

# Notes on Colossians

2023 Edition  
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## Introduction

### DESTINATION

The city of Colosse lay in the beautiful Lycus Valley about 100 miles east of Ephesus in the Roman province of Asia. 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 not yet excavated the site of Colosse.<sup>1</sup>

"... the Greek historian and geographer Strabo, writing about two generations before Paul wrote Colossians, calls the Colosse of his day 'a small town' (*Geography* XII.viii.13)."<sup>2</sup>

The inhabitants of Colosse 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>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; and Hershel Shanks, "Not So Colossal Colossae," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 38:1 (January/February 2012):13.

<sup>2</sup>William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup>E. Earle Ellis, "The Epistle to the Colossians," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1333.

"Without doubt Colossae was the least important church to which any epistle of St Paul is addressed."<sup>1</sup>

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>2</sup>



Epaphras seems to have been the founder, or one of the founders, of the Colossian church (1:7; 4:12-13).<sup>3</sup> He was a Colossian and had instructed the Christians not only in Colosse (1:7) but probably in Laodicea and Hierapolis as well. Perhaps Paul had led Epaphras to Christ, maybe at Ephesus (cf. Acts 19:10). His more formal name was probably Epaphroditus.

<sup>1</sup>J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup>For a fuller history of Judaism and Christianity in the Lycus Valley, see Lightfoot, pp. 1-70; 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>3</sup>John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians*, p. xxii.

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

### OCCASION

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 most dangerous heresies the church is called on to combat from time to time are not those which openly and blatantly assail the person of our Lord but rather those which subtly detract from His dignity while giving the appearance of honoring Him."<sup>1</sup>

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, whom they believed controlled the operations of nature to some degree (2:18-19).

There was an emphasis by these false teachers on ascetic self-denial (2:20-23), and apparently also the idea that only those with full knowledge of the truth—as taught by them—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>2</sup> It is easy to see how such a cult could have

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<sup>1</sup>Everett F. Harrison, *Colossians*, p. 15.

<sup>2</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.

developed and gained 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>1</sup>

"The probability is, that the false teachers had at that period no fully developed system—that they held only a few prominent tenets, such as those which the apostle condemns; and that they were rather the exponents of certain prevailing tendencies, than the originators of a defined and formal heresy."<sup>2</sup>

The two main problems were the misunderstood doctrine of Christ and the misunderstanding of how this doctrine affects Christian living. The primary Christological passages in the epistle (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.

## **DATE**

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 was confined, but 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

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<sup>1</sup>Dunn, p. 34. Cf. A. S. Peake, "The Epistle to the Colossians," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 3:484-88, and 533, who believed that the false teachers were Christian Jews who had been influenced by Essenism.

<sup>2</sup>Eadie, p. xxxi.

view of the letter's origin generally fits the facts better than the Caesarean and Ephesian theories of origin.

### CHARACTERISTICS

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.

"Colossians stands in the same relation to Ephesians as Galatians to Romans. The special characteristic in both Colossians and Galatians is 'correction' of serious doctrinal deviation from the already-given standard."<sup>1</sup>

Stylistically Colossians is somewhat tense and abrupt, whereas Ephesians is more diffuse and flowing. Colossians tends to be more specific, concrete, and cryptic while Ephesians is more abstract, didactic, and general. The mood of Colossians is argumentative and critical, but that of Ephesians is calm and peaceful. The former is a letter of discussion whereas the latter is a letter of reflection.<sup>2</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>3</sup> Baxter saw the same emphasis in Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians as he perceived in Romans, Corinthians, and Galatians: doctrine, reproof, and correction, respectively.<sup>4</sup>

### PURPOSE

The primary purpose of the letter was clearly to combat false teaching.

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<sup>1</sup>J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, 6:197.

<sup>2</sup>Vaughan, p. 169.

<sup>3</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.

<sup>4</sup>Baxter, 6:197.

"Its great purpose is to close the door of the Colossian church against the peculiar heretical teaching that had recently begun to knock for entrance. No entrance had as yet been effected, but there was danger that it might be gained. The burden of the letter thus consists of warning."<sup>1</sup>

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, first, of the danger of returning to their former beliefs and practices. Secondly, he also refuted the false teaching that was threatening this congregation. The outstanding Christian doctrine that this letter deals with is Christology. Thirdly, Paul's great purpose was to set forth the absolute supremacy and sole sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

### RELEVANCE

"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."<sup>2</sup>

"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

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<sup>1</sup>Richard C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*, p. 17.

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

dethroning Him and robbing Him of His rightful place of preeminence."<sup>1</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

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

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
- 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>1</sup>

- I. Doctrinal: Deeper life in Christ 1:1—2:7
- II. Polemical [critical]: 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

### MESSAGE

The whole message of this epistle finds expression in 2:9-10a.: "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete."<sup>2</sup> The two declarations in this sentence are the great revelations of the Colossian letter. The central doctrine in Colossians is Christology. Kenneth Hanna titled the first two chapters "the preeminence of Christ," and the second two "the preeminence of Christ in life."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Norman L. Geisler, "Colossians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, pp. 668-69.

<sup>2</sup>Quotations from the English Bible in these notes are from the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB), 2020 edition, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>3</sup>Kenneth G. Hanna, *From Gospels to Glory*, pp. 301, 303.



The fullness of the Godhead is in Christ. This is an eternal fact that is always true. The Greek word translated deity (*theotetos*) occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. It does not mean divinity. Divinity is an attribute of God, but deity is the essence of God. It is not enough to say that Jesus Christ was divine. In a sense every person is divine in that we possess some characteristics that God also possesses. Only He possesses them perfectly. Jesus Christ was deity. He alone possesses the unique nature of God. In Him the fullness of essential deity dwells in bodily form. The Apostle Paul expounded Christ's fullness in three respects in this epistle:

In relation to creation Christ is the Originator and Sustainer of all things (1:16-17). This includes all life.

In relation to redemption Christ is the first-born from the dead (1:18). Resurrection presupposes death. Death is due to sin. Between creation and resurrection there was sin and death. In His resurrection Christ was Victor over sin, death, and the grave. He is Death's Master.

In relation to reconciliation Christ is the maker of peace (1:19-20). The result of Christ's victory over death is peace. He is the reconciler of all the things that sin has separated. His reconciliation affects both people and the created world.

In Christ we see all the fullness of deity: creating, rising triumphantly out of death, and reconciling to the farthest reaches of the universe. That is the Christ of Christianity!

The second major declaration of Colossians is that in Christ God makes Christians complete (2:10a). Not only is the fullness of the Godhead in Christ, but the filling of the saints is in Christ too. Paul explained what this means:

First, it means that God restores us to our true place in creation in Christ. We can regain the scepter and the crown as kings of the earth under God's authority (cf. Gen. 2:15). God has sent us out into all the cosmos to make Christ known (Matt. 28:19-20). Unfortunately we do not always realize our position. We choose instead to grovel among the world's garbage heaps. Nevertheless in this sense God makes us full in Christ: We come into a new relationship to all creation through Christ. God restores us to our divinely intended position in creation in Him. We are His trophies.

Second, God restores us to our true relation to Himself through Christ's resurrection. God communicates His very life to us so that we take our rightful place as God's subjects. God does not break our will. He captures our will by the indwelling grace of Christ's life. God makes us full in this sense too. We are His instruments.

Third, God restores us to true fellowship with Himself in Christ. We not only receive from God, but we can also give to God in service. Thus our fellowship is reciprocal. We are His partners.

We experience fullness in Christ because in Him God restores us to our true place in creation, to our true relation to Himself, and to our true fellowship with Himself. This restoration enables us to cooperate with God in His purposes. We become not only trophies of His grace but His instruments and even His partners in our generation.

In view of this revelation Paul made a threefold appeal:

The first appeal is a warning against a false philosophy (2:8). Paul described this false philosophy in two ways: First, it is the tradition of men, which is essentially speculation. In this context Paul meant human guessing that leaves God out of His universe. The theory of organic evolution is an example of this. Second, it is also the rudiments of the world. This philosophy is rudimentary because it tries to explain everything within the limits of the material. The material part of life is rudimentary. The philosophy of anti-supernaturalism is an example of this.

We correct this false philosophy by recognizing that Jesus Christ is the solution to the problem of the universe. When we realize that Jesus Christ is the first-born (first in rank and sovereignty), then we gain a true view of the universe. He is the Creator and the great cohesive agent in the universe.

Paul's second warning is against false mediation (2:16-18). He pointed out that ceremonies such as observing certain kinds of foods and festivals are only shadows. We should not think that observing these ceremonies will improve our relationship to God. We have Jesus Christ who is the substance to which these ceremonies pointed (e.g., the Jewish feasts). Another type of false mediation involves the worship of angels. We should have nothing to do with this practice because we have direct access to God through Jesus Christ. He is the Creator and Master of all creatures including the angels. "For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and

mankind, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). To summarize, we should not allow religious ceremonies or created mediators to come between us and Christ.

Paul's third warning is against false confidences (2:20-23). Our spiritual enemy may tempt us to have confidence in the opinions of others. When false teachers say: Do not touch this or taste that or handle something, we may think that those statements are authoritative. But this is legalism. Paul urges us not to follow such opinions but to get our direction from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our enemy may tempt us to put confidence in ascetic practices of abstention and self-affliction. Paul tells us to forget these things and to set our thinking on the things of Christ rather than on ourselves. Asceticism breeds morbid introspection and selfishness. When we have a true view of Jesus Christ, He will be the focus of our thinking. That view will deliver us from the domination of the flesh. We need to base our confidence on God's Word, rather than on human traditions that do not reflect scriptural revelation accurately.

The matter of supreme importance to the church is her doctrine of Christ. Our Christian life and service will flow out of our doctrine of Christ. We are what we think. "For as he [any person] thinks within himself, so he is" (Prov. 23:7). Not only must Christ occupy the central place in our lives, but our understanding of Christ must be accurate. We can avoid all the errors that Paul warned against in this epistle by keeping a proper view of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Modern preaching is often quite shallow because it focuses on man rather than on God and Christ. One of my professors in seminary, Dr. S. Lewis Johnson, used to urge us in class to "Preach Christ!" And he often preached Christ when he spoke in a chapel service.

E. V. Hill, pastor of Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles, told of the ministry of an elderly woman in his church whom the congregation referred to as "1800," because no one knew how old she was. 1800 was hard on unsuspecting preachers because she would sit in the front row and when the preacher began she would say, "Get Him up!" referring to Christ. After a few minutes, if she did not think that it was

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<sup>1</sup>This Message section is adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 2:1:207-23.

happening, she would again shout, "Get Him up!" If a preacher did not "Get Him up!" he was in for a long hard time.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>R. Kent Hughes, "Preaching: God's Word to the Church Today," in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, ed. John H. Armstrong, p. 99.

## Exposition

### I. INTRODUCTION 1:1-8

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

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

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

1:1 Paul cited his apostolic calling and office at the start of this letter in order 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>1</sup>

"Paul" was the name that the apostle used of himself in the Hellenistic-Roman world instead 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>2</sup>

"His [Paul's] designation of the Saviour as 'Christ Jesus' (the reading of the leading manuscripts) may be understood as a deliberate effort to emphasize at the very outset the present exalted position of the risen Lord over against a system of thought which tended to rob Him of His full

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, p. 123.

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

majesty. Paul does not use the name *Jesus* alone in this letter."<sup>1</sup>

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

James 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>2</sup> Dunn could write that this was a Pauline letter, even though he believed that 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, and this has been the opinion of most Bible scholars through the ages.

Paul linked Timothy with himself in his 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 brothers and sisters" (Gr. *pistis adelphois*) in their practice.

"... the employment of only one article 'the' means that 'saints' and 'faithful brothers' are not two separate groups but are simply two designations of the same persons."<sup>3</sup>

"By pronouncing his readers 'faithful,' Paul may be expressing his confidence that, when he has

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<sup>1</sup>Harrison, pp. 19-20.

<sup>2</sup>Dunn, pp. 35-39.

<sup>3</sup>Homer A. Kent Jr., *Treasures of Wisdom*, p. 29.

shown them the peril of being influenced by wrong teaching, they will turn away from it."<sup>1</sup>

The Colossians lived in Colosse, which was a small town 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 where it occurs 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>2</sup>

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

Paul gave thanks to God for his readers frequently. He told them so in order to enable them to appreciate the fact that he knew of their situation and rejoiced in their good testimony. These six verses are all one sentence in the Greek text indicating the unity of thought in this pericope (section of verses).

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<sup>1</sup>Harrison, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, 473:335.

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 [Paul was a tent-maker] to hold his churches before God (see also on 1:9 and 4:2)."<sup>1</sup>

Specifically Paul and Timothy rejoiced over the continuing demonstration of the Colossians' faith 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.

"Faith is the root of Christian life, and love is the fruit."<sup>2</sup>

1:5-6 Paul also gave thanks for the hope of blessings ahead that his readers possessed but had not yet experienced. They demonstrated their hope in their daily living by presently manifesting faith (v. 4) and love (v. 8). The Colossians had first heard of this hope when they had heard the gospel that had been preached to them.

"Faith rests on the past; love works in the present; hope looks to the future. They may be regarded as the efficient, material, and final causes respectively of the spiritual life."<sup>3</sup>

Paul reminded his readers that the gospel had not come to them exclusively but was spreading throughout the whole world. Reference to the whole world is probably hyperbole (exaggeration not meant to be taken literally), though some

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<sup>1</sup>Dunn, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup>Harrison, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup>Lightfoot, p. 132.



interpreters have taken it literally.<sup>1</sup> Paul may have intended this wording in order to contrast the universal gospel with the exclusive message that the false teachers in Colosse were trying to get the Christians to adopt.<sup>2</sup> Paul further glorified the gospel message by referring to its dynamic power to change lives—it was constantly bearing fruit and increasing—and to its uniquely gracious content.

"The true Gospel, the Apostle seems to say, proclaims its truth by its universality. The false gospels are the outgrowths of local circumstances, of special idiosyncrasies; the true Gospel is the same everywhere. The false gospels address themselves to limited circles; the true Gospel proclaims itself boldly throughout the world. Heresies are at best ethnic: truth is essentially catholic [i.e., for all people everywhere]."<sup>3</sup>

"Sinners are not saved by studying the heavens or by watching the lives of Christians. They must hear the inscripturated word of divine grace [Rom. 10:17]."<sup>4</sup>

1:7-8 Epaphras had evangelized the Colossians. He may have planted the church there.<sup>5</sup> It is unlikely that this Epaphras is the same man that Paul referred to as Epaphroditus in Philippians 2:25, 4:18, and 4:23 because this Epaphras appears to have been from Asia Minor and that Epaphroditus was evidently from Macedonia. Since Epaphras had evangelized in Colosse he had come to Rome and was now ministering to the Apostle Paul during Paul's first Roman imprisonment (v. 7; cf. 4:12).

It appears that Epaphras' bondage ("fellow bond-servant") was to God's will as a fellow slave of God with Paul, not as a fellow prisoner with Paul in prison (cf. Phile. 23). He had given

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 5:335-36.

<sup>2</sup>Lenski, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup>Lightfoot, pp. 132-33.

<sup>4</sup>Robert G. Gromacki, *Stand Perfect in Wisdom*, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup>Peake, 3:498.

Paul a good report of the Colossian Christians even though false teachers were trying to make inroads into the church. Paul mentioned him here in order to pass along a 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 that Paul presented in this letter. This should have made Paul's teachings more persuasive to the Colossians.

The Holy Spirit had created love 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 in order to glorify Jesus Christ in the Colossians' estimation. They were being taught by false teachers 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>1</sup>

### **C. PRAYER 1:9-14**

This entire section, together with verses 15 through 20, are one sentence in the Greek text. In verses 9 through 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 that they would be able to glorify God in their conduct. He told them this in order 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.'"<sup>2</sup>

"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

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<sup>1</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.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, p. 130.

from life, but in order to live life in the world of men as it ought to be lived."<sup>1</sup>

1:9 In view of the Colossians' trust in Christ and mutual love (vv. 4-8) Paul and his companions had been praying consistently for them. They had prayed both thanksgivings and petitions since the day that they had heard of the Colossians' reception of the Word and their consequent love, which the Holy Spirit had produced in them.

"Praying is the more general and comprehensive term. It indicates any form of reverent address directed to the Deity, whether we 'take hold of God' by means of intercession, supplication, adoration, or thanksgiving. *Asking* is more specific. It refers to making definite, humble requests."<sup>2</sup>

Specifically Paul and Timothy asked that God would give the Colossian believers full and exact knowledge of all His will for them. The Greek word translated knowledge is *epignosis*. This word can mean either full knowledge or more precise knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Probably Paul prayed for the Colossians' greater knowledge in both respects. This word always describes moral and religious knowledge in the New Testament. It refers especially to full and comprehensive knowledge of God's will that rests on the knowledge of God and of Christ.<sup>4</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 Colossians had *gnosis*, but the apostle wished them to be filled with additional and supplemental knowledge, not new knowledge, or a different form or section of Christian science, but

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Hendriksen, p. 56.

<sup>3</sup>Lightfoot, p. 136; J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, pp. 248-54.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Lightfoot, p. 138.

a fuller development of the partial theological information which they already possessed."<sup>1</sup>

"Paul did not say as some evangelists now, 'To get sinners saved is all; my only aim.' He desired that those who had become saints, might be filled with the knowledge of their Lord's will."<sup>2</sup>

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>3</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>4</sup>

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

"'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>5</sup>

This interpretation takes the words wisdom and understanding as a hendiadys.<sup>6</sup> This knowledge would come to them only by the impartation and illumination of the Holy Spirit ("spiritual wisdom"). The false teachers in Colosse were evidently

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<sup>1</sup>Eadie, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup>William Lincoln, *Lectures on the Epistle to the Colossians*, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup>Vaughan, p. 177.

<sup>4</sup>Dunn, p. 69.

<sup>5</sup>Vaughan, p. 177.

<sup>6</sup>A hendiadys is a figure of speech in which a single idea is expressed by two words connected with "and."

promoting what they called a deeper knowledge that was attainable only by the privileged few, namely, the false teachers and their followers. The fact that Paul referred to wisdom six times in this brief epistle (1:9, 28; 2:3, 23; 3:16; 4:5) underlines its importance.

"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>1</sup>

"The true antidote to heresy is always a deeper and richer knowledge of the truth concerning Jesus Christ."<sup>2</sup>

1:10-12a The goal of fully understanding God's will was that the Colossians would be able to live one day at a time in a manner that would glorify and please their Lord. This would be a walk through life that would be worthy of what Christ had done for them. The metaphor of walkin—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>3</sup> Please (v. 10, 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

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:110.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, 472:341.

<sup>3</sup>See Dunn, p. 71.

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>1</sup>

"Doctrine and ethics are for Paul inseparable. Right conduct must be founded on right thinking, but right thinking must also lead to right conduct."<sup>2</sup>

Four characteristics, each of which is a present participle in the Greek text, distinguish this worthy "walk," which is an aorist infinitive in the Greek text. First, walking worthily includes continuously bearing fruit in character and conduct in every type of good 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 he grows in his ability to bear fruit, like 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>3</sup>

Third, walking worthily includes gaining strength that shows itself in perseverance (continuance in spite of trial, fear, intimidation, or despondency: "the capacity to see things through").<sup>4</sup>

"Chrysostom calls 'perseverance' the queen of the virtues."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:111.

<sup>2</sup>Peake, 3:499.

<sup>3</sup>Vaughan, p. 178.

<sup>4</sup>F. W. Beare, *The Epistle to the Colossians*, p. 158.

<sup>5</sup>Lenski, p. 39.

Along with perseverance a worthy walk is also marked by patience (longsuffering restraint in the face of wrath or revenge) and joy (cf. Phil. 4:13; 2 Tim. 2:1).

"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>1</sup>

"The glory of God ["according to His glorious might"] possesses a peculiar might, and that might is not love simply ... If we survey the glory of God in creation, the immensity of its architectural power overwhelms us; or in providence, its exhaustless and versatile energy perplexes us; or in redemption, its moral achievements delight and amaze us."<sup>2</sup>

"When the multimillionaire gives 'of' his wealth to some good cause he may be giving very little; but when he donates 'in accordance with' his riches, the amount will be substantial. The Holy Spirit gives not only 'of' but 'in accordance with.'"<sup>3</sup>

Fourth, walking worthily includes expressing gratitude to God consistently. Three causes for thankful gratitude follow in verses 12b-13.

1:12b-13 First, God has qualified the believer by His grace. He has made us heirs of an inheritance (cf. 1 Pet. 1:4).<sup>4</sup> Our qualification to receive an inheritance took place at conversion, though actual possession of most of it is still future. Second, He has rescued us from Satan's domain of darkness (v. 13a). This too took place at conversion but will become more evident in the future. Third, He has transferred us to Christ's kingdom (v. 13b). The

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:113.

<sup>2</sup>Eadie, p. 28. Providence refers to God's working through the natural course of affairs in contrast to His supernatural interventions in the course of affairs.

<sup>3</sup>Hendriksen, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup>See John A. Witmer, "The Man with Two Countries," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 113:532 (October-December 1976):338-49.

verb translated transferred (*metestesen*) elsewhere describes the relocation of large groups of people, such as captured armies or colonists, from one country to another (cf. Acts 26:18).<sup>1</sup>

The kingdom in view is probably Christ's present rule over His own.<sup>2</sup> It is God's kingdom of light that is opposed to Satan's sphere of authority and power that is characterized by darkness.

"The context here suggests that the action must be regarded as *de jure* [by right] rather than *de facto* [in reality]. Believers have been 'delivered ... from the power of darkness,' the apostle declares. Yet in another place he warns that we must still wrestle 'against the rulers of the darkness of this world' (Eph. 6:12). Our translation into the Kingdom of Christ, therefore, must be similar to that act of God when He 'raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus' (Eph. 2:6). Although we are not yet *de facto* seated in the heavenlies, the thing is so certain that God can speak of it as already done. In the same sense, we have been (aorist tense) transferred judicially into the Kingdom of our Lord even before its establishment [on the earth]."<sup>3</sup>

The apostle probably used these light-versus-darkness figures because the false teachers in Colosse were apparently promoting a form of Gnosticism that became very influential in the second century.

"Gnosticism sprang from the natural human desire to create a theodicy, an explanation of the origin

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson, 472:344. See also my comment about Antiochus relocating Jewish families to the Colosse region in the Historical Background section of these notes.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Eadie, p. 38; 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.

<sup>3</sup>Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 435.



of evil. ... It took all of the intellectual skill and spiritual power of the polemicist Irenaeus and the development of a rule of faith and a canon of Scripture by the Church to overcome the threat to Christianity of this movement."<sup>1</sup>

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).<sup>2</sup>

1:14 Perhaps Paul explained redemption because the false teachers had redefined that term too. Redemption is a benefit of union with Christ (v. 13b). The word 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>3</sup>

"Redemption and forgiveness are not exactly parallel or identical concepts, but by putting the two terms in apposition [side by side] to each other, the apostle teaches that the central feature of redemption is the forgiveness of sins."<sup>4</sup>

Forgiveness of sins is an important theme 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 of Christian growth later (2:7). The Christian grows more like a fruit tree than like a stalk of wheat. We do not just bear fruit and then die. We continue to grow in our

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<sup>1</sup>Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, p. 105.

<sup>2</sup>The Qumran material refers to the Dead Sea Scrolls.

<sup>3</sup>Johnson, 472:345.

<sup>4</sup>Vaughan, p. 180.

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 discuss further the full knowledge about Jesus Christ that the false teachers in Colosse were attacking. He did so in order to give his readers fuller knowledge of God's revealed will so that they would reject the false teaching of those who were demeaning Christ, and so that they would 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>1</sup>

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

In this section Paul revealed in what senses Christ is supreme.<sup>2</sup>

"These things are not new to the Colossians. In concise form they restate for the Colossians the mighty facts about the Son of the Father's love because these facts destroy root and branch the error with which the Judaizers were operating in Colosse."<sup>3</sup>

This passage "represents a loftier conception of Christ's person than is found anywhere else in the writings of Paul."<sup>4</sup>

"No comparable listing of so many characteristics of Christ and His deity are found in any other Scripture passage."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce, 562:99.

<sup>2</sup>See also the summary chart in *The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 2015.

<sup>3</sup>Lenski, pp. 46-47.

<sup>4</sup>E. F. Scott, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup>Geisler, p. 672.

Paul described Jesus Christ in three relationships: to His deity, to His creation, and to His church. Some writers understood this passage to be an early Christian hymn.<sup>1</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>2</sup>

I believe there are thirteen marks.

### **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>3</sup> Whereas 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>4</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>5</sup>

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

1:15b Firstborn (Gr. *prototokos*) may denote either priority in time (the first child born) or supremacy in rank (sovereignty; cf. v. 18; Exod. 4:22; Ps. 89:27; Rom. 8:29; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 1:15). The word may also denote both of these qualities. Both seem to be in view here.<sup>6</sup> Christ was before all creation in time, and

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Hendriksen, pp. 66-69; Dunn, pp. 85-86.

<sup>2</sup>McGee, 5:338.

<sup>3</sup>Lightfoot, pp. 143-44; Vaughan, p. 182.

<sup>4</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "The Greek use of *eikon*," by Hermann Kleinknecht, 2(1964):389.

<sup>5</sup>Bruce, 562:101.

<sup>6</sup>Lightfoot, pp. 144-48; Kenneth S. Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*, 1:4:183.

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>1</sup>

What firstborn does not mean is that Christ was the first created being, which ancient Arians believed and modern Jehovah's Witnesses teach.<sup>2</sup> This is clear because verses 16-18 state that Christ existed before all things and is the Creator of all things. 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 Greek word translated only (*monogenes*) means alone of His kind, not first-created (*protoktiskos*).

"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 *protokos*. If Christ were the 'first-created,' the Greek word would have been *protoktisis*."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>O'Brien, *Colossians ...*, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup>See Jan Karel Van Baalen, *The Chaos of Cults*, pp. 238-40; John H. Gerstner, *The Theology of the Major Sects*, pp. 161-62. See also *The Nelson ...*, p. 2013.

<sup>3</sup>Geisler, pp. 672-73.

1:16 Christ is also the originator of creation ("by Him," v. 16a). All things—in every place, of every sort, and of every rank—originated with Him. God mediated the beginning of life for the entire universe through His Son (cf. John 1:3, 10; Heb. 1:2). Christ 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>1</sup> Or these gradations may actually exist. Some scholars believe that thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities refer to both holy and fallen angels, to demons and man.<sup>2</sup>

In Gnosticism, and in its primitive development in Colosse, angels received varying degrees of veneration according to their supposed rank. Probably ranks of heavenly powers are in view here (v. 16).<sup>3</sup> Thus Paul claimed that Christ is superior to all angelic beings, good and bad (cf. Heb. 1:1-14).<sup>4</sup>

"The *good* angels cannot *add* anything to the fullness of riches and resources which believers have in Christ. The *evil* angels cannot separate them from his love (Rom. 8:35-39)."<sup>5</sup>

"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>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Vaughan, p. 182.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Wuest, 1:4:184.

<sup>3</sup>Eadie, p. 54; Dunn, p. 92.

<sup>4</sup>Harrison, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup>Hendriksen, p. 74.

<sup>6</sup>Bruce, 564:299.

Christ is also the agent of creation ("through Him," v. 16b). He accomplished creation (cf. John 1:3; Heb. 1:2). He is both the Architect and the Builder of the creation.

Christ is also 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>1</sup>

"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>2</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>3</sup>

Paul used the verb translated 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

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<sup>1</sup>See Handley C. G. Moule, *Colossian Studies*, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, 473:15.

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, 2:116.

and pictures "the universe as still remaining the monument and proof of His creative might."<sup>1</sup>

1:17 Christ is also 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>2</sup> This assertion, combined with the earlier one that He is the first-born of all creation (v. 15b), proves that Christ is not a created being. 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>3</sup>

Christ is also the sustainer of creation ("hold together," v. 17b). Christ is the Person who preserves and maintains the existence of what He has created. God the Father has delegated the administration of the universe to God the Son.<sup>4</sup>

"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>5</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

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<sup>1</sup>Eadie, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*, p. 74.

<sup>3</sup>Bruce, 562:104.

<sup>4</sup>See McClain, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup>Lightfoot, p. 154. Cf. Peake, 3:505.

universe hangs together, and does not disintegrate in chaos."<sup>1</sup>

"So the thought passes from creation to preservation."<sup>2</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 that Paul had written about Christ had been revealed by other New Testament writers. 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 that is 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>3</sup>

1:18 The term head (Gr. *kephale*) can refer to origin or authority. One writer argued that head here does not point to Christ as the ruler of the church, though He is that, but to His being its beginning.<sup>4</sup> Other interpreters take head to refer to either origin or authority, or to both.

"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>5</sup>

Christ is the head of the church because He is the firstborn from the dead. Christ is the beginning of the church in that He established the church, He is its authority, and He is its power

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, p. 144.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, 473:16.

<sup>3</sup>See O'Brien, *Colossians ...*, pp. 57-61, for a discussion of the term *ekklesia* (church) in Colossians and Philemon.

<sup>4</sup>Stephen Bedale, "The Meaning of *kephale* in the Pauline Epistles," *Journal of Theological Studies* NS5 (1954):213.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 212.



and source of spiritual life. He became all of these things at His resurrection, when He became the firstborn from the dead in time. Christ was the first Person to rise from the dead 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).

"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>1</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>2</sup>

1:19 The purpose for Christ's preeminence in the new creation was the Son's work of reconciliation (v. 20). Verses 19-23 give the reason that Paul could say what he just did say 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>3</sup> Here Paul used this word to mean 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

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:117.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, 473:18. Cf. Rom. 1:4; 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:20.

<sup>3</sup>Lightfoot, pp. 255-71.

interaction with the universe is summed up in Christ."<sup>1</sup>

"The Judaizers imagined such a domain into which Christ and his work did not fully reach and had invented a system by which Christians, as they claimed, could protect themselves from ill effects that came from this domain."<sup>2</sup>

The Greek word translated dwell (*katoikesai*) means to dwell (at home) permanently. This contradicts the idea that Jesus was only a man and the Christ was an ideal, which the Christian Science religion teaches.<sup>3</sup> In short, fullness here probably refers to Christ's official power, which was given to 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>4</sup>

"... 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

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<sup>1</sup>Dunn, p. 101.

<sup>2</sup>Lenski, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup>Gerstner, p. 163. Van Baalen called Christian Science "sheer Gnosticism," p. 108.

<sup>4</sup>Dunn, p. 103.

attitude to Christ's work and our very idea of God are affected."<sup>1</sup>

All things in this verse would include the angelic world and the rest of creation as well as humanity. Christ's death has dealt with the defilement that 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>2</sup> By His death Christ' defeated Satan and his angels. They now have to submit to Him (cf. 2:15).<sup>3</sup>

This passage (1:15-20) contains one of the greatest revelations about Jesus Christ in the Bible.<sup>4</sup> Scholars have often referred to verses 15-18 as "The Great Christology."<sup>5</sup> They have also called verses 15-20 "The Christ Hymn."<sup>6</sup> The form of these verses is probably Hebrew poetry rather than Greek poetry.<sup>7</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

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson, 474:143. See also James S. Stewart, *A Man in Christ*, pp. 204-72; and Barclay, p. 147.

<sup>2</sup>See Gary L. Shultz Jr., "The Reconciliation of All Things in Christ," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 167:668 (October-December 2010):442-59.

<sup>3</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>4</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>5</sup>E.g., Johnson, 473:12

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Bruce, 562:99.

<sup>7</sup>Steven M. Baugh, "The Poetic Form of Col. 1:15-20," *Westminster Theological Journal* 47:2 (Fall 1985):227-44.

own store of theological ideas or from early Christian hymns.<sup>1</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>2</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. 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>3</sup>

#### THIRTEEN ASSERTIONS ABOUT CHRIST IN COLOSSIANS 1:15-20

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).

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

<sup>2</sup>T. E. Pollard, "Colossians 1:12-20: a Reconsideration," *New Testament Studies* 27:4 (July 1981):572-75.

<sup>3</sup>H. Wayne House, "The Doctrine of Christ in Colossians," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149:594 (April-June 1992):187.

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 an emphasis on His reconciling work. He did this in order to ground his readers further in the full truth of God's revelation so that 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. He moved from objective affirmation to subjective experience.

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 body of flesh likely 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>1</sup> One of the heresies of the early church was Docetism, though it may not have been common as early as A.D. 60-62.<sup>2</sup> 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.

"... 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

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<sup>1</sup>Vaughan, p. 187.

<sup>2</sup>Peake, 3:512.

the dead by experiencing the full reality of physical death."<sup>1</sup>

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

"This is put in so strong a way because the Judaizers claimed that such a state could be attained only when their scheme of purification and keeping pure is followed in addition to faith in Christ. Errorists always like to add at least something to faith in Christ's death, often even the main saving thing."<sup>2</sup>

1:23 The word if introduces a condition that 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 that 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>3</sup> However perseverance in the faith is not inevitable for believers. Apostasy (departure from a position previously held) 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>4</sup>

"This 'if' contemplates reality, the reality that they will remain what they have been made. Yet the 'if' bids them examine and watch themselves."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Dunn, p. 109.

<sup>2</sup>Lenski, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup>Herbert M. Carson, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon*, p. 48.

<sup>4</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>5</sup>Lenski, p. 70.

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 "not shifting from the hope of the gospel" may have reminded the Colossians of their security from another perspective.<sup>1</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>2</sup>

The gospel had had wide circulation. "In all creation under heaven" must be hyperbole, meaning that it had gone everywhere in a general sense (cf. Rom. 15:19).<sup>3</sup> Paul was contrasting the wide appeal and proclamation of the gospel with the exclusive appeal and comparatively limited circulation of the false teachers' message. The word translated minister (Gr. *diakonos*) also means servant.

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

### **Paul's sufferings 1:24**

This verse is "... probably the most controversial in the letter."<sup>4</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

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:120-21.

<sup>2</sup>Dunn, p. 111.

<sup>3</sup>Harrison, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup>Johnson, 475:229.

that his sufferings were part of God's plan and he rejoiced in them.<sup>1</sup> Paul could rejoice because he knew that his imprisonment would benefit his readers, at least 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, '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>2</sup>

One view is that the phrase "lacking in Christ's afflictions" refers to the quota of sufferings that the church must undergo corporately before the end of the present age (cf. Matt. 24:6; Heb. 11:40; Rev. 6:11).<sup>3</sup> However this idea is foreign to the context, which stresses the contribution Paul's sufferings made toward the Colossians' 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 that his sufferings were similar to Christ's. Both he and Christ suffered for believers: Christ on the cross, and Paul presently.<sup>4</sup> Yet Paul wrote here of Christ's sufferings. They were His own sufferings.

A third view is that the sufferings of Christ to which Paul referred are those sacrificial works that the Lord left for believers to perform.<sup>5</sup> As Christ suffered during His ministry, so we who are Christians must suffer during

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<sup>1</sup>See Stanley D. Toussaint, "Suffering in Acts and the Pauline Epistles," in *Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and Church*, p. 192.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, 475:229-30. Paragraph division omitted. AV refers to *The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version*. Cf. Carson, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 76; Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 3:2:210.

<sup>4</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>5</sup>Lightfoot, p. 163; McGee, 5:343-45.



our ministries. However if this is what Paul meant why did he speak of them as Christ's afflictions? This view, like the preceding two views, expresses a Scriptural revelation, but that revelation does not seem to be Paul's point here.

A fourth view, the one that 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. Acts 9:16; 2 Cor. 11:23-28).<sup>1</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>2</sup>

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

1:25 Paul's role in the household or house management of God (the literal meaning of "commission from God") was that of a servant-manager who fully expounded God's revelation for the benefit of his readers.

"He was a servant of the church, but in the deepest sense he was a steward of God."<sup>3</sup>

1:26 This revelation included a mystery. This term in Scripture 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 of this word was similar to the Greeks' use of it 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>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Peake, 3:514-15; Johnson, 475:230-31; Eadie, pp. 90-91; Hendriksen, p. 87; Dunn, p. 114; E. M. Blaiklock, *Today's Handbook of Bible Characters*, pp. 584-85.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, 475:231.

<sup>3</sup>Vaughan, p. 191.

<sup>4</sup>Dunn, p. 120.

God had hidden this new revelation in past ages from past generations. Paul expounded it more fully in Ephesians 3:3-9 and only gave its essence here as "Christ in you" (v. 27; 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>1</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>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson, 475:233.

<sup>2</sup>Geisler, p. 675. KJV refers to *The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version*. Cf. Eadie, p. 95; McGee, 5:346.

<sup>3</sup>See Lightfoot, pp. 166-67.

describe qualities that distinguish the church from Israel."<sup>1</sup>

Some interpreters understand 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>2</sup> Others understand this mystery as new revelation that Christ would indwell believers in the church.<sup>3</sup> The difference is not in the Spirit and Christ distinction. Both positions see unity between the Spirit and Christ. The difference between these two interpretations is in their concept of the church. Some view the church as the present phase of the messianic kingdom. Others see the church as distinct from the messianic kingdom.

"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>4</sup>

### Paul's purpose 1:28

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

"'Counseling' ('admonishing,' *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

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<sup>1</sup>Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, "Israel and the Church," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, pp. 117-18.

<sup>2</sup>See Saucy, *The Case ...*, pp. 167-73.

<sup>3</sup>Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 135; idem, *Dispensationalism*, pp. 124-25; Wiersbe, 2:122.

<sup>4</sup>Dunn, p. 123.

importance of instruction in proclaiming the Word. 'With all wisdom' seems to express the way the teaching was done."<sup>1</sup>

Admonitions and teaching, presented through appropriate methods ("with all wisdom"), were and are necessary to bring all people, not just the privileged few as in Gnosticism, to maturity in Christ. James Stewart argued that the phrase "in Christ" is the key to Paul's theology.<sup>2</sup> Paul had the imminent appearing of Christ in view as the time when he desired to present every person mature in Christ (cf. Eph. 4:13). Another view is that he had the present time in mind.<sup>3</sup> Paul proclaimed a Person, not a philosophy.

"Paul preached, not a system of doctrine so much as a Person, the Lord Jesus. His statements regarding that Person and what He did on the Cross, constituted the doctrine he preached."<sup>4</sup>

Note that Paul did not just preach the gospel message but the whole counsel of God ("all wisdom"). His goal was not just to get people save but also 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>5</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>6</sup>

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

Paul had to expend physical, mental, and spiritual energy in order to achieve his goal of bringing the Colossians to maturity. 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.

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<sup>1</sup>Vaughan, p. 193.

<sup>2</sup>Stewart, pp. vii, 147.

<sup>3</sup>Lenski, pp. 81-82.

<sup>4</sup>Wuest, 1:4:194.

<sup>5</sup>Dunn, p. 126.

<sup>6</sup>Wiersbe, 2:123.

"To this striking and typically Christian combination of human effort and divine succor [help], an obvious parallel is Phil. ii. 12f. But it runs right through the N.T."<sup>1</sup>

"The root [of the Greek word translated works, *energoumenen*] generally refers to supernatural power, whether God's or Satan's."<sup>2</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>3</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).

### 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>4</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 in order to prevent them from accepting the erroneous instruction of the false teachers who were seeking to turn them away from God's will for them.

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<sup>1</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles ...*, p. 85.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, 475:234.

<sup>3</sup>Vaughan, p. 193.

<sup>4</sup>Wiersbe, 2:105.

### 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 and was 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. "How great a struggle I have in your behalf" may have meant that he was struggling in prayer for them.<sup>1</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>2</sup>

2:2-3 As the Bible uses the term, the heart includes everything in the inner man including the mind (cf. Prov. 23:7).

"The *heart* of all true pastoral activity is to be an instrument in God's hand to bring the *hearts* of those entrusted to one's care to the *heart* of Christ."<sup>3</sup>

The Christian's wealth is his or her thorough understanding of God's truth. With that understanding the believer is well equipped to deal with false teaching.

"Spiritual prosperity consists of understanding God's truth and being confident of it."<sup>4</sup>

The essence of God's revelation is Christ Himself (cf. 1:27). The better a Christian understands God's revelation concerning

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<sup>1</sup>Vaughan, p. 194; Lightfoot, p. 170.

<sup>2</sup>Bruce, 561:8. Cf. Lightfoot, pp. 170-71.

<sup>3</sup>Hendriksen, p. 103.

<sup>4</sup>Kent, p. 70.

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>1</sup>

Mutual love is a source of great encouragement.

"The apostle is saying that the perception of God's truth is greatly affected by the state of human relationships within the body of Christ."<sup>2</sup>

God has revealed in Christ Himself all that a person needs to know to establish a relationship with God.

"The mystery here is not 'Christ,' but 'Christ as containing in Himself all the treasures of wisdom' ..."<sup>3</sup>

"The full assurance of understanding,' is the fixed persuasion that you comprehend the truth, and that it is the truth which you comprehend. It is not merely the vivid belief, that what occupies the mind is the Divine verity, but that this verity is fully understood. The mind which has reached this elevation, is confident that it does not misconceive the statements of the gospel, or attach to them a meaning which they do not bear."<sup>4</sup>

"The mind most liable to be seduced is that which, having reached only an imperfect and one-sided view, is continually disturbed and perplexed by opposite and conflicting ideas which from its position it is unable to reconcile, but is forced to wonder whether really it has attained to just

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<sup>1</sup>Dunn, p. 130.

<sup>2</sup>Harrison, p. 49.

<sup>3</sup>Lightfoot, p. 171.

<sup>4</sup>Eadie, p. 111,

conceptions of the truth. The traveller [*sic*] who has already made some progress, but who begins gradually to doubt and debate, to lose faith in himself, and wonder whether he be in the right way after all, is prepared to listen to the suggestions of any one who, under semblance of disinterested friendship, may advise to a path of danger and ruin."<sup>1</sup>

Thinking that the source of true spiritual wisdom is somewhere other than in Christ can produce terrible disorder in the Christian life. The word knowledge refers to genuine understanding, and wisdom is 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>2</sup>

"Wisdom results from penetration into this knowledge. Knowledge is the study, and wisdom its fruit."<sup>3</sup>

"The word *apokruphoi* (AV, 'hidden') is emphatic by position [in the Greek text], 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>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>2</sup>Geisler, p. 676.

<sup>3</sup>Eadie, p. 115.

<sup>4</sup>Johnson, 475:236.



"In the New Testament the word 'mystery' always means something that cannot be discovered by the intellect but which can be revealed; and which, being revealed, can be apprehended."<sup>1</sup>

2:4-5 Paul's description of the Colossian church as behaving in an orderly manner could also describe a company of well-disciplined soldiers standing at attention in straight lines. The Greek word *stereoma*, translated stability, occurs only here in the New Testament.

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>2</sup>

So far the Colossian 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 using 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>3</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>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>G. Campbell Morgan, *The Unfolding Message of the Bible*, p. 400.

<sup>2</sup>Eadie, p. 123.

<sup>3</sup>Dunn, p. 134.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 135. An inclusio is a literary device based on a concentric principle, also known as bracketing, bookending, or an envelope structure, which consists of creating a frame by placing similar material at the beginning and end of a section.

## 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>1</sup>

2:6 Paul encouraged his readers to continue following Christ in harmony with the sound teaching that had resulted in their salvation.<sup>2</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 *paralabete*, translated received, which 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" is a phrase that Paul used nowhere else in the New Testament. It counteracts three false conceptions of the Savior. It asserts His deity (Christ), which Judaism denied; His humanity (Jesus), which Docetists denied; and His sovereignty (Lord), which 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>3</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

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<sup>1</sup>O'Brien, *Colossians ...*, p. 108. For further discussion of the Colossian heresy, see Lightfoot, pp. 71-111; Barclay, pp. 115-18; Wuest, 1:4:163-68.

<sup>2</sup>See H. Wayne House, "The Christian Life according to Colossians," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151:604 (October-December 1994):440-54.

<sup>3</sup>A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 4:489.

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>1</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.

2:7 Four characteristics describe the healthy Christian in this verse: First, he or she stands firmly rooted, like a tree. Second, he or she is being built up, like a building under construction (cf. 1 Pet. 2:2). Third, he or she is being established in the faith, like a house that is being built on a rock. Fourth, he or she is overflowing with gratitude, like a thankful person. 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.

"Faith is, as it were, the cement of the building ..."<sup>2</sup>

"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>3</sup>

"A thankful spirit is a mark of Christian maturity. When a believer is abounding in thanksgiving, he is really making progress!"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Dunn, p. 140.

<sup>2</sup>Lightfoot, p. 175.

<sup>3</sup>Vaughan, p. 196.

<sup>4</sup>Wiersbe, 2:125.

"The emphasis on thankfulness is very marked in this Epistle."<sup>1</sup>

"As in Rom. 1:16-17 and Gal. 1:11-12, these two verses [2:6-7] 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>2</sup>

THE CHRISTIAN'S WALK	
"Walk ... worthy of the Lord" (1:10)	"Walk in Him" (2:6)
• Bearing fruit (1:10)	• Firmly rooted (2:7)
• Growing like a tree (1:10)	• Being built up (2:7)
• Gaining strength (1:11)	• Established (2:7)
• Giving thanks (1:12)	• Giving thanks (2:7)

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

In this pericope Paul revealed what his readers enjoyed in Christ in order to encourage them to remain faithful to the true revelation that 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>3</sup>

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

8a    polemical denunciation    16-23

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<sup>1</sup>Peake, 3:521.

<sup>2</sup>Dunn, p. 138.

<sup>3</sup>Vaughan, p. 197.

8b in accordance with Christ 9-15"<sup>1</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>2</sup>

2:8 Paul warned his readers not to allow themselves to be taken captive (lit. carried off bodily, Gr. *sulagogon*). He implied that the false teachers were behaving like human traffickers.<sup>3</sup>

The word philosophy does not refer here to the study of basic questions concerning God, man, and the meaning of life. This, by the way, is the only occurrence of the Greek word *philosophia* in the New Testament

"Philosophy is the attempt to correlate all existing knowledge about the universe into systematic form and to integrate human experience with it."<sup>4</sup>

Here philosophy refers to the speculations and ideas of people that are not rooted in divine revelation. These ideas come down from generation to generation by merely human tradition rather than divine revelation.

"'Philosophy' is here used in the general sense according to which we to this day call any speculative scheme a philosophy."<sup>5</sup>

"... false philosophy is like a blind man looking in a dark room for a black cat that isn't there—there is no hope for its search for truth."<sup>6</sup>

"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

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<sup>1</sup>Dunn, p. 144. A chiasmus is a rhetorical or literary figure in which words, grammatical constructions, or concepts are repeated in reverse order, in the same or a modified form.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, p. 161.

<sup>3</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles ...*, p. 90.

<sup>4</sup>Merrill C. Tenney, *The New Testament: An Historical and Analytic Survey*, p. 103.

<sup>5</sup>Lenski, p. 97.

<sup>6</sup>McGee, 5:350.

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>1</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 that Paul had been warning his readers about was empty deception ("vain deceit," AV). These are not two separate dangers but one. It 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

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

Christianity down through the centuries since then."<sup>1</sup>

"... *We cannot properly beware of philosophy unless we be aware of philosophy.*"<sup>2</sup>

The elementary principles (Gr. *stoicheia*) of the world probably refer to the religious practices that the false teachers were promoting, which were simply external and physical acts (v. 20; cf. Gal. 4:3, 9). Some interpreters have identified these principles as angels or "personal elemental spirits."<sup>3</sup> But this view seems too narrow. The view of many commentators is that this false religious system of worship had the elementary principles as its subject matter (rules, foods, special days, rituals, angels; cf. vv. 18, 20-22).<sup>4</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 [disapproved] here is a form of asceticism for asceticism's sake, cultivated as a religious obligation."<sup>5</sup>

"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

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

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Peake, 3:482, 523.

<sup>4</sup>See O'Brien, *Colossians ...*, pp. 129-32, for further discussion.

<sup>5</sup>Bruce, 563:196-97.

which tempted its adepts to look on themselves as a spiritual elite."<sup>1</sup>

"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>2</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>3</sup>

2:9-10a "For" introduces another reason for abandoning the false teaching. What Paul's readers had in Christ was completely adequate for their spiritual needs. Christ is the very essence of Deity in whom the divine 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 [power emanating from God] Christ. He asserts

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>3</sup>House, "Heresies in ...," p. 59.



plainly the deity and the humanity of Jesus Christ in corporeal [bodily] form."<sup>1</sup>

This fullness of Deity (the Godhead, AV) was present in Christ's bodily form during His earthly ministry. He did not give up His Deity when He became a man.<sup>2</sup> And it continues in His resurrected bodily form.<sup>3</sup>

"He did not surrender His deity at His incarnation, and He did not give up His humanity at His resurrection."<sup>4</sup>

As those in Christ, Christians also partake of His fullness having been made complete. We have no essential need that He does not supply. But we do not partake of His Deity.

"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>5</sup>

"He had to be who He was in order to do what He did."<sup>6</sup>

"... believers find their own completion only as incorporated in Christ."<sup>7</sup>

"What Paul means is that in Christ they find the satisfaction of every spiritual want."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Robertson, 4:491.

<sup>2</sup>See Hendriksen, p. 112.

<sup>3</sup>See Johnson, 476:309-10.

<sup>4</sup>Gromacki, p. 104.

<sup>5</sup>Vaughan, p. 199. ASV refers to *The Holy Bible: American Standard Version*, 1901 ed.

<sup>6</sup>H. A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Epistle to the Colossians*, p. 80.

<sup>7</sup>C. D. F. Moule, *The Epistles ...*, p. 93.

<sup>8</sup>Peake, 3:524.

"In the mystery cults which flourished in the apostolic age the great promise which was held out was salvation through enlightenment."<sup>1</sup>

Arianism taught that Christ was of a different essence than God the Father. Docetism taught that matter is inherently evil, so Christ's incarnation was not real. He only appeared to be human. Gnosticism taught that Jesus' body only appeared to be real, so He left no footprints where He walked.<sup>2</sup>

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

"Moses commanded that part of the [physical] flesh should be cut off; here all the [metaphorical] flesh is cut clean out, and put off."<sup>3</sup>

"This circumcision, he [Paul] would say, that is the removal of the flesh, was first experienced by Christ on the cross, and what happened to you ideally then is realized through union with Him now."<sup>4</sup>

Our spiritual circumcision (v. 11), which was made without hands, took place when God regenerated us (cf. Gal. 5:24).<sup>5</sup> It involved Christ cutting off the domination of our sinful nature (flesh), the slavery to sin that characterizes the unregenerate person (cf. Rom. 7:24-25). Baptism here (v. 12) refers to

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<sup>1</sup>Carson, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, p. 119.

<sup>3</sup>Lincoln, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup>Peake, 3:525.

<sup>5</sup>See R. Bruce Compton, "The *Ordo Salutis* and Monergism: The Case for Faith Preceding Regeneration, Part 3," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 175:699 (July-September 2018):288-92.

Spirit baptism, which is symbolized by water baptism (cf. Rom. 6:3-4).<sup>1</sup>

"Paul turned [in verse 11] from the theological errors of the false teachers to their practical errors—from 'Gnosticism' to legalism."<sup>2</sup>

2:13-14 Unbelievers are sinners by nature ("the uncircumcision of your flesh," i.e., sinful nature), and practice ("wrongdoings," i.e., violations of God's standards). Nevertheless, God has forgiven believers. He has canceled our certificate of debt, which probably refers to God's record of our sins. This was true if, as Jews, they violated the Law of Moses (special revelation).<sup>3</sup> And it is also true if, as Gentiles, they violated the law of God that is written on our hearts (general revelation, Rom. 2:14-15). The reference to the readers' uncircumcision indicates that they were mainly Gentiles.

The Greek word translated canceled (v. 14, *exaleipsas*) suggests the smearing of letters written on wax.<sup>4</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. He "nailed it to the cross."

"It died when he died."<sup>5</sup>

"One ancient mode of cancelling bonds was by striking a nail through the writing: this seems at that time to have existed in Asia ..."<sup>6</sup>

The final phrase in verse 14 may be an allusion to the superscription above Jesus' cross.

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<sup>1</sup>See Kent, p. 86.

<sup>2</sup>Geisler, "Colossians," p. 677.

<sup>3</sup>See Hal Harless, "The Cessation of the Mosaic Covenant," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160:639 (July-September 2003):349-66.

<sup>4</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles ...*, p. 98. Cf. Barclay, pp. 170-71.

<sup>5</sup>Hendriksen, p. 121. See also Kent, p. 88.

<sup>6</sup>Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, p. 1322.

"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>1</sup>

"Christ was so nailed to the cross, and in him the law was nailed to it; Christ, when he was nailed up, died; so did the law. Christ rose again, but *not* the law; Christ rose because his death killed the law forever. If the law had not died in the blood of the cross, Christ could not have arisen. Since the law is dead and gone, spiritual quickening and resurrection are now ours."<sup>2</sup>

Christ actually died as our Substitute under the penalty of the broken Mosaic Law, not under the supposed charge that He falsely claimed to be the King of the Jews.<sup>3</sup>

2:15 The disarming of the angelic rulers and authorities probably refers to Christ's defeat of Satan and his evil demonic assistants by His death and resurrection.<sup>4</sup> This seems a better explanation than the notion of His retiring a mediatorial function of the good angels, such as their giving the Law.<sup>5</sup> This latter view holds that since the Law has been abolished the angels who brought the Law have now been degraded.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce, 564:296. Cf. Eadie, pp. 170-71; O'Brien, *Colossians ...*, p. 124.

<sup>2</sup>Lenski, pp. 116-17.

<sup>3</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>4</sup>Lightfoot, pp. 187-89.

<sup>5</sup>Kent, pp. 88-89.

<sup>6</sup>Peake, 3:529.

"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>1</sup>

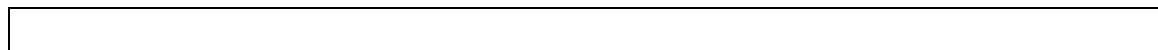
The public display that is in view probably refers to Jesus' disgracing of the powers of evil when He died on the cross by bearing the sin that was their claim and hold on human beings. Christ triumphed over Satan's hosts at the cross (cf. 2 Cor. 2:14). It is not clear whether Paul meant that Christ made a public display of His victory over the powers of evil Himself or through the cross. The Greek phrase *en auto* can mean either in Him or in it. In either case the meaning is clear.

"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>2</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>3</sup>

"See his crown of thorns turned into a crown of laurels."<sup>4</sup>

"The truth expressed is, that there has been complete and irretrievable subjugation."<sup>5</sup>



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<sup>1</sup>Johnson, 477:20.

<sup>2</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>3</sup>Vaughan, p. 202.

<sup>4</sup>Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 1872.

<sup>5</sup>Eadie, p. 173.

**SUMMARY OF THE BELIEVER'S COMPLETENESS IN CHRIST IN 2:11-15**

- The domination of our flesh has been broken. (2:11)
- Our former manner of life has ended. (2:12a)
- We have been raised from spiritual death. (2:12b)
- We have been given new life. (2:13a)
- Our transgressions have been forgiven. (2:13b)
- Our debt to God has been paid. (2:14)
- Our spiritual enemy has been defeated. (2:15)

This passage (2:8-15) is another one (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 in order to help his readers identify and reject their instruction.

"The connexion [*sic*] with the preceding argument is this: Since the bond written in ordinances has been abolished, and the angelic powers spoiled and led in triumph, allow no one to criticize your action on the ground that it is not in harmony with the precepts of the Law, or cuts you off from communion with the angels. You have nothing to do with Law or angels. At best they were but the shadow, and in Christ you possess the substance."<sup>1</sup>

"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

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<sup>1</sup>Peake, 3:530.

everything they ever will need in the person and work of Jesus Christ."<sup>1</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 such as eating certain foods, attending special meals, or refraining from attending religious festivals. The five items mentioned in verse 16 were all part of Judaism, and they involved yearly, monthly, and daily observances. 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). Their legalism seems to have involved asceticism.

"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>2</sup>

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>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:105.

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

<sup>3</sup>Johnson, 478:112.

"This verse [17] contains a hint of the fundamental argument of the Epistle to the Hebrews (*cf. esp. Heb. viii. 5, x. 1*)."<sup>1</sup>

When Christ came He explained that the Mosaic Law was no longer in effect (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*). The failure of the false teachers to recognize this 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 [*sic*] is an unbroken Sabbath."<sup>2</sup>

"When law observance is demanded by present-day legalists, the gospel is upset and we must fight as Paul does in Galatians. But when certain observances, rules, and regulations are attached to the gospel, which are said to produce a much safer and superior Christianity, we must fight as Paul does in Colossians, scorn this fictitious safety and superiority with the absolute completeness and superiority of the gospel, with the infinite supremacy of the God-man, the utter fulness [*sic*] and completeness of his saving work, and the fulness [*sic*] (v. 10) which he has bestowed upon us."<sup>3</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 of not staying on the track. They could lose

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<sup>1</sup>Peake, 3:531.

<sup>2</sup>Eadie, p. 177.

<sup>3</sup>Lenski, p. 124.



the prize that God will give those who run the race well (cf. 2 Tim. 4:7-8). A false type of humility includes self-abasement, which can involve denying oneself with the idea that this will gain merit with God. Fasting, specifically, seems to be in view.

The false teachers also advocated the worship of the angels probably with the notion that angels are 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 for such claims was personal experience or observation, things the false teacher had seen in his fleshly mind, not revelation from God.

Some translators added visions (v. 18) in order to give the idea of some superior experience. However the contrast intended is between humanly generated ideas and divine revelation. Such grandiose ideas gave those who had them a false sense of pride. Christians, on the other hand, should get their 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 believers in Christ's body of which He is the Head (cf. 1:18; Eph. 4:7-16).<sup>1</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,

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

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>1</sup>

2:20-23 In these verses Paul expanded on the third error that he had already alluded to, namely, asceticism. The ascetic practices that he referred to seem to have been connected to, or were extensions of, the elementary principles that he had previously referred to (v. 8). "If" (v. 20) could read "Since." It is a first class condition in Greek that, in this case, is a true-to-reality condition. Christians have indeed died to these elementary ideas 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 things postmortem, so to speak, and again live like unbelievers in the world.

"Fasting was practiced to some extent in the early church, particularly on solemn occasions or in critical circumstances (Ac 13:2-3; 14:23); but it does not appear in the exhortations of the epistles. It was strictly a matter of individual choice or mutual agreement rather than something legislated. The emphasis in the New Testament falls rather on self-discipline as the key to dedicated usefulness in the kingdom of God (1 Co 9:24-27)."<sup>2</sup>

The false teachers were in effect forcing the Colossians to live by the world system by placing various 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: (1) The things prohibited are destined to perish. Food and drink

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<sup>1</sup>Darrell L. Bock, "A Theology of Paul's Prison Epistles," in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, p. 305.

<sup>2</sup>Harrison, p. 71.

are consumed in the body and "perish with use." (2) The laws referred to were of human origin ("commandments and teachings of men"). (3) They do not solve the real problem, namely, the desires of the flesh ("are of no value against fleshly indulgence").

"Man's way of safeguard is by placing various restraints and negations of evil ... God's way is by 'stripping off the body of the flesh' through death and resurrection with Christ, giving us a new life, a new nature, and a continual flow of nourishment for that new life direct from the Risen Head in Heaven."<sup>1</sup>

"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>2</sup>

"One may shut himself up in a monastery in order to escape the world, only to find he has taken the world in with him."<sup>3</sup>

"Pride is one of the worst manifestations of the flesh; but asceticism goes further than subjection of the body, for it treats the body as an evil thing and thereby does despite to the natural order which God has ordained. The right course is to dedicate the body with all its powers to God for fruitful service (Ro 12:1)."<sup>4</sup>

"Asceticism does not touch the seat of sin. All its strength is exerted against the body. Sin is of the soul, has its seat in the soul. So long as the heart

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<sup>1</sup>Lincoln, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup>Alexander Maclaren, "The Epistles of St. Paul to the Colossians and Philemon," in *The Expositor's Bible*, p. 255.

<sup>3</sup>Ironside, p. 112.

<sup>4</sup>Harrison, p. 73.

is corrupt, no bodily restraints will make the life holy."<sup>1</sup>

Four harmful teaching emphases of these false teachers are still with us today: The first harmful teaching is so-called higher knowledge (Gnosticism). Some examples are so-called scientific, archaeological, or paleontological facts that contradict Scripture, so-called revelations that claim to be on a par with Scripture, and teaching that directly contradicts biblical revelation. The second harmful teaching is the observance of laws in order to win God's favor (legalism). Some examples are salvation by works, teaching that puts Christians under the Mosaic Law, and teaching that says sanctification comes by keeping man-made rules.

The third harmful teaching is the belief that beings other than Christ must mediate between people and God (mysticism). Some examples are teachings that certain beings (e.g., angels, canonized saints, ancestors) or experiences (e.g., glossolalia, hearing voices) can improve our relationship with God. The fourth harmful teaching is the practice of abstaining from things in order to earn merit with God (asceticism). Some examples are fasting to force God's hand, living in isolation to avoid temptation, and self-mutilation to mortify the flesh.

"Any system of religion which is unwilling to accept Jesus Christ as the only and all-sufficient Savior is an indulgence of the flesh, a giving in to man's sinful conceit, as if he, by his own contrivances, were able to perfect Christ's imperfect (?) work. It makes matters worse instead of better."<sup>2</sup>

"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

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<sup>1</sup>Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Annotated Bible*, 4:1:72.

<sup>2</sup>Hendriksen, p. 133.

offer a system for victory and fullness that bypasses devotion to Jesus Christ. In all things, He must have the preeminence!"<sup>1</sup>

Reformed theology has historically taught that a true Christian will never renounce his or her 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 some claim were the objects of his warnings, and true Christians. Rather he appealed to the Colossians as genuine Christians to watch out for this very real danger. Genuine Christians can be deceived by false teaching, even teaching concerning the person and work of 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 proceeded to explain true Christian mysticism.

"Now he proceeds to delineate the true Christian life which results from the true doctrine; and he shows that this is the opposite of the life the Judaizers try to live in accord with their doctrine. ... It would be a misunderstanding of Paul's purpose to regard this part as a general sketch of Christian ethics."<sup>2</sup>

Paul 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 of believers.

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

In order 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 in Greek). It introduces another "in Christ" position that Paul

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:104.

<sup>2</sup>Lenski, p. 148.

assumed to be true for the sake of his argument and which is indeed true (cf. 2:20). Paul returned to his thought about the believer's union with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection (2:9-15). Another view is that Paul was referring to the believer being raised up with Christ at the believer's conversion and/or baptism (cf. Eph. 2:6).<sup>1</sup>

Two present imperatives identify the Christian's responsibilities: "keep seeking" (v. 1) and "set your minds 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. Keep looking up (cf. Heb. 12:12:1-2)

"'Seek' (*zeteite*) implies here not an investigation but an effort to obtain."<sup>2</sup>

"The horizon of spiritual attainment grows broader as the believer advances higher and further into the will of God."<sup>3</sup>

"Heaven and earth are contrary one to the other, and the prevalence of our affection to one will proportionably weaken our affection to the other."<sup>4</sup>

"The pilgrim is not to despise the comforts which he may meet with by the way, but he is not to tarry among them, or leave them with regret."<sup>5</sup>

"This preoccupation with 'things which are above' is not born of wistfulness, as though one can find relief from the pressures of the world only by looking to a better world. It is not an effort to detach oneself, to find escape. Rather, it is the attitude found in Christ during the days of His flesh, who lived in the bosom of the Father even

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<sup>1</sup>Peake, 3:36.

<sup>2</sup>Kent, p. 105.

<sup>3</sup>Gromacki, p. 127.

<sup>4</sup>Henry, p. 1873.

<sup>5</sup>Eadie, p. 215.

as He continued His strenuous labors among the children of men."<sup>1</sup>

"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>2</sup>

The Christian's second responsibility is to continually set his or her mind on the things above (the things of heaven; i.e., 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>3</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>4</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>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Harrison, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup>Vaughan, p. 209.

<sup>3</sup>Lightfoot, p. 207.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, p. 177. Paragraph division omitted.

<sup>5</sup>Robertson, 4:500.

This is the legitimate mysticism of Paul.<sup>1</sup> 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 is inward.

Intellectual brilliance, advanced education, or unusual physical strength are not required for a Christian to become great in God's estimation. What He requires is faithful perseverance in the basics of the Christian life. Any Christian can do this since we all have the help of the Lord Himself.

I remember listening to sports commentator John Madden's analysis of the success of the Boston Celtics' basketball team several years ago. He said that the reason that they had been so successful was that they constantly practiced the basics of good basketball—such as getting down the court fast, keeping their hands up, and following up on their shots. He said most teams could be as good if they executed the basics as consistently as the Celtics did. The same is true in the Christian life. Unfortunately, we are often tempted to abandon the basics for what appears to be more esoteric and interesting.

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 the whole earth, which will begin when He returns to earth at His second advent.<sup>2</sup>

"Christ's sitting at God's right hand is the exercise of all the majesty and the power of deity according to his human nature."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Stewart, pp. 147-200.

<sup>2</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.

<sup>3</sup>Lenski, p. 150.



"That is a place, heaven itself, where a glorified Man, Himself God the Son, is seated, His work of salvation finished."<sup>1</sup>

3:3 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: (1) Our life draws nourishment from secret springs (cf. John 14:19; Phil. 3:20). (2) Our life is as safe as a deposit locked in a bank vault. (3) Our life is one with Christ, who is at the right hand of the Father.<sup>2</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>3</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. *kekrypta*) in Him.

"To have one's life hidden with Christ also implies that it is unobserved by others. This explains why those outside of Christ fail to understand the true situation of the child of God. They often think him to be odd or fanatical."<sup>4</sup>

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,

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<sup>1</sup>Wuest, 1:4:217.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, 479:212-13.

<sup>3</sup>Dunn, p. 206.

<sup>4</sup>Kent, p. 109.

Christ is his life. Jesus Christ dominates his thought and fills his life."<sup>1</sup>

"When" 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 His coming for the church at 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 ("with Him in glory"). The Rapture will be a glorious revelation of Christ to us, but it will also reveal 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>2</sup>

"This particular language—that of divesting and reinvesting—was no doubt dramatically symbolized by the baptizand's unclothing before immersion and reclothing after it."<sup>3</sup>

In view of this revelation Christians need not pursue another system that claims to provide more than we have in Christ. God has provided all that we need, both for acceptance by Him and for godly living in Christ. All we need

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

<sup>2</sup>O'Brien, *Colossians ...*, pp. 171-72. Paragraph division omitted.

<sup>3</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles ...*, p. 114.

to do is act on (apply) the implications of these truths, which Paul proceeded to help his readers do in the following verses.

## 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>1</sup>

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

In view of their position in Christ, Paul urged his readers to separate from the practices of their former way of life. He did this in order 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), rid yourselves (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 in our experience what we already are in reality in Christ. The key Greek word *nekrosate*, translated "treat ... 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>2</sup>

"God in salvation has broken the power of the evil nature over the believer's physical body. Now, the believer is charged with the responsibility of maintaining in his experience that state of liberation, and, as the behests of the evil nature come before him, he is to put them to death, that is, refuse to obey them."<sup>3</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,

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<sup>1</sup>Dunn, p. 211.

<sup>2</sup>Bruce, *Commentary on ...*, p. 267.

<sup>3</sup>Wuest, 1:4:219.

which tied them 'to the earth' and hindered the outworking of the 'mind set on what is above.'"<sup>1</sup>

To put something to death is never pleasant. It is not the same as practicing asceticism however. Asceticism says that I, by my own will, can subdue the flesh simply by denying its desires. Christian self-control says that I can subdue the flesh by relying on the Holy Spirit to empower me to deny its desires.

"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>2</sup>

"The false doctrine of the Gnostics had failed to check sensual indulgence (ii. 23). The true doctrine of the Apostle has power to kill the whole carnal man."<sup>3</sup>

Paul's first list of things to put to death 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>4</sup>

- Sexual immorality (Gr. *porneia*) refers to illicit sexual activity.
- Impurity (*akatharsia*) in any form is in view in this context, especially moral impurity.

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<sup>1</sup>Dunn, p. 212.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, 481:24.

<sup>3</sup>Lightfoot, p. 208.

<sup>4</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.

- Passion (*pathos*) means uncontrolled illegitimate desire, "like an inward fire that is kindled in the heart."<sup>1</sup>
- Evil desire (*epithymian kaken*) means any evil desire in a more general sense that reaches out for some forbidden thing in order to satisfy itself.
- 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>2</sup>

"Every sin is basically selfishness, the worship of self instead of the worship of God, the substitution of self for Christ, in one's affections (cf. Col. 3:1-3)."<sup>3</sup>

The various vice lists in the New Testament, in their different contexts, reveal to some extent the social conditions that prevailed in those places.<sup>4</sup>

3:6-7

Such carnal behavior will bring God's wrath eventually. God will discipline both Christians and non-believers alike ("sons of disobedience") who practice these things. These activities normally characterize the unsaved, so Christians must lay them aside (v. 8; cf. Matt. 5:29-30; Rom. 8:13; Eph. 5:3-14) or face divine discipline.

"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 [cut out]."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lenski, p. 158.

<sup>2</sup>G. B. Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison*, p. 205.

<sup>3</sup>Hendriksen, p. 147.

<sup>4</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles ...*, p. 117.

<sup>5</sup>Barclay, pp. 180-81.

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

3:8-9 Paul's second list of things to put to death 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.

"We have three generations of sin here: anger cherished begets wrath, and wrath if not judged begets malice."<sup>2</sup>

- Slander (*blasphemia*) refers to insulting, injurious, malicious speech in general.
- Obscene speech (*aischrologia*) means filthy, disgraceful, dishonorable speech.
- Lying (*pseudesthe*) refers to deceptive, distorting, untruthful speech.

The imperative command against lying is very strong. Paul literally said: Never lie! The reason for this command is given in verses 9b-10 and 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 self refers to the church, the body of Christ.<sup>3</sup> But this is a minority view. Verse

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<sup>1</sup>Shawn R. Leach, "The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians," in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, 2:921.

<sup>2</sup>Ironside, p. 136.

<sup>3</sup>Darrell L. Bock, "'The New Man' as Community in Colossians and Ephesians," in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands*, pp. 158-60.

10 describes the process of individual sanctification in which the new self is being renewed or renovated into Christ's image. "To a true knowledge" probably means according to a true knowledge. True knowledge (*epignosis*) is full knowledge of God and His will in contrast to the false knowledge that the false teachers were promoting. 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 or that puts him or her in a better position in relation to God. Nor is there any religious, cultural, or social distinction that does that. Jesus Christ is essentially all that we need for new birth and growth, in contrast to the additives that the Judaizers promoted. Christ 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>1</sup>

A barbarian was a person who did not know Greek; his or her language was foreign. Barbarians came mainly from Western Asia and the Black Sea region.<sup>2</sup> Scythians originated from the Black Sea and Caspian Sea areas, and the Greeks thought of them as the lowest type of barbarian.<sup>3</sup> Paul often used the term Greek to describe anyone who practiced Greek culture, not necessarily a Gentile or a pagan or a native Greek (cf. Rom. 1:13-16).<sup>4</sup> Whereas to the Jews the world was divided into Jews and Gentiles to the Greeks and Romans it was divided into Greeks and barbarians: those who were educated in Greek culture and those who were not.<sup>5</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

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<sup>1</sup>See C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles ...*, pp. 121-22.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>3</sup>Hendriksen, pp. 153-54; McGee, 5:358. See also Kent, pp. 120-21

<sup>4</sup>Lenski, p. 164.

<sup>5</sup>See Lightfoot, pp. 215-16.

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>1</sup>

## 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 in order 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>2</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>3</sup>

3:12-14 Paul reminded the Colossians of who they were ("those who have been chosen by God") because an appreciation of who

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson, 481:28.

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

<sup>3</sup>McGee, 5:358.



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 (cf. Prov. 23:7). God has specially selected believers, has set them apart for great things, and has made them the objects of His love. In view of these privileges, 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>1</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>2</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.
- Bearing with (*anechomenoi*) means putting up with others and enduring discomfort.
- Forgiving (*charizomenoi*) involves not holding a grudge or grievance but letting go of it immediately.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Carson, p. 86.

<sup>2</sup>C. J. Ellicott, *A Critical and Grammatical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistles to the Philippians, Colossians, and to Philemon*, p. 190.

<sup>3</sup>See Lenski, pp. 171-72; David W. Augsburger, *Seventy Times Seven: The Freedom of Forgiveness*, pp. 18-24.

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

All these features deal with the believer's interpersonal relationships. These are the things that the Colossians and all Christians should concentrate on rather than the external requirements of the Judaizers. They have been called ordinary (common) virtues designed to reduce or eliminate friction.<sup>1</sup> In interpersonal relationships especially the life of Christ should be visible in us. Love is the supremely important Christian virtue.

"It is not looked upon here as containing perfection within itself, but as so uniting the other graces that it gives them perfection, and keeps them in it."<sup>2</sup>

"Love, then is 'the bond of perfection' in the sense that it is that which unites believers, causing them to move forward toward the goal of perfection."<sup>3</sup>

3:15 Four imperatives in verses 15-17 identify which precepts believers must follow. The first of these is literally: Let rule the peace of Christ. When Christians need to make choices, the peace that Christ produces in our hearts should be a determining factor.<sup>4</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; Rom. 12:18).

"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>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles ...*, p. 123.

<sup>2</sup>Eadie, p. 246.

<sup>3</sup>Hendriksen, p. 159. Cf. Lenski, p. 174.

<sup>4</sup>Lightfoot, p. 221. See Charles R. Swindoll, *The Mystery of God's Will*, pp. 49-51.

<sup>5</sup>Johnson, 481:30-31.

When these three indicators line up we can move ahead confidently. Attainment of the unity of the body of Christ and the peace of Christ normally results in a spirit of thankfulness that should also be expressed in our behavior. The second imperative is: Be thankful.

3:16 The third imperative is literally: Let dwell the word of Christ. The word of Christ, which is a phrase used only here in the New Testament, is Christ's teachings, not only during His earthly ministry but also in all of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> His Word should permeate our whole being so that we make all of our 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>2</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>3</sup>

"The Holy Spirit uses the Word of God that we know as He talks to us and guides our lives. He can efficiently talk to us to the extent to which we know the Word. That is the language He uses."<sup>4</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>5</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup>Harrison, p. 91; Wuest, 1:4:226. Cf. Eadie, p. 250.

<sup>2</sup>Dunn, p. 236.

<sup>3</sup>Vaughan, p. 216.

<sup>4</sup>Wuest, 1:4:226-27.

<sup>5</sup>Wiersbe, 2:140.

word psalms implies that the believers sang them with musical accompaniment. "Hymns" are songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. "Spiritual songs" probably refers to all types of expressions of Christian experience set to music.<sup>1</sup> Thankfulness to God is to characterize our singing too (cf. v. 15).<sup>2</sup>

"Whether with instrument or with voice or with both it is all for naught if the adoration is not in the heart."<sup>3</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>4</sup>

Singing in the heart probably means heartfelt singing, not inaudible singing.<sup>5</sup> Private as well as public worship is in view however.<sup>6</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

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<sup>1</sup>Lightfoot, p. 223.

<sup>2</sup>See David F. Detwiler, "Church Music and Colossians 3:16," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158:631 (July-September 2001):347-69.

<sup>3</sup>Robertson, 4:505.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, p. 191.

<sup>5</sup>Harrison, p. 94.

<sup>6</sup>Lightfoot, p. 223.

accompanied too frequently by shallow grounding in the Word of God."<sup>1</sup>

3:17 This verse covers all other thoughts, words, and actions ("Whatever you do in word or deed").

"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 [clever but unsound reasoning]. 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 [*sic* Dos]' and 'Don't's [*sic* Don'ts].' 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>2</sup>

The basic principle, as opposed to a set of specific rules, is this: We should say all our words, and practice all our deeds, in harmony with the revelation of Jesus Christ, namely, under His authority and as His followers. Acting in someone's name means conducting oneself as that person's representative. The Christian is to do all with thanksgiving to God. The fourth imperative is implicit here in the Greek text, but the translators have supplied it in the English text: Do.

"Holiness and happiness go together."<sup>3</sup>

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. Asking oneself: What would Jesus do? is quite similar. This approach is vastly different from the legal one that provides a

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson, 481:32. Cf. Ironside, p. 153.

<sup>2</sup>Bruce, *Commentary on ...*, p. 285.

<sup>3</sup>Ironside, pp. 152-53.

specific command for every situation. In this contrast we see a basic difference between the Old and New Covenants.

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

Paul next set forth certain principles in order to guide his readers in their most important interpersonal relationships. Geisler saw this section as containing exhortations to perfect the Christian's private life (3:18—4:1), prayer life (4:2-4), and 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>1</sup> Paul wrote this instruction in order to enable the readers to understand what behavior is consistent with union with Christ in various 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>2</sup> Luther referred to these sections as *haustafel*, and some scholars still use this German word 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>3</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>4</sup>

"... household life was so transformed 'in the Lord' that each person was seen as precious to God, and that husbands and masters recognized that they had duties no less than rights."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Geisler, "Colossians," p. 683.

<sup>2</sup>See O'Brien, *Colossians ...*, pp. 214-19, for a discussion of them.

<sup>3</sup>Dunn, p. 245.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, p. 192.

<sup>5</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles ...*, p. 128.

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

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

"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' ..."<sup>1</sup>

This subjection rests on divinely prescribed authority, not on any inherent inferiority in spirituality, intelligence, worth, or anything else.<sup>2</sup> This subjection 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."<sup>3</sup>

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."<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> She should maintain a submissive attitude toward him and defer to him, but she need not subject herself and/or her children to danger. Paul's point was that a wife should always relate to her husband as God's appointed leader in their

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, p. 247. Cf. Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 119; and W. Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, p. 253.

<sup>2</sup>See Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, p. 57.

<sup>3</sup>Johnson, 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.

<sup>4</sup>Vaughan, p. 218.

<sup>5</sup>See Hendriksen, p. 169.

relationship. 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 like 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 either because of the wife's lack of submission or for any other reason. Bitter means irritated mentally or cross verbally. This attitude is a specific and all too common manifestation of lack of love. Husbands can avoid becoming bitter by calling to memory the good qualities of their wives rather than dwelling on things that irritate them.

"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 Christianity we have for the first time an ethic of mutual and reciprocal obligation."<sup>1</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 translated 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. 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).

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, p. 193.



"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>1</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, with the words "do not antagonize," is the habitual provoking of children by insensitive parents, especially fathers. Some fathers can be very hard on their children by holding them to unattainably high standards of conduct, by not listening to them, and by trying to control their futures, among other ways.

"Since like begets like, a parent who provokes will produce a child of strife. Such provocation makes unreasonable demands on the child, humiliates him, and manifests no loving understanding of his unique personality. It is marked by constant nagging."<sup>2</sup>

Some provocation is at times unavoidable in disciplining, but ceaseless irritation causes children to become discouraged, sullen, angry, and even hateful.

"'Irritation' is the first consequence of being too exacting with children, and irritation leads to moroseness (*athumia*)."<sup>3</sup>

"Paul may have had in mind the regimen of 'don'ts' that loomed so large in the Colossian heresy."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>McGee, 5:361.

<sup>2</sup>Gromacki, p. 150.

<sup>3</sup>Lightfoot, p. 225.

<sup>4</sup>Vaughan, p. 219.

**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 along with the Epistle to Philemon. Onesimus, Philemon's run-away slave, carried them.<sup>1</sup> Moreover there may well have been more slaves in the Colossian church than masters (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26).<sup>2</sup> The friction inherent in the slave-master relationship probably called for extended comments on this 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 the social group to which they currently belonged.

"It is clear that Paul was not concerned about social structures but only with how the Christian should live out his Christian life within the contemporary social situation. ... There is no evidence that Paul looked upon the church as a structure that would take its place with other social structures and change them for the good."<sup>3</sup>

"... 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>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson, 482:109, 113; Lightfoot, p. 226.

<sup>2</sup>Hendriksen, p. 173.

<sup>3</sup>George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 530.

<sup>4</sup>Dunn, p. 253.

Paul's view was this: It is more important for Christians to carry out their mission as Christians, in whatever social conditions they find themselves, than it is to make changing those conditions their primary concern (cf. Matt. 28:19-20; 1 Cor. 7:20-22).<sup>1</sup> In spiritual matters the slave and his master were equal brothers in Christ, but in society they were on different levels. Slaves in the Roman Empire were sometimes similar to domestic servants in Victorian Britain.<sup>2</sup> That is, they were often honored members of a household. However in other families slaves were treated no better than tools.

"Slaves were property. Masters had complete control over them, even to putting them to death on the slightest provocation."<sup>3</sup>

3:23-24 Slaves (or workers) should do their work primarily for the Lord, not merely for their masters. This view of one's true master transforms a worker's attitudes and performance. Even the most servile menial work thereby becomes a ministry and an act of worship. All jobs can then and should be full-time Christian work. Gideon was a farmer; Dorcas, a seamstress; Luke, a doctor; Daniel, a government official; and Lydia, a business woman—to name only a few. God uses all occupations.<sup>4</sup>

"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.

Slaves should also do their work heartily, with the whole heart (lit. from the soul).

"If you are lazy on the job, you are *not* dedicated to Jesus Christ."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Wiersbe, 2:144.

<sup>2</sup>Dunn, p. 252.

<sup>3</sup>Harrison, p. 102.

<sup>4</sup>See R. C. Sproul, *God's Will & the Christian*, pt. 2, ch. 1: "God's Will and Our Job."

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

The Lord will reward such service with an inheritance (1 Cor. 4:5; Rev. 22:12). Imagine: a slave receiving an inheritance!

"This promise must be viewed in light of the fact that a slave had no legal right to an inheritance on earth even if one should be left to him."<sup>1</sup>

The title Lord Christ occurs only here in the New Testament. Evidently Paul coined it here in order to stress Jesus' Lordship. Jesus is the Messiah (Christ) who, as Lord, will reward the faithful in the future.<sup>2</sup> There may be an intended contrast with Lord Caesar here.

"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 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>3</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 some 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 much 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.

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<sup>1</sup>Harrison, p. 100.

<sup>2</sup>See René A. López, "A Study of Pauline Passages on Inheriting the Kingdom," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168:672 (October-December 2011):450-52.

<sup>3</sup>Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, p. 68. See also O'Brien, *Colossians . . .*, p. 231.

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 the wedding banquet at the beginning of the earthly messianic kingdom (e.g., Matt. 25; et al.). Other passages speak of it in connection with 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>1</sup>

3:25 Whereas doing one's work heartily as to the Lord results in a reward, not doing so will also inevitably result in bad consequences. Paul did not specify what these consequences would be, but lack of a reward at least, and punishment at most, can reasonably be expected (cf. Matt. 25:14-30). Furthermore, Paul reminded his readers, the Judge will be impartial.

4:1 Masters should remember that they too have a Master. This view should transform how they regard and treat their slaves, namely, with justice and fairness. 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>2</sup>

William Webb offered an extensive discussion of how to apply these instructions.<sup>3</sup> I do not agree with his "redemptive-movement hermeneutic," or what I would call a "trajectory

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<sup>1</sup>See Dillow, pp. 551-83.

<sup>2</sup>Ellis, p. 1344.

<sup>3</sup>William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*.

hermeneutic," because I believe it is subjective. I do believe, however, that he has offered some helpful suggestions.<sup>1</sup>

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

"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>2</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 in order 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 true because when we pray we are calling on

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<sup>1</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.

<sup>2</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.

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, namely, to give it constant attention and priority (cf. Luke 18:1-8). Perhaps the main problem that we face when we do pray is concentration. Therefore Paul reminded his readers to keep alert in prayer and to express gratitude with thanksgiving in view of God's goodness and grace to them.<sup>1</sup>

"This is like breathing: inhale by prayer, exhale by thanksgiving."<sup>2</sup>

"The soul flourishes in an atmosphere of prayer. ... We need to pray as much as we need to breathe. Our souls will languish without it, and our testimony will be utterly fruitless if we neglect it."<sup>3</sup>

"Long continuance in prayer is apt to produce listlessness. Hence the additional charge that the heart must be *awake*, if the prayer is to have any value. The word is not to be taken literally here, but metaphorically."<sup>4</sup>

"The apostle enjoins, not physical, but spiritual wakefulness, as in Ephes. vi. 18, where he employs *agrupnountes* ["be alert"] ..."<sup>5</sup>

"The accompanying exhortation to 'keep awake, be on the alert' (*gregoreo*) is drawn from the

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<sup>1</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>2</sup>McGee, 5:363.

<sup>3</sup>Ironside, pp. 166-67.

<sup>4</sup>Lightfoot, p. 229.

<sup>5</sup>Eadie, p. 273.

imagery of guard duty (Neh. 7:3; 1 Macc. 2:27; Mark 14:34, 37) ..."1

Paul's 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).

4:3-4 Paul requested his readers' intercession for two matters in particular: First, he asked them to pray that God would give him and his companions opportunities for evangelism and edification.

"God opens the door by his providence. Many fail to note this and try to open doors for themselves. When we are spreading the gospel we must follow God's providential indications as to where we ought to work."2

Second, Paul asked that when these opportunities came he would be able to present the gospel clearly.<sup>3</sup>

"A truly great man is not too proud to ask that he be remembered in prayer ..."4

"The people must pray particularly for their ministers, and bear them upon their hearts at all times at the throne of grace."<sup>5</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 out of prison.

4:5 With respect to his readers' relationship to unbelievers ("outsiders"), Paul counseled the use of wisdom as most important. This involves living life in the light of God's

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<sup>1</sup>Dunn, p. 262.

<sup>2</sup>Lenski, p. 191.

<sup>3</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles ...*, p. 133.

<sup>4</sup>Hendriksen, p. 201.

<sup>5</sup>Henry, p. 1874.



revelation and then applying the knowledge gained by revelation to specific situations (1:9).

"St. Paul probably has in mind the difference between bold, uncompromising witness to the Christian allegiance when occasion offers, and a harsh, unloving, tactless obtruding [forcing] of it at the wrong time."<sup>1</sup>

"The world's Bible is the daily life of the church, every page of which its quick eye minutely scans, and every blot on which it detects with gleeful and malicious exactness."<sup>2</sup>

The Greek word translated opportunity (*kairos*, lit. time, meaning "a strategic point of time"<sup>3</sup>) probably implies the opportune time (i.e., the best, most effective, and most productive time) as this Greek word 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 addressing his readers' walk to their talk. A most important thing to keep in mind regarding the Colossians' own practices involved their speech. Speech most effectively expresses what is inside a person. The Christian's speech should represent the gracious character and conduct of his or her God by demonstrating: love, patience, sacrifice, undeserved favor, etc.

Salt probably represents both attractiveness, since salt makes food appealing, and wholesomeness, since salt was a preservative that retarded spoiling or rotting in food (cf. Matt. 5:13; Mark 9:50; Eph. 4:29).<sup>4</sup> The Christian should wisely suit his or her speech to each situation. The phrase seasoned with salt refer to witty speech in classical Greek, but Paul probably

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<sup>1</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles ...*, p. 133. See also Hendriksen's appendix: "Scripture on Tactfulness," pp. 231-32.

<sup>2</sup>Eadie, p. 279.

<sup>3</sup>Wuest, 1:4:234.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Eadie., p. 281; Lenski, p. 194.

meant attractive and wholesome speech in view of other biblical uses of the term salt.<sup>1</sup>

"... there should be a Christian flavor to the conversation which should not be confined to insipid talk or mere platitudes but move to important matters that will invite the light which revelation can provide. The objective here is to cultivate a sensitivity to each individual, so as to be able to meet his objections and show how the gospel can supply his needs."<sup>2</sup>

In other words the Christian's conversation should be distinctively Christian as opposed to merely human.

"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>3</sup>

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

## V. CONCLUSION 4:7-18

Paul concluded this epistle with personal information and instructions. He did this in order to bond his readers more tightly to one another in 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

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson, 484:314-15.

<sup>2</sup>Harrison, p. 107.

<sup>3</sup>McGee, 5:363.

<sup>4</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.

present ministry than he felt led to record in the letter itself. And he 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 bond-servant, either as a prisoner of both Rome and the will of God or just 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>1</sup>

4:9 Onesimus had previously been a slave in the household of Philemon, who was a member of the Colossian church. But he had run away to Rome where Paul had subsequently led him to Christ. Paul was now sending 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 letter to the Ephesians (Eph. 6:21-22). They probably also carried one to the Laodiceans (cf. v. 16), another one to Philemon (Phile. 2:23-24), and this letter to the Colossians.

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

Paul mentioned six individuals five of whom he also named in his letter to 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 (*sunaichmalotos*, lit. prisoner of war). It probably means a prisoner to the will of God rather than a prisoner of Caesar (cf. Phile. 23).<sup>2</sup> Another view is that

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:149.

<sup>2</sup>Carson, p. 98.

Aristarchus resided in the same house in Rome with Paul, which was Paul's prison.<sup>1</sup>

John Mark (Acts 12:25), who is called Mark here, had since rejoined Paul sometime after their separation, which happened on Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13:5, 13). The Colossians apparently knew his cousin Barnabas better than they knew Mark. This Mark wrote the Gospel that bears his name (cf. 2 Tim. 4:11).

"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>2</sup>

4:11 Jesus Justus is mentioned only here in the New Testament. These three men (Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus Justice) were Jewish Christians, as is clear from their names plus the fact that Paul referred to them as "from the circumcision." 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 kingdom of believers over whom Christ rules now. Others believe that it refers to the future earthly messianic kingdom "toward which as a glorious goal all the labors of the Church are directed."<sup>3</sup>

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 appreciation that God would provide illumination and continued growth in response to His people's prayers (James 4:2). Providing illumination and

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<sup>1</sup>W. J. Conybeare, in *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, p. 687.

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

<sup>3</sup>McClain, p. 436.

growth is spiritual work that only God can do. Epaphras' concern for the Christians in the other towns near Colosse (Laodicea and Hierapolis) suggests the possibility that he evangelized these communities as well.

"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>1</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>2</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>3</sup>

"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

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<sup>1</sup>D. Edmond Hiebert, *Working With God: Scriptural Studies in Intercession*, p. 77.

<sup>2</sup>Harrington C. Lees, *St. Paul's Friends*, p. 157.

<sup>3</sup>W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Christ Pre-Eminent*, p. 191.

his people reflected the grace of God upon them. Blessed is that church which has such a praying shepherd."<sup>1</sup>

4:14 Paul identified Luke, the writer of the third Gospel and Acts, simply as the beloved physician without any further elaboration or commendation. The name Luke is a contraction of Lucanus.<sup>2</sup>

"At this time medicine was only just becoming a subject of systematic instruction."<sup>3</sup>

Luke would have been both physically and spiritually helpful to Paul. Demas (probably a short form of Demetrius) 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, who was possibly the hostess of a Laodicean house-church. There is no evidence that Christians met in church buildings until the third century.<sup>4</sup> The early Christians seem to have chosen their meeting places on the basis of convenience and availability.

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

4:17 Archippus appears to have been Philemon's son (Phile. 2). Perhaps he was a gifted young man whom Paul wished to

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<sup>1</sup>Hiebert, p. 83. See also idem, "Epaphras, Man of Prayer," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136:541 (January-March 1977):54-64.

<sup>2</sup>Lightfoot, p. 239.

<sup>3</sup>Dunn, p. 283. See *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, s. v. "Medicine," p. 662.

<sup>4</sup>Lightfoot, p. 241.

<sup>5</sup>For discussion of this theory, see the introductions to the New Testament and commentaries on Ephesians 1:1. For defense of the view that this letter was the Epistle to the Ephesians, see Lightfoot, pp. 242, 272-98.

encourage. The idea that he was the present leader of the Colossian church is a possibility that some commentators have suggested. Whatever his ministry may have been, Paul urged him to fulfill it.

"To say: 'I feel as if my work is done,' is only a bit of proud flesh. Your work will not be done till the Lord comes, or calls you to be with Him. Therefore, as long as you are here, take heed to the service, and complete it."<sup>1</sup>

#### **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). This verse seems to be one example of his practice. 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): "Grace be with you."

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 Colosse. 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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<sup>1</sup>Lincoln, pp. 60-61.

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