

INTRODUCTION AND COLOSSIANS

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Introduction

I. Authorship

1. The letter states it is from the Apostle Paul and contains many personal references and details which reinforce that identification, including the declaration in 4:18, "The greeting [is] by my hand, Paul's. Remember my chains." No early Christian doubted Paul's authorship, and there was no controversy over its acceptance into the Christian canon. Indeed, Donald Guthrie says, "There is no shred of evidence that the Pauline authorship of the whole or any part of this epistle was ever disputed until the nineteenth century."¹

2. Nevertheless, many modern scholars argue against Pauline authorship claiming the language, style, and teaching differ from that of Paul. They assert that a later disciple who considered himself an authoritative interpreter of Paul adopted the persona of Paul, in keeping with an allegedly recognized literary convention, in order to extend or develop Paul's thought.

3. But even if there was such a literary convention for a personal letter like Colossians, which is doubtful, why is there no indication historically that it was written pursuant to this convention (i.e., pseudonymously)? Moreover, there is zero evidence that a letter written by someone in the name of an apostle would have been accepted as authoritative by the church. On the contrary, Serapion, Bishop of Antioch around A.D. 200, "seems to represent the universal viewpoint of the early church on the issue of pseudepigraphy: 'We receive both Peter and the other apostles as Christ; but as experienced men we reject the writings falsely inscribed by their names, since we know that we did not receive such from our fathers' (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.12.1-6)."²

4. For these reasons, a roughly equal number of modern scholars reject the arguments against the traditional view of authorship. As put by D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo:

¹ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 576.

² Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 38.

It seems, then, that the arguments against Pauline authorship are not decisive. They do not reckon sufficiently with the fact that a mind like Paul's was capable of adaptation to new situations and to the adoption of new vocabulary and new concepts when older ones do not meet the need. They also fail to give a reason for addressing the letter to the unimportant town of Colosse. Surely an imitator would have selected a city of some importance, such as Laodicea or Hierapolis. In view of the letter's claim and of the many undoubtedly Pauline features it manifests, we should accept it as an authentic Pauline writing.

This is supported by a number of links with Philemon, which almost all scholars take to be a genuine letter of the apostle. . . . In light of such references it is difficult to argue that Colossians was not written by Paul.³

5. Andreas Köstenberger, Scott Kellum, and Charles Quarles conclude their assessment of the authorship question this way:

The case for authenticity is customarily crafted as a response to the rejection of Paul's authorship. While these responses are important points to make, one must not adopt a merely defensive approach without advancing the case in positive terms. Paul's authorship primarily rests on the strength of four pillars: (1) the letter's own claim to authenticity; (2) the unbroken tradition throughout church history; (3) the close connections between Colossians and Philemon, a letter which almost all accept as authentic; and (4) the questions surrounding the practice and acceptance of pseudonymity.⁴

II. Audience

A. City of Colossae (also spelled Colosse)

1. Colossae was situated in the territory of Phrygia in the Roman Province of Asia Minor (southwest Turkey) on the southern bank of the Lycus River. It was on the early main road from Ephesus, about 120 miles to the west, to the Euphrates. The site was discovered in 1835, but it has not been excavated.

2. In the fifth century B.C., Herodotus called it "a great city of Phrygia," and a century later Xenophon called it "a populous city, wealthy and large." By Paul's day, however, Colossae had dropped off considerably in importance. Fifty years or so before Paul, the Greek geographer Strabo referred to it as a "small town."

³ D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo in *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2005) 520-521.

⁴ Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009), 604.

3. Laodicea, eleven miles to the west-northwest, had developed into a prosperous city during the first century B.C. Hierapolis, fifteen miles to the northwest, also surpassed Colossae.

4. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, Laodicea was destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 60-61 but was quickly rebuilt. In the first part of the fourth century, Eusebius says an earthquake devastated Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae around A.D. 64.⁵ Tacitus and Eusebius probably are referring to the same earthquake but with differing information about the date. However, Janice Anderson, citing the recent work of Alan Cadwallader, states, "there is no certainty that an earthquake *decimated* Colossae ca. 60-64 nor that Colossae faded into obscurity in the late first century for other reasons."⁶ So perhaps Colossae was not *destroyed* at any time in the early 60s, and Eusebius simply was misinformed about the earthquake's effect on that city.

