

Doctrinal Issues in Colossians  
Part 4 (of 4 parts):

**THE CHRISTIAN LIFE  
ACCORDING TO COLOSSIANS**

H. Wayne House

A muscle will not function properly if the bone to which it is attached is broken or is in a state of degeneration. The same is true of the Christian life. Orthodoxy serves as the skeletal framework for the saint of God. If that framework is faulty and does not affirm truth, the result will be a defective lifestyle.

In the Epistle to the Colossians Paul demonstrated this point. The Colossian congregation was under attack by syncretistic Jewish mysticism, which promoted "legal ordinances, circumcision, food regulations, the Sabbath, new moon, and other prescriptions of the Jewish calendar."<sup>1</sup> In response to this heterodoxy, the Apostle Paul sought to make clear how the infection of false doctrine would affect their Christian living. This article examines the union between doctrine and practice by noting four themes in the Book of Colossians: walking in divine wisdom, living in Christ, putting off sinful works, and putting on Christ.

WALKING IN DIVINE WISDOM (2:6-10)

In Colossians 2:6 Paul affirmed the association between correct theology and correct living. The Colossians, or at least some of them, were abandoning the doctrines espoused by Paul and were pursuing theological opinion in addition to deprecating the superiority and efficacy of Christ. Paul reminded them to live according to the truth they had been taught them.

H. Wayne House is Professor-at-large, Simon Greenleaf University, School of Law, Anaheim, California.

\* This is article four in a four-part series, "Doctrinal Issues in Colossians." Parts one and two were published in the *Bibliotheca Sacra* January 1992 and April 1992 issues, and part three was published in July—September 1994.

<sup>1</sup> *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1979 ed., s.v. "Colossians," by F. F. Bruce, 1:733.

## HOLDING TO TRUTH, NOT OPINIONS (2:6-7)

Paul was concerned that the Colossians might succumb to a philosophy completely estranged from his apostolic message. In 2:1 he said he wanted his readers to know of his willingness to suffer for the saints. He did this so the Colossians would come to experience "all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself" (v. 3). He wanted to prevent their being led astray by malignant "persuasive" speech (πιθανολογία, v. 4, a word that means persuasive speech that is plausible yet false<sup>2</sup>). However pleasing and logical this new philosophy seemed, it was heresy, not truth. The Greco-Roman world of the first century did not lack an abundance of views, philosophies, and religious trends. The populace was probably accustomed to hearing rhetoric and oratory promoting one cause or another.

Paul urged them to live in accord with the fact that they had received Jesus Christ: "As you therefore have received [παρελάβετε<sup>3</sup>] Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him" (v. 6). Paul's concern was not that they simply possess the right Christology and theology in general, but that they also live in accord with it (v. 7). The Colossians were to be rooted and established in the truth. Ellicott remarks that the two words "rooted" (ῥριζωμένοι) and "established" (ἐποικοδομούμενοι) refer to "the image[s] of a root-fast tree (hence the perf. part.), [and] a continually uprising building (hence the pres. part.) marking the stable growth and organic solidity of those who truly walk in Christ."<sup>4</sup> The authority and priority of orthodoxy serves as a filter through which any grain of wisdom, whether true wisdom or false, must be strained.

## AVOIDING PHILOSOPHIES THAT REJECT CHRIST (2:8)

The Colossians were also warned not to allow anyone to take them captive through philosophy and empty deception. The verb

<sup>2</sup> Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 657.

<sup>3</sup> "Early Christianity took over from rabbinic Judaism the idea of transmitting and safeguarding a tradition (the verbs 'receive,' 'accept,' παραλαμβάνω, and 'transmit,' παραδίδωμι, correspond to the rabbinic terms *qibbel* and *masar*)" (P. O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary [Dallas, TX: Word, 1982], 105).

<sup>4</sup> C. J. Ellicott, *The Epistles of St. Paul*, 2 vols. (Andover, MA: Draper, 1884), 2:160.

"take captive" translates *συλαγωγέω*, "to carry off as booty or as a captive, rob."<sup>5</sup> In employing the term figuratively, Paul symbolized Colossians being carried "away from the truth into the slavery of error."<sup>6</sup> The pundits who harbored this wayward philosophy were an imminent threat to the Colossian congregation. In the Greco-Roman world the word "philosophy" included a broad spectrum of religious and intellectual perspectives. "In Hellenistic language usage the word 'philosophy' (*φιλοσοφία*) was used to describe all sorts of groups, tendencies and points of view and thus had become a rather broad term."<sup>7</sup> This deviant and mystical philosophical skew not only posed a threat to the intellectual understanding of the Christian faith but also served as a potential barricade against true Christian virtue.

The heresy in Colossians 2 echoes a form of Jewish mysticism known as Merkabah mysticism,<sup>8</sup> which was characterized by supposed ascents of the initiates to heaven to converse with beings in the heavenly realm. The name "Merkabah" comes from "the literary tradition that associates these celestial revelations with the biblical accounts of angelic figures surrounding the Throne of Glory (Eze. 1:22-28) and the chariot (1 Chr. 28:18) on which it descended."<sup>9</sup> This early phase of Jewish mysticism grew out of Palestine and eventually became grafted into Christian Gnosticism and Greek mystery religions.

Merkabah mystics yearned for religious experiences apart from the Scriptures. "To experience God, i.e., to behold him, the mystic must undergo a total transformation induced by ascetic practice and the recitation of hymns declaring the holiness and majesty of God."<sup>10</sup> Along this journey angelic beings would attempt to expel the mystics from the realm of the heavenlies. To avoid confrontation and expulsion it was necessary for the mystics to know the names of all the angels. In Merkabah, "there was

<sup>5</sup> Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 776.

<sup>6</sup> Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 94.

<sup>7</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 109.

<sup>8</sup> This is not to advocate that the Colossian heresy was Merkabah mysticism, but to provide an example for comparative purposes only in order to demonstrate the delinquency of syncretism. For a list of opinions on the nature of the heresy see J. J. Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and Their Background: A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Keith Crim, ed., *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 477.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

no love for God nor a desire to attach oneself to him, but only the ecstatic, albeit passive, vision of God and his realm."<sup>11</sup>

Scholars do not agree on the exact nature of the Colossian heresy.<sup>12</sup> However, the view that it involved a Jewish form of mysticism is held by Bornkamm, Lightfoot, Lyonnet, and Francis.<sup>13</sup> Lexical evidence in Colossians 2 may indeed point to a Merkabah-like experience, particularly the use of the word ἐμβατεύω,<sup>14</sup> which occurs in the New Testament only in Colossians 2:18. (The New American Standard Bible renders it "taking his stand on," and the New International Version translates it, "goes into great detail about.") The Jewish-Gnostic philosophy of the Colossian heretics suggests that ἐμβατεύω means "to approach something with a view to examining it."<sup>15</sup> "What they try to achieve by way of ecstasy and asceticism is for Paul opposed to adherence to the exclusiveness of Christ the Head in whom all wisdom and knowledge are given."<sup>16</sup> "Ἐμβατεύω is to be taken as a quoted word, containing a sarcastic reference to the man of the mysteries with his false worship and fleshly mind."<sup>17</sup>

The earthly and fleshly orientation of this heretical viewpoint was not at all amenable to the Christian life as it had been proclaimed by Paul. It is clear that Paul's tenor in 2:8 is polemical. He referred to this philosophical stream as "empty deceit" (κενῆς ἀπάτης), originating from men and from the "elementary principles [or 'elements'] of the world" (κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου).

Concerning the phrase κενῆς ἀπάτης O'Brien states that Paul "exposes it as a hollow sham, having no true content, seductive and misleading," using a phrase that "can describe the seduction

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of various views see H. Wayne House, "Heresies in the Colossian Church," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (January–March 1992): 45-59.

<sup>13</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, xxxiii-xxxvi.

<sup>14</sup> Ἐμβατεύω was employed as a technical term in mystery religions (Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 254).

<sup>15</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "ἐμβατεύω," by Herbert Preisker, 2:536. Reinecker and Rogers suggest, "Perhaps the meaning here is the entering into heavenly spheres as a sort of superspiritual experience" (Fritz Reinecker and Cleon L. Rogers, Jr., *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980], 576).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> James H. Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-literary Sources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930), 206.

which comes from wealth, Mark 4:19; the deceitfulness of sin, Heb. 3:13; wicked deception generally, 2 Thess. 2:10; or deceptive desires, Eph. 4:22."<sup>18</sup> Though the heretical leaders may have possessed the ability to charm people, their tantalizing ideas parted company with doctrinal soundness. There was no inherent value in accepting concepts that were void of substance and lacking worth.

Also the apostle considered this heresy mundane as opposed to celestial, for it was confined to the depraved ingenuity of the human mind, a mind inclined to earthly and carnal things of no spiritual and eternal import. This heresy was in keeping with "the tradition of men" (κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, Col. 2:8). Through this phrase "Paul rejects any suggestion of divine origin. This was a human fabrication standing over against the apostolic tradition which centered on 'Christ Jesus as Lord.'"<sup>19</sup> The clause κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου ("according to the elementary principles of the world") parallels and emphasizes the idea of human origination and tradition.<sup>20</sup> "Elements [στοιχεῖα] is a common word in the language of the philosophers when they treat of the matter or the elements out of which every thing is formed."<sup>21</sup> "Elements" can also imply "the fundamental principles which provide the basis for every thing that is to be built upon it."<sup>22</sup> It seems plausible that Paul employed "elements" in this fashion. In Colossians 2 Paul emphasized establishing a credible basis for theology and life and refuting any that were groundless.

The apostle asserted that the false philosophy did not find its roots in Christ Jesus (οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν). If everything were built on a faulty foundation of speculation and deceit, the lifestyle of the Colossian believers would no doubt reflect the fallacy of this thinking. Verse 16 serves as an indicator of what the logical end of this fallacious reasoning would be. The result would be the needless practice of customs and sacerdotal mannerism meant to appease angels. Paul implored the Colossians not to allow anyone to entice or browbeat them into ascetic practices or make them feel obligated to participate in feasts, new moon festivals, or rites pertaining to the Sabbath.

<sup>18</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 110.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Παράδοσις is used of "the tradition preserved by the scribes and Pharisees"; cf. Matt. 15:2; Mark 7:5 (Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 615).

<sup>21</sup> Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 96.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Paul wanted the Colossians to be established in Christ Jesus and to grow in Him. Christ was to be the basis of every aspect of life. The only way to ensure this was to beseech the Colossians to reject any doctrine or teaching that did not have Christ as its bedrock. In addition the teaching concerning Christ had to do with what they had received originally (2:6). Thus the door would be closed to any wayward religious idealism that attempted to infiltrate Colossae by merely using the name of Christ. Any interpretation of Christ proffered by advocates of Jewish mysticism or any other Gnostic-like mystery religions was not to be tolerated.<sup>23</sup>

Syncretism posed a great threat to the integrity of the Christian faith. The shared nomenclature of the mystery religions and Christianity made doctrinal interference and confusion easy. For example *πλήρωμα* ("fullness," "completeness") was a word common to the mystery religions; however, Paul utilized the same term to reflect the completeness of the deity of Christ.<sup>24</sup> Since such lexical congruities existed, heretics sought to redefine the Person and work of Christ in terms that mitigated His role in both salvation and sanctification. Therefore Paul emphasized the superiority of Christ over and above that of angels (2:10; Eph. 2:20-21).

#### ENJOYING THE FULLNESS OF CHRIST (2:9-10)

The Colossian saints were to live the Christian life by adhering to the soundness of the apostle's Christ-centered message. The resonance of this doctrine was rich and full. There was no need for any philosophical or esoteric embellishments. Furthermore, when one's life is based on Christ, the result is virtue and not "false humility" associated with the worship of angels (2:18).

Christ is to be regarded above all. The causal *ὅτι* ("because"), with which verse 9 begins, introduces the reason He should be the ground for "Christian philosophy": "In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form." "The high Christological statement serves as the basis for the application to the particular needs of the congregation."<sup>25</sup> Colossian believers needed to know that Christ is superior to all, even above the angels who were the objects of worship for the heretics. Since Christ possesses in Himself "all

<sup>23</sup> See Scholem's comments on the origin of Gnosticism from Jewish roots (Gershom C. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965], 1-8).

<sup>24</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 51-52.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

the fullness of Deity," He is to be revered, honored, and obeyed. Moreover, this fulness was not shared, certainly not with lesser beings such as angels. As O'Brien states, "the expression 'the entire (πᾶν τὸ) fullness' is tautologous and this suggests Paul is writing polemically to underscore the point that the 'pleroma' is to be found exclusively in Christ."<sup>26</sup>

The Colossian heretics worshiped angels as intermediaries between God and man. Paul's counterattack focused on the fact that Christ is the sole intermediary and that access to the πλήρωμα ("fullness") was through Christ and Him alone. The words τῆς θεότητος ("deity") refers to the "quality of being divine."<sup>27</sup> Σωματικῶς ("in bodily form") underscores the reality of Christ's incarnation. Paul then associated the fullness of Christ with the fullness the Colossians had, in Christ because of the symbiotic relationship they shared with Him. This can be seen through the use of the root πληρ- in Christ's fullness (πλήρωμα) and in the participle πεπληρωμένοι ("have been made complete," v. 10), which refers to the believer's position in Christ as complete.<sup>28</sup> The passive voice of the participle πεπληρωμένοι indicates that the action of making the believer "full or complete" was accomplished by an outside agent, namely, God.<sup>29</sup> Thus the status and well-being of the Christian life is predicated solely on Christ Jesus, who indwells the saints (cf. 1:28). Compared to Christ, all other entities ("all rule and authority," v. 10, or, "powers and principalities") are inferior, irrelevant, and impotent.

#### LIVING IN CHRIST (2:11-23)

Because believers are in Christ, who has forgiven them, they are to conduct themselves in a holy manner while laying aside all rules of conduct based on terrestrial principles concocted by false teachers.

#### POSITIONAL TRUTH (2:11-12)

Two of the many benefits of being in Christ are treated in Colossians 2:11-12. The first benefit was that of having a circum-

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 100.

<sup>28</sup> Bullinger defines the use of root repetition of this sort as "paregmenon" (E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech in the Bible* [London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1898; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968], 304).

<sup>29</sup> Πεπληρωμένοι is a "divine passive," that is, no agent is stated; rather the agent of the action is implied and understood to be God.

cision "not done with hands" (ἀχειροποιήτω). Circumcision in the Old Testament was a sign of consecration. Abraham was circumcised to demonstrate his relationship with God and the efficacy of the promises of God accompanying that relationship. In Israel's history circumcision grew from a sign of a relationship with God to a "stumbling block" for Jews. As Unger states, "circumcision became the pride of Israel, they looking with contempt upon all those people not observing it (Judg. 14:3; 15:18; I Sam. 14:6; Isa. 52:1, etc)."<sup>30</sup> However, the circumcision mentioned here in Colossians was different. In Ephesians 2:11 Paul belittled the legitimacy of "the circumcision done in the flesh by hands." "Hand-made" righteousness was of little use to God. Lincoln remarks, "This term [χειροποιήτος] and its opposite are frequently used in the NT for the contrast between external material aspects of the old order of Judaism and the spiritual efficacy of the new order (cf. Col 2:11; also, for example, Mark 14:58; Acts 7:48; Heb 9:11, 24)."<sup>31</sup> The circumcision of the Jews was but a shadow of things to come, but the circumcision Paul discussed here was the real thing, namely, spiritual consecration.

The circumcision of Christ which every member of the community has experienced is nothing other than being baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ. The formulation of the sentence depends on expressions used in the primitive Christian teaching on baptism. Such expressions also underlie Rom 6:4f. Christianity believes and acknowledges that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried and that God raised him from the dead (1Cor 15:3-5).<sup>32</sup>

A second benefit of being in Christ is that the believer participates in the death of Christ ("buried with Him") and the resulting ramifications of His resurrection ("raised up with Him," Col. 2:12). The burial of Christ served as proof of His death. The result of His death was that a penalty had been paid on the cross for the remission of sin. Christ's death removed the requirement of sentencing for all who receive Him as their Savior. Therefore since an individual, at the moment of belief, participates in Christ's burial, the penalty for his or her sin is considered paid. No further charges can be brought against the one who believes in Christ (Rom. 8:11, 31-34).

Christ's resurrection, then, indicated that all matters of di-

<sup>30</sup> Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody, 1988), 238.

<sup>31</sup> A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, 1990), 136.

<sup>32</sup> Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 103.

vine justice were settled and a new day could commence. The believer therefore is to live according to his resurrected life, because his old life met its demise in Christ. In Romans 6:2 Paul pondered the question, "How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" The connection between a believer, born from above in Christ, and sin is an unnatural relationship. Death has no fellowship with life.

#### NEW LIFE AND FORGIVENESS (2:13-15)

God's forgiveness of the believer is the impetus for a new position and outlook on life. The believer acquired this newness not through any merit of his own. Paul's perspective was that although "you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our trespasses" (v. 13). A dead person has no means of raising himself from his grave. This is especially true of sinners who are dead in their sin. Thus forgiveness, which enables the believer to enjoy spiritual life, should be exemplified in his daily conduct.

The forgiveness provided for by Christ is final (v. 14). "God has not only removed the debt; he has also destroyed the document [χειρόγραφον, 'certificate of debt,' NASB] on which it was recorded."<sup>33</sup> A χειρόγραφον was a note of indebtedness in one's own handwriting as proof of one's obligation.<sup>34</sup> The mention that this certificate of indebtedness was nailed to the cross was notification that the debt was paid in full by Christ's death.

As Lohse explains, this means that on the cross Christ divested the "powers and principalities of their authority" (v. 15).<sup>35</sup> Thus Paul was implying that the heretics' practice of worshiping angels or elevating their status beyond that of Christ was wrong.

#### THE RESPONSE OF FAITH TO WORKS (2:16-23)

In 2:16-23 Paul wrote against succumbing to standards of living inappropriate for Christians. In no way were the tenets of the Colossian heresy requisites for a genuine Christian experience. Asceticism and the observance of festivals were only "shadows" of reality. The mysterious tactics used by the heretics produced false humility and arrogance. Paul remarked that such practices caused them to be "inflated" (φυσιοῦμενος, literally, "puffed up") in their earthly minds (ὑπὸ τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ, literally,

<sup>33</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 124.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 112.

"by the mind of his flesh"). Christian virtue fosters true humility and meekness in light of the forgiveness of God, not arrogance. Living in light of forgiveness helps sustain believers in both doctrinal orthodoxy and orthopraxis. A Christian who neglects the truth of his or her marvelous position in Christ and of the forgiveness wrought through Him is opened to influence by "every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14) and empty, deceitful philosophy.

### PUTTING OFF SINFUL WORKS (3:1-11)

#### THE BELIEVER'S POSITION IN CHRIST (3:1-4)

Because of the believer's participation in the death and resurrection of Christ and his victory over "the elements of the world," he is to "keep seeking the things above" (τὰ ἄνω ζητεῖτε, 3:1). This continual, ongoing process of seeking, suggested by the present imperative, is to be the consequence of having "been raised up with Christ." For Paul there was no reason for anyone to be "seeking the things above" if he had not been raised with Christ. The road to the heavenly realm was through Christ, not through asceticism or mysticism.

The believer's position in Christ is his only hope of glory. There should be no boasting of a meeting with God apart from Christ. The believer is to "set" his "mind on the things above" (v. 2), that is, to seek spiritual wisdom and guidance from the One who sits "at the right hand of God" (v. 1). This wisdom from above is superior to the traditions of men and "the elementary principles of the world" (2:8). The contrast is striking. From Christ, the Source above, there is wisdom. On the other hand the world and all that is a part of it ("the things that are on earth," 3:2), are under a curse and doomed for destruction. Believers are to have a mindset that avoids all that is at enmity toward God (cf. Rom. 8:6).

The believer's death in Christ terminated his relationship with the old self and the things of the earth. To ensure its safety, the new life is protected and vouchsafed in Christ. As Paul wrote, "your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). "The verb κέκρυπται ('hidden') is a perfect tense, in contrast to the preceding aorist, ἀπεθάνετε ('you died,' drawing attention to the specific occasion of their death with Christ), and stresses the ongoing and permanent effects: your life has been hidden with Christ in God and it remains that way."<sup>36</sup>

When Christ will return ("when Christ, who is our life, is re-

<sup>36</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 165.

vealed," v. 4), the believers' glory will be disclosed as well, Meanwhile they can live life to the fullest because of Jesus' power sustaining them.

#### THE BELIEVER'S RESPONSE TO HIS POSITION IN CHRIST (3:5-11)

In light of their security, believers pursue righteousness while putting to death (*νεκρώσατε*) "the members of [their] earthly body" (literally, "the members that are on the earth"). This command means to "put to death whatever in your nature belongs to the earth"<sup>37</sup> (cf. Rom. 6:11; 8:10). "Man cannot distance himself from his actions; he is so intimately bound up with them that his actions are a part of himself. Only through the death in which the old self dies, can the way to new life be opened."<sup>38</sup>

With the aorist imperative *νεκρώσατε*, Paul moved from the theological to the practical, into the realm where the believer is responsible for his actions. Five things Christians should exclude are fornication (*πορνείαν*), impurity (*ἀκαθαρσίαν*), lust (*πάθος*), evil desire (*ἐπιθυμίαν κακήν*), and greed or covetousness (*πλεονεξίαν*). The order of these terms in Colossians 3:5 moves "from the outward manifestations of sin to the inward cravings of the heart, the acts of immorality and uncleanness to their inner springs."<sup>39</sup> These sins emerge from a heart that feeds on earthly philosophies of living. Because of such filth God's wrath will come on those who willfully disobey Him (v. 6). This includes not only flagrant unbelievers, but also those in the Colossian congregation who said they believed in Christ but who actually were unbelievers as their evil actions revealed. As already noted, Paul wrote this epistle to dissuade some who might delude themselves with alleged visions of glory through mystic encounters. Though false teaching may be enticing, it is bankrupt with respect to life-sustaining principles and as a result, the heresy leads to moral turpitude.

The apostle reminded the Colossian believers that moral misconduct was part of their former demeanor: "in them you also once walked" (v. 7). The words "but now" (*νυνὶ δὲ*) which begin verse 8, introduce temporal contrast, pointing to the fact that the Christian life must contrast with the person's former life (cf. 1:21-22).<sup>40</sup>

Paul commanded the Colossians to "put . . . aside" (*ἀπόθεσθε*,

<sup>37</sup> Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 501.

<sup>38</sup> Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 137.

<sup>39</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 179.

<sup>40</sup> Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 140.

"rid themselves"<sup>41</sup>) of other vices, including wrath (ὀργήν), anger (θυμόν), malice (κακίαν), slander (βλασφημίαν), and foul talk (αἰσχρολογία). The aorist imperative ἀπόθεσθε emphasizes that "the process and repeated efforts which lead to a transformed daily walk are all incorporated into the imagery of 'putting off the old life with its deeds' and 'putting on the new life' of righteousness and Christ-likeness."<sup>42</sup>

Believers are to discard their old repulsive habits like a set of worn-out clothes. Αποτίθημι, meaning to "put away," was used literally with reference to clothes at Acts 7:58 (cf. 2 Macc 8:35; Jos[ephus] *Ant[iquities of the Jews]* 8, 266) and in a metaphorical and ethical sense at Romans 13:12; Ephesians 4:22, 25; Hebrews 12:1; James 1:21; and 1 Peter 2:1.<sup>43</sup>

Believers also are not to lie to each other. The present tense in the prohibitive imperative μὴ ψεύδεσθε ("do not lie," Col. 3:9) connotes an action that is to be habitual. In Ephesians 4:15 the present participle ἀληθεύοντες ("being truthful") demonstrates this same idea. Dishonesty characterized the former life, the "old self," which was crucified and buried with Christ, but now honest speech and conduct are to characterize believers.

Since the "old self" (παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον, literally "old man") and his proclivities are to be purged, a new and invigorating "self" or lifestyle must fill the void left by the absence of the old (Col. 3:10). The new life is to be lived in conformity to the image of the One who created it (κατ' εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν). Thus Christ alone starts as the Christian's paradigm.

This newness also implies that former distinctions of race or social caste bear no significance on the status of saints as image-bearers of God. In verse 11 Paul emphatically denounced the notion that one group had any greater advantage in Christ than any other. Greeks and Jews were adversaries. Greeks viewed Jews as unsophisticated and lacking wisdom, and Jews viewed the Greeks as uncircumcised aliens estranged from "the covenants of promise" (Eph. 2:12). Barbarians and Scythians were viewed as crass and repulsive peoples, the scorn of Greco-Roman society. Slaves and masters in general bore mistrust and animosity toward one another. Yet the enmity between these groups departs when these individuals come to Christ. An unregenerate life

<sup>41</sup> Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature*, 101.

<sup>42</sup> Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 363.

<sup>43</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 186.

gives birth to racism and classism, attitudes stemming from the heart. By contrast, it is improper for believers to harbor disdain for races and classes of people different from their own (cf. Rom. 3:22; 10:12). Being renewed at salvation to a new perspective and knowledge (ἐπίγνωσιν, Col. 3:10), the believer's conduct is to be "in conformity with the Creator's will."<sup>44</sup> Skin color and socioeconomic status, being merely aspects of external appearance and circumstance, are inadequate barometers of character.

#### PUTTING ON CHRIST (3:12–4:6)

The believer's new life, based on his status in Christ, means that every relationship and activity is to be patterned after the model set forth by Christ.

#### GENERAL ADMONITION (3:12-17)

Believers are to "put on" (ἐνδύσασθε, literally, "clothe themselves") in righteousness and its accompanying amenities. Ephesians 6:11 uses the same word in reference to believers clothing themselves with the armor of God, in order to be victorious in spiritual warfare. The redeemed are to don spiritual garb fitting for God's elect (ἐκλεκτοί).

The phrase "as God's chosen ones" (ὡς ἐκλεκτοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ) is not meant as a comparison, as if Christians try to become equals of the heavenly elect. Rather the community is addressed as the chosen, holy and beloved people of God. Just as Israel had been singled out by God as his possession (Dt 4:37; 7:7; Ps 33:12, etc.) and the Qumran community understood itself to be the assembly of the chosen ones.<sup>45</sup>

The Christian's attire is to include "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (Col. 3:12). Furthermore Christians are to be lovingly tolerant of each other and forgiving in the same manner as Christ forgave them (v. 13).

Love, however, is the supreme virtue (v. 14). This is the same love God manifested on the Cross (John 3:16). Peace, which comes from Christlikeness,<sup>46</sup> serves as an umpire (βραβευέτω) on all the fields of endeavor for Christians (Col. 3:15). This peace can be understood as subjective inner peace and also as objective peace in reference to interpersonal relations. That is, the lives of

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>45</sup> Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 146.

<sup>46</sup> The phrase τοῦ Χριστοῦ may be a subjective genitive, implying that Christ is the One who brings peace to believers.

Christians who apply the blessings brought to them by virtue of their position in Christ are marked not by a chaotic, argumentative demeanor, but by harmony and rapport. In addition their lives are to be characterized by gratitude (mentioned in each of the three verses of 3:15-17), appropriation of God's Word (v. 16), worship that expresses itself in music (v. 16), and conduct that is focused on "the name of the Lord Jesus" (v. 17).

#### PRACTICAL OUTWORKING OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE (3:18—4:6)

The houserules (3:18-4:1). There is no greater testing ground for the authenticity of one's faith than the family. For this reason Paul set forth rules of conduct for Christian households. "Luther called this scheme of household duties a *Haustafel*, which means 'a list of rules for the household,' but it is usually translated into English as 'house-table.'"<sup>47</sup> This "house-table" governed the rules of order and conduct in the Christian household. In Greco-Roman society emphasis focused on three major relationships: husband and wife, parent and child, and master and slave. All these relationships were in the home. Paul contrasted the relationships in Christian households with secular families.<sup>48</sup> For example fathers held extensive control over their sons.<sup>49</sup> This extensive control coupled with a depraved nature could make for some harrowing experiences between fathers and their offspring. The Christian household, however, was to have no such discord (vv. 20-21). The impetus for maintaining better parent-child relationships rests on the fact that Christian fathers and sons are to exhibit Christlike qualities already addressed in verses 12-17.

Though Paul had much more to say about the union of husband and wife in Ephesians 5:22-33, the gist of the content is the same in Colossians 3:18-19. Wives should respect their husbands because "it is fitting in the Lord" (ὡς ἀνῆκεν ἐν κυρίῳ). The goal is to do what the Lord expects and not what society accepts. Husbands are commanded to love their wives and not to treat them with bitterness or harshness (μὴ πικραίνεσθε). In Ephesians 5 Christian husbands are challenged to follow Christ as their model. They are to hold their wives in the highest esteem, viewing them in the same way Christ views the church.

The master-slave relationship was also to differ from the secular order (Col. 3:22-4:1). Slaves had no rights. Their well-

<sup>47</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 215.

<sup>48</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 398-99.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

being was totally in the hands of their masters on earth (literally, "lords according to the flesh"; cf. Eph. 6:5). One of the most vivid examples of how this relationship was to differ from the secular world is seen in the Epistle to Philemon. In the Roman world Philemon, a master, had every right to punish his runaway slave, Onesimus, even to the point of death. Yet Paul, appealing to Philemon's faith and appreciation for the sovereignty of God, encouraged him to rejoice in his spiritual obligation to forgive. "Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (Phile. 15-16, NIV). The believer's position in Christ transforms the nature of relationships, for the power of Christ overshadows even the most despicable institutions in society.

*Christian attitudes and graces* (4:2-6). The attitudes and graces of the Christian community serve as an excellent "public relations tool" for the gospel. The Christian life is to be expressed in a mode of thanksgiving (ἐν εὐχαριστίᾳ, 4:2; cf. 3:15-17). Within this attitude of thanksgiving believers are to devote themselves to alertness and prayer so that the mystery of the indwelling Christ may be proclaimed (4:2-4). Paul implored the believers at Colossae to live wisely before "outsiders" (τοὺς ἕξω literally, "the ones outside"), a reference to unbelievers (4:5). They were to make the most of every opportunity for spiritual gain "by redeeming the time."<sup>50</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Book of Colossians clearly mandates that all facets of one's Christian experience must be in harmony. The basis of this harmony is correct theology regarding Christ Jesus. One cannot redefine or mitigate the role of Christ in salvation and expect to enjoy right practice. Correct living is driven by hope and conviction stemming from the work of Christ. A proper understanding of Christ serves as the platform for the Christian life. With the Cross in view believers are enabled to strip away behavioral characteristics of sinners, and to clothe themselves in the righteousness befitting those who have been redeemed.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 341.

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Dallas Theological Seminary

3909 Swiss Ave.

Dallas, TX 75204      www.dts.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu