave either both as a prisoner of Rome and to the will of God, or just to the will of God. Tychicus' name occurs five times in association with Paul in the New Testament (Acts 20:4; Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7; Titus 3:12; 2 Tim. 4:12).

"Someone has said that the greatest ability in the world is dependability, and this is true."<sup>211</sup>

4:9 Onesimus had been a slave in the household of Philemon and a member of the Colossian church, had run away to Rome, and Paul had led him to Christ there. Paul sent him back to Colosse with Tychicus, not in chains but as a beloved brother in Christ who had proved himself faithful (cf. Phile.).

These men traveled from Rome to Colosse, probably by way of Ephesus and Laodicea, with the epistle to the Ephesians (Eph. 6:21-22). They probably also carried one to the Laodiceans (cf. v. 16), and the epistle to Philemon (Phile. 2:23-24), as well as this epistle.

### **B. GREETINGS FROM PAUL'S COMPANIONS 4:10-14**

Paul mentioned six individuals, five of whom he also named in Philemon.

4:10 Aristarchus came from Thessalonica (Acts 20:4), had been with Paul in Ephesus (Acts 19:29), and had accompanied him to Rome (Acts 27:2). "Prisoner" (v. 10) is the translation of an unusual Greek word (lit. prisoner of war). It probably means prisoner to the will of God rather than prisoner of Caesar (cf. Phile. 23).<sup>212</sup>

John Mark (Acts 12:25) had rejoined Paul after their separation during Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13:5, 13). The Colossians knew his cousin Barnabas better. This Mark wrote the Gospel that bears his name (cf. 2 Tim. 4:11).

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<sup>211</sup>Wiersbe, 2:149.

<sup>212</sup>Carson, p. 98.

"John Mark is an encouragement to everyone who has failed in his first attempts to serve God. He did not sit around and sulk. He got back into the ministry and proved himself faithful to the Lord and to the Apostle Paul."<sup>213</sup>

- 4:11 Jesus Justus' name occurs only here in the New Testament. These three men were Jewish Christians as is clear from their names. By mentioning them Paul helped the Colossians realize that what he had written about Jews and Gentiles being equal in Christ was a reality in his ministry. The "kingdom of God" here probably refers to the domain over which Christ presently rules in contrast to Satan's domain (cf. 1:13).
- 4:12-13 The following three fellow-workers had Gentile backgrounds. Epaphras had evidently been instrumental in the founding of the church at Colosse (1:7). His concern for the Colossians is clear from his zealous prayers for their maturity and their full perception of God's complete will for them. These concerns are the burden of this epistle. Epaphras' fervent agonizing in prayer (cf. Luke 22:44) reflects his understanding that God would provide illumination and continued growth in proportion as people requested these of Him (James 4:2). This is spiritual work that only God can do. Epaphras' concern for the Christians in the other towns near Colosse suggests the possibility that he evangelized these communities too.

"Epaphras holds the unique distinction among all the friends and co-workers of Paul of being the only one whom Paul explicitly commended for his intensive prayer ministry. The passage quoted above [4:12-13] may well be called his diploma of success in this ministry."<sup>214</sup>

"Epaphras grasped, what many of us are slow to realize, that the tactics of the Christian battle are born of the strategy of prayer."<sup>215</sup>

"There are many things outside the power of ordinary Christian people, and great position, wide influence, outstanding ability may be lacking to almost all of us, but the humblest and least significant Christian can pray, and as 'prayer moves the Hand that moves the world,' perhaps the greatest power we can exert is that which comes through prayer."<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>213</sup>Wiersbe, 2:150.

<sup>214</sup>D. Edmond Hiebert, *Working With God: Scriptural Studies in Intercession*, p. 77.

<sup>215</sup>Harrington C. Lees, *St. Paul's Friends*, p. 157.

<sup>216</sup>W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Christ Pre-Eminent*, p. 191.

"It is related of an old pastor who every Saturday afternoon could be seen leaving his study and entering the church house by the back door, and about sundown he would be seen going home. Someone's curiosity was aroused enough to follow one day and watch through a window. It was in the days when the family pew was an institution of the church. The old pastor was seen to kneel at each pew and pray for every member of the family that was to occupy it on the Lord's Day. He called each member by name as he poured out his heart to God for his flock. His was a ministry of power and his people reflected the grace of God upon them. Blessed is that church which has such a praying shepherd."<sup>217</sup>

4:14 Paul identified Luke, the writer of the third Gospel and Acts, only as a physician.

"At this time medicine was only just becoming a subject of systematic instruction."<sup>218</sup>

Luke would have been both physically and spiritually helpful to Paul. Demas later forsook Paul (2 Tim. 4:10), but at this time he was ministering to and with the apostle.

### **C. GREETINGS TO OTHERS 4:15-17**

4:15 In addition to the neighboring Laodicean Christians, Paul sent greetings to Nympha, possibly the hostess of a Laodicean house-church. There is no evidence that Christians met in church buildings until the third century.<sup>219</sup> The early Christians seem to have chosen their meeting places on the basis of convenience and expediency.

4:16 Paul's letter to the Laodiceans was probably not an inspired one and has evidently been lost (cf. 1 Cor. 5:9). This seems more likely than that Paul was referring to the Epistle to the Ephesians here.<sup>220</sup>

4:17 Archippus seems to have been Philemon's son (Phile. 2). Perhaps he was a gifted young man whom Paul wished to encourage. The idea that he was the present leader of the Colossian church is a possibility that some commentators have suggested.

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<sup>217</sup>Hiebert, p. 83. See also idem, "Epaphras, Man of Prayer," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136:541 (January-March 1977):54-64.

<sup>218</sup>Dunn, p. 283. See *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, s. v. "Medicine," p. 662.

<sup>219</sup>Lightfoot, p. 241.

<sup>220</sup>For discussion of this theory, see the introductions to the New Testament and commentaries on Ephesians 1:1.

**D. PAUL'S PERSONAL CONCLUSION 4:18**

Paul normally used a secretary to write his letters and then added a personal word at the end in his own handwriting to authenticate his authorship (cf. Rom. 16:22; Gal. 6:11). Here he requested his readers' prayers for him in his house arrest in Rome (cf. vv. 3-4). Finally he wished that God's continuing unmerited favor would be their portion (cf. 1:2).

Why did Paul include so many personal references to friends and acquaintances in this epistle? Perhaps he had never visited these Christians and they knew him only by reputation (cf. 2:1). Probably since he had lived and ministered in Asia Minor for three years he would have had personal contact with some of the saints in Colosse. Evidently he sent many personal greetings because he had many friends in Colossae. Paul also sent many personal greetings to the Christians in Rome though he had not yet visited Rome when he wrote his epistle to them (cf. Rom. 16).

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