B. People of Colossae

Douglas Moo says regarding the people of the city:

[Colossae's] location on an important highway at the time of considerable mobility and the mixing of different ethnic groups that typified the Roman Empire meant that the population of Colossae was very diverse. A majority were undoubtedly Gentile, but we have good reason to think there was also a substantial number of Jews. . . . The diversity of population and exposure to the latest ideas via travelers on its major highway meant that Colossae was a place where many different religious and philosophical viewpoints thrived and probably mixed together. This diversity helps explain the apparently syncretistic religious movement that was affecting the Colossian Christians and that gave rise to the letter.⁷

C. Church at Colossae

1. Paul did not personally begin the congregation at Colossae (1:4; 2:1). As far as we know, he never visited the city.

2. Acts 19:9-10 indicates that during his third missionary journey Paul's daily evangelistic discussions in the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus, which went on for two years, were so effective that all those in Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord. (Acts 20:31 indicates that Paul continued ministering in the city into the third year.) This implies that Paul's converts or coworkers spread the gospel into the interior of Asia Minor. These church plantings fall within the sphere of Paul's apostolic ministry to the Gentiles, even though he was unable to visit all of them.

⁵ Moo, 26 (fn. 2).

⁶ Janice Capel Anderson, *Colossians: An Introduction and Study Guide: Authorship, Rhetoric, and Code* (New York: T&T Clark, 2018), 21.

⁷ Moo, 26-27.

3. The church in Colossae was started by Epaphras (1:7), who was a native of Colossae (4:12).

a. Paul describes him as "our beloved fellow slave, who is a faithful minister of Christ on [our]⁸ behalf" (1:7) and as "a slave of Christ Jesus" (4:12). It seems likely from 4:13 that the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis also were the result of his efforts.

b. Epaphras had traveled to where Paul was in prison (1:7-8; 4:3, 18) and, at some point, shared in some way in that imprisonment (Philem. 23 – "fellow prisoner"), as did Aristarchus (Col. 4:10). Perhaps they at different times "volunteered to share the apostle's imprisonment in order to be of help to him."⁹ For whatever reason, Epaphras was unable to travel back to Colossae with the letter, so Paul assigns that job to Tychicus (4:7-8), who also was sent with the letter we know as Ephesians (Eph. 6:21).

4. Paul's statements about the group and allusions to its past suggest that the vast majority were Gentile converts (1:12, 1:21, 1:27, 2:13, 3:5-7). In the language of Eph. 2:12, they were those who previously were "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world."

5. Paul mentions Laodicea several times. The church in that city is described some decades later in Rev. 3:14-22 as wealthy. Colossae appears to have continued as a Roman city for centuries (based on coins and inscriptions), but as I indicated, there is some debate as to its status and significance from the latter part of the first century.

III. Circumstances of writing

A. Paul's situation

1. He is in prison (4:3, 18), and Aristarchus is his fellow prisoner (4:10). As I have explained, there is a debate about where Paul is imprisoned when he wrote the "Prison Epistles," which include the letters of Colossians and Philemon. In the class on Ephesians, I gave some of the evidence for believing Paul is in Rome. Here I will just say that I agree with the many scholars who are persuaded that Rome is likely the place where Colossians and Philemon were written (e.g., F. F. Bruce, Peter O'Brien, Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, Donald Guthrie, Douglas Moo, David Garland, Todd Still, and David Pao).

2. Accepting Rome as the site of the imprisonment, the letter was most likely written during the early part of Paul's first Roman imprisonment, around A.D. 60-61.

⁸ Accepting ἡμῶν (our) as the original reading instead of ὑμῶν (your). This is in line with ERV, ASV, RSV, NAS, NASU, NET, NIV and *The Greek New Testament Produced at Tyndale House Cambridge*.

⁹ Moo, 338.

B. Situation in Colossae

1. As I noted, Epaphras, who was from Colossae, had come to visit Paul. During his visit, he voluntarily or involuntarily shared for a time in Paul's imprisonment (Philem. 23 - "my fellow prisoner"). Epaphras undoubtedly wanted to encourage Paul about the progress of the gospel in the Lycus Valley, but probably the main purpose of his visit was to seek Paul's advice on how to deal with a false teaching that had arisen in Colossae.

2. There is much debate about the particulars of the "Colossian heresy," the false teaching that was threatening the church in Colossae. What we know about it is by deduction from Paul's arguments against it. The following appear to be marks of this teaching.

a. It was set forth as "philosophy" (2:8), as a sophisticated system of thought rooted in a devotion to inquiry and love of wisdom. It was presented as a kind of insight.

b. It claimed to be a matter of "tradition" (2:8), suggesting "its antiquity, dignity and revelational character."¹⁰ Peter O'Brien notes, "Paul, however, rejects any suggestion of divine origin. This was a human fabrication standing over against the apostolic tradition centered on 'Christ Jesus as Lord.'"¹¹

c. There was a keen interest in spirit beings (1:16, 2:10), which probably includes what Paul refers to in 2:8 and 2:20 (*stoicheia tou kosmou*) as the "elements [or elemental spirits – RSV, NRSV] of the universe."

(1) According to O'Brien, "The majority of commentators this century [the 20th century] have understood the 'elements of the universe' in Galatians and Colossians as denoting spiritual beings, regarded as personal and active in the physical and heavenly elements."¹²

(2) In arguing for understanding the phrase in 2:8 as a reference to spiritual beings, David Pao states, "In some documents in the traditions of magic and astrology that can be dated as early as the first century AD, 'the term *stoicheia* was indeed used of personalized spiritual forces that have significant influence over the affairs of day-to-day existence.'"¹³

d. There also were elements of mysticism (2:18), asceticism (2:16, 18, 20-23), and Judaism (2:11-13, 16-17).

¹⁰ Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 110.

¹¹ O'Brien, 110.

¹² O'Brien, 131-132.

¹³ David W. Pao, *Colossians & Philemon*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 160, quoting Clinton Arnold.

3. Various scholars emphasize different things in interpreting the marks of the heresy, but Robert McL. Wilson says, "What is clear is that there are Jewish as well as 'Gnostic' elements in the false teaching."¹⁴

a. F. F. Bruce states:

[T]he Colossian heresy was more probably a Phrygian development in which a local variety of Judaism had been fused with a philosophy of non-Jewish origin – an early and simple form of gnosticism.

The synagogues of Phrygia appear to have been peculiarly exposed to the influence of Hellenistic speculation and consequent tendencies to religious syncretism. When the gospel was introduced to the region, a Jewish-Hellenistic syncretism would find little difficulty expanding and modifying itself sufficiently to fit the general framework of the Christian story, and the result would be something not unlike the Colossian heresy as we can reconstruct it from Paul's reply to it.¹⁵

b. It appears that spirit beings, including angels, were viewed as intermediaries between heaven and earth. They somehow controlled one's communication with or access to God. In order to have "fullness" with God, one had to placate or appease these spiritual powers.¹⁶

c. Peter O'Brien says:

[It was a kind of Judaism] in which asceticism and mysticism were featured and where angels and principalities played a prominent role in creation and the giving of the Law. They were regarded as controlling the communication between God and man, and so needed to be placated by keeping strict legal observances.

• • •

Many recent scholars, however, consider that the false teaching, which advanced beyond Epaphras's elementary gospel, is to be read against the background of ascetic and mystical forms of Jewish piety (as evidenced, for example, at Qumran). It was for a spiritual elite who were being urged to press on in wisdom and knowledge so as to attain true "fullness." "Self-abasement" (Col. 2:18, 23) was a term used by opponents to denote ascetic practices that were effective for receiving visions of heavenly mysteries and participating in mystical experiences.¹⁷

4. Regarding the state of the threat this teaching posed, Todd Still states:

¹⁴ Robert McL. Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, ICC (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 61.

¹⁵ F. F. Bruce, *Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 413.

¹⁶ See, Bruce, 414.

¹⁷ Peter T. O'Brien, "Colossians, Letter to the" in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 149.

The tenor and tone of the letter suggest that in writing to the church Paul was being more proactive than reactive, more preventive than corrective. In Paul's perception, the Colossians had not been sold as far down the river as the Galatians. Nonetheless, he seems genuinely concerned that the Colossians might somehow be deceived and taken captive by a "philosophy" that certain unnamed others were touting (2:4, 8, 16, 18).¹⁸

IV. Relationship to Philemon

A. Both are written by Paul from prison; both include Timothy as a sender; both refer to Epaphras (Col. 1:7; Philem. 23) and Archippus (Col. 4:17; Philem. 2); both include Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke among Paul's companions (Col. 4:10, 14; Philem. 24); and both refer to Onesimus (Col 4:9; Philem. 10).

B. Philemon is a resident of Colossae. We know that because Archippus is in Colossae (Col. 4:17) and Philemon is in the same place as Archippus (Philem. 1-2). Tychicus and Onesimus are traveling to Colossae with Paul's letter to the Colossians (Col. 4:7-9). Since Onesimus is a slave who ran away from Philemon (Philem. 10, 16), they must also be carrying Paul's letter to Philemon (otherwise Onesimus would not be returning to his master's congregation).

C. Donald Guthrie states: "[Philemon's] close connection with Colossians makes it virtually certain that the two epistles belong to the same period and the most probable theory is that Tychicus accompanied by Onesimus took them both to Colossae at the same time (i.e., during the first Roman imprisonment)."¹⁹

Text

I. Opening (1:1-14)

A. Greeting (1:1-2)

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy the brother, ²to the saints in Colossae, the faithful brothers in Christ: grace to you and peace from God our Father.

1. Paul follows the standard oriental and Jewish letter form but adapts it to his own purpose. The prescript typically gave the name of the sender and the addressee and contained a greeting (such as "peace be with you").

2. He identifies himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus," as a special representative of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. He adds that this role was given to him

¹⁸ Todd D. Still, "Colossians" in Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, eds., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 12: 267.

¹⁹ Guthrie, 664.

by God, referring to his dramatic calling to service. It was not something he claimed for himself. And as an apostle, his letter carries the authority of the Messiah, which they need to bear in mind in reading his refutation of the false teaching.

3. Paul's dear coworker Timothy is identified in the prescript probably meaning simply that he is with Paul and is in accord with all that Paul says in the letter. There are many personal references in the letter that could apply only to Paul. It is also possible that Timothy served in this instance as Paul's secretary, writing out what Paul wanted written.

4. Paul addresses the letter to the saints (holy ones) in Colossae, whom he further identifies as "the faithful brothers [and sisters] in Christ." The plural "brothers" can be and often was used to refer to "brothers and sisters," and that is clearly the case here (e.g., NRS, NET, NIV). Christians are family. They are "faithful" in that they are maintaining their allegiance to what they were taught. This serves as an encouragement for them to continue to do so.

5. Paul expresses his desire for God's grace in their lives in all its manifestations and for the peace that accompanies that grace, peace with God, with one another, and with one's heart. Those two little words, grace and peace, say so much.

B. Thanksgiving (1:3-8)

³We always give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when praying about you, ⁴having heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love you have for all the saints ⁵on account of the hope which lies prepared for you in heaven, which [hope] you previously heard in the word of the truth, the gospel ⁶that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in all the world, so also among you, from the day in which you heard [it] and understood the grace of God in truth, ⁷as you learned [it] from Epaphras, our beloved fellow slave, who is a faithful minister of Christ on [our] behalf, ⁸who also told us of your love by [the] Spirit.

1. The form of ancient letters often included a thanksgiving to the gods. Paul adapts that model to his message. Paul says that he and Timothy (and perhaps his other coworkers) always give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when praying about the Colossians (v. 3).

a. The reference to God as the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ implies that Jesus has a special relationship with God and thus implies his deity. This is reinforced by the description of Jesus as "Lord" (*kurios*) because that was the word typically used in the LXX to render the divine name Yahweh. It also was the word used by pagans of their gods.²⁰

²⁰ G. K. Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 34.

b. The "our" in the phrase "our Lord Jesus Christ" no doubt includes the Colossian Christians. They, like all Christians, have come to understand the truth of Jesus' lordship.

2. They always give thanks for them when praying because they heard of their faith in Christ Jesus and their love for all the saints (v. 4). They thank God for the Colossians' faith because he is its source; it is his work in their lives, not their own intellectual achievement. They simply chose, in the freedom he gave them, not to resist his work. Their love for all other Christians flowed from that faith and bore witness to its genuineness. As believers in Christ, they felt a familial bond with all other believers.

3. Paul says that their faith in Christ and their love for all the saints are based on, are "on account of," the hope which lies prepared for them in heaven (v. 5a). As Pao says, "In any case, 'faith' and 'love' flow from 'hope.' Syntactically, the three terms are not strict parallels, as 'hope' becomes the source of 'faith' and 'love.'"²¹ The REB, NET, and NIV make this clear by translating, respectively, "both [faith and love] spring from that hope," "Your faith and love have arisen from the hope," and "your faith and love that spring from the hope."

a. Hope" here means the content of their hope, that for which they hope. The Christian hope is variously described by Paul as salvation (1 Thess. 5:8), righteousness (Gal. 5:5), resurrection of an incorruptible body (1 Cor. 15:52-55), eternal life (Tit. 1:2, 3:7), and God's glory (Rom. 5:2). This is the hope they previously heard about in the gospel Epaphras presented to them (1:5b-6a). Moo states:

Paul often uses 'hope' to refer to the attitude of hope (e.g., Rom. 4:18; 5:5; 2 Cor. 3:12). Here, however, it pretty clearly denotes that which Christians hope for: 'the totality of blessing that awaits the Christian in the life to come' [citing BDAG] (as also in, e.g., Titus 1:2, where the hope consists in eternal life, and 1 Pet. 1:4, where it is virtually identified with the 'inheritance').²²

b. In what way are faith in Christ and love for the saints based on this hope?

(1) The eternal blessings held out in the gospel draw people to faith. It is the only answer to death! This is not an illegitimate motivation for heeding the gospel. The more materialistic our society becomes, the less able people are to entertain even the possibility of eternal blessings. It is crucial that we counter such a world view by radiating our own confidence in eternal life, by living like we believe it. We cannot capitulate to materialism by jettisoning the eternal perspective of the Christian faith and reducing its appeal to a life-improvement program.

²¹ Pao, 52.

²² Moo, 85.

(2) This expectation of future blessing also fuels one's ongoing faith and exercise of Christian love. It has consequences in the here and now. It gives strength and endurance for the marathon of life. In 1 Cor. 15:19 Paul says they are to be pitied if hope in Christ is limited to this life, if there is no resurrection. In 15:32 he says, "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'"

c. This is an unusual elevation of hope. Normally, all three terms are parallel instead of one functioning as the foundation of the others (see 1 Thess. 1:3; Gal. 5:5-6; Rom. 5:1-5). Perhaps Paul reminds them that the promise of eternal glory that is held out in the gospel helped to draw them to faith in Christ (and thus to love for the saints) because some were being led to doubt Christ's sufficiency to deliver. Since it was that very promise that led them to trust in Jesus, they clearly accepted his sufficiency at that point, the implication being that it would be fickle of them now to deny it.

d. This hope "lies prepared in heaven."

(1) "Lying prepared" was a common phrase for denoting the certainty of the thing for which one is waiting. It was already prepared so there was no question of "if," only "when." The fact the Christian's hope lies prepared "in heaven" reinforces this idea. It is kept where no power can touch it. (Of course, this does not mean a Christian cannot apostatize. He is speaking on the assumption of faithfulness.) This "glory" for which they hope (1:27) is now hidden from man's view, but it will be finally and fully revealed when the focus of their hope, Jesus Christ, is revealed (3:4).

(2) Peter conveys the same thought when he writes in 1 Pet. 1:4-5 that they had been given a new birth "into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you" and "into [the] salvation ready to be revealed in [the] last time."

e. The Colossians heard of this eternal hope in the gospel, the word of truth, that was preached to them by Epaphras (v. 5b-6a). Being a revelation from God, the gospel is true and is thus a reliable basis for hope, unlike what was being promoted by the false teachers.

4. Paul says (v. 6b) that just as the gospel was bearing fruit and growing in all the world, meaning it was gaining converts in many different geographical regions ("all the world" here being hyperbole, similar to how we might say "everywhere") and transforming their lives to produce the fruit of good works (Phil. 1:11), so it was doing in Colossae. He is suggesting that the international scope the gospel's impact, the gospel they had received, attests to its validity. It is consistent with the claim it is the word of truth, a divine revelation, in contrast to the localized heresy circulating in Colossae.

5. The fact their transformation, their fruit bearing, began from the time of their acceptance of the gospel as preached by Epaphras vouches for the power and sufficiency of that message as presented. Its effect in their lives demonstrates it has no need of revision as claimed by the false teachers.

6. Paul describes their acceptance of the gospel as their coming to a true understanding of the grace of God (v. 6c). The gospel of Christ is all about grace. Moo comments:

Paul wants to remind them that they have *truly* – really, authentically, reliably – come to understand the gospel of grace. It is worth noting that Paul in this verse seeks to ground the Colossians spirituality by appealing both to the truth of the gospel and to its life-changing power. The gospel is authenticated not by its truth only nor by its power in people's lives only but by both working in tandem.²³

7. They came to their true understanding of God's grace in their learning the gospel from Epaphras (v. 7).

a. Epaphras, a short form of Epaphroditus, was a very common name. Paul calls him "our beloved fellow slave" and "a faithful minister of Christ on [our] behalf," thus vouching that they had received the true apostolic gospel. He was Paul's representative in Colossae. He is not to be confused with the Epaphroditus who was sent to Paul by the Philippians.

b. O'Brien says the verb used (ἐμάθετε – you learned) "probably indicates that Epaphras had given them systematic instruction in the gospel rather than some flimsy outline and that these Colossians had committed themselves as disciples to that teaching (cf. 2:6, 7)."²⁴

c. Epaphras had reported to Paul and the others with him that the Colossian community had a love "en" the Holy Spirit (v. 8), the preposition here having an instrumental sense meaning they had a love produced or given to them *by* the Holy Spirit.²⁵ N. T. Wright remarks, "No mere human affection, this: it is a love which, created by the Spirit . . . is God's own love, becoming their own through the miracle of grace, enabling them to give to one another that love which can be recognized by its likeness to God's own act of love on Calvary (see Rom. 5:5-10; *etc.*)."²⁶ Fee remarks, "As in Gal 5:22, this is the 'fruit of the Spirit' (cf. Rom 15:30)."²⁷

C. Intercessory prayer report (1:9-14)

⁹For this reason, from the day we heard [about you] we have not stopped praying and asking [God] on your behalf, in order that you may be filled with the knowledge of his

²³ Moo, 89.

²⁴ O'Brien, 15. James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 64, thinks it "may imply" that. See also, Scot McKnight, *The Letter to the Colossians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 101-102.

²⁵ See, e.g., Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 639.

²⁶ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 56.

²⁷ Fee, 639.

will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰in order that you may walk worthily of the Lord into all pleasing [of him]: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you for the share of the allotment of the saints in the light. ¹³He rescued us from the dominion of the darkness and transferred [us] into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

1. Paul continues the prayer report he began in vv. 3-5. He and Timothy not only give thanks to God for the Colossians' faith and love but also, because of it ("For this reason"), have steadily interceded for them since hearing of their faith. They have not stopped praying and asking God on the behalf of the saints there.

2. What they have been praying and asking God for is that the Colossians will be filled by God (divine passive) with the knowledge of his will, referring not primarily to insight into how God wants them to behave but to his will relating to Christ, to Jesus' role in the divine plan. Moo remarks, "What Paul has in mind is not some particular or special direction for one's life (as we often use the phrase 'God's will'), but a deep and abiding understanding of the revelation of Christ and all that he means for the universe (vv. 15-20) and for the Colossians (vv. 21-23)."²⁸

3. That knowledge of God's purposes in Christ will manifest itself in all *spiritual* wisdom and understanding, in contrast to merely human or worldly intellectual skill. As one is filled with knowledge of God's purposes in Christ, one gains a vantage point from which to perceive things as they truly are. This has obvious relevance to the claims of the false teachers who lack adequate knowledge of Christ's role in God's purposes. Their claims masquerade as wisdom and understanding. This nicely prepares the way for the instruction Paul intends to give.

4. The purpose of this spiritual wisdom and understanding that flows from the filling with knowledge of God's will for which Paul and Timothy are persistently praying is that they may walk worthily of the Lord. Moo states, "Echoing a consistent biblical theme, Paul indicates that the Colossians' mental and attitudinal realignment is to produce behavioral transformation."²⁹ The greater one's spiritual wisdom and understanding, the more one's life should change for the better.

5. He says literally that this walking worthily of the Lord is "into all pleasing," the "of him" being understood. The point is that "walking worthily of the Lord" finds its fullest expression in pleasing him in every way, being who he wants us to be. We will not be completely who he wants us to be until the resurrection, as indicated in Phil. 3:12 and elsewhere, but even in this life we who belong to Christ can and do please God (e.g., Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 5:9; 1 Thess. 4:1).

²⁸ Moo, 93. See also, Wright, 57.

²⁹ Moo, 94.

6. Paul then elaborates on living worthily of the Lord, on the life that pleases the Lord that is to result from increased spiritual wisdom and understanding. It involves:

a. bearing fruit in the form of every kind of good work – The more we gain true wisdom and understanding, the more we will lay down our lives in devotion to and gratitude for the Lord Jesus, allowing ourselves to be his instruments, and the more clearly we will see the kind of people he wants us to be.

b. growing in the knowledge of God – To gain true wisdom and understanding is to grow in the knowledge of God. As we increasingly perceive existence correctly, perceive it through the true perspective of God, we gain a greater understanding of God himself, one that helps free us from false ideas of him. His nature becomes clearer.

c. being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience – As we increasingly perceive existence through the true perspective of God, as we gain spiritual wisdom and understanding, we become more receptive vessels for God's empowerment to endure trials. We lessen our resistance to his strengthening and thus exhibit extraordinary endurance and patience, which is pleasing to the Lord.

d. joyfully giving thanks to the Father – With increasing spiritual wisdom and understanding comes increasing appreciation of who God is and what he has done in Christ. This results in joyful thanksgiving to him.

7. Having mentioned joyful thanksgiving to the Father as an element of a life that is pleasing to the Lord, Paul reminds them of a basis for that thanksgiving.

a. God has qualified or fitted them to share in the allotment of God's people (the saints or "holy ones"), to share in what his people are destined to receive as an inheritance. As Gentiles, they had, because of God's work, jumped from ignorance of God to sharing in the inheritance of his people (see Eph. 2:11-13).

b. The inheritance of which he is speaking is far superior to the allotment of the land of Canaan that was given to the tribes of Israel under the old covenant. The Colossians have been qualified to share in the allotment of the saints "in the light." They will have a share in the consummated kingdom of God which is characterized by the light of God's unique presence. As John says in Rev. 21:23-25: ²³ *And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.* ²⁴ *By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it,* ²⁵ *and its gates will never be shut by day-- and there will be no night there.* And he says in Rev. 22:5: *And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.*

8. At conversion God delivered Christians from an alien power, the "dominion of darkness." In Lk. 22:53, after Jesus' arrest, he says, "But this is your hour – when darkness reigns." The power or authority of darkness is the realm of Satan's authority (Acts 26:18). Until our conversion, we were in his power.

9. But at conversion, God transferred or transplanted Christians from that realm, the dominion of darkness, into the kingdom of Jesus, the Son he loves. In Jesus, we have redemption, which implies liberation from imprisonment and bondage, a redemption he identifies with the forgiveness of our sins.

II. The Supremacy of Christ: Lord in Creation and Redemption (1:15-20)

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, ¹⁶for by him all the things in the heavens and on the earth were created, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that in everything he might have first place. ¹⁹For [God] was pleased [for] all his fullness to dwell in him ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things in heaven or things on earth, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

A. Introduction

1. There is much scholarly debate over the origin of this section. Stylistically it seems different from the rest of the letter, more like poetry. Many are convinced it was a set expression of faith, often referred to as a "hymn," that preexisted Paul's letter to the Colossians which he incorporated into the letter possibly with some editing. Matthew Gordley states in his recent investigation of New Testament "hymns":

We simply cannot know if Paul wrote this poetic passage himself or if he was citing something that already existed. In calling the passage a hymn and arranging it in strophes, my claim is not that this was necessarily a preexisting composition but that it is a passage which demonstrates many hymnic features. . . . For my part, I do think it is plausible that Paul is quoting earlier material here, and perhaps even adds in his own editorial expansion in a line or two. These points must simply be recognized as plausible but not provable.³⁰

2. Whether Paul used preexisting material or not, the fact he chose, incorporated, and possibly modified it for his own purpose makes it his. After all, in Titus 1:12 Paul quotes a pagan prophet, so he could surely employ some other preexisting material, especially Christian material.

³⁰ Matthew E. Gordley, *New Testament Christological Hymns* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 119.

3. Whatever their origin, Paul employed these words because they so powerfully express the absolute supremacy of Christ, the antidote to the Colossian heresy. The Colossians were being told that Christ was important but inadequate or insufficient in himself for fullness with God. After starting with Christ, one had to satisfy a host of powerful spirit beings to maximize one's relationship with God.

B. Supreme in creation (1:15-17)

1. Jesus is the image, the visual manifestation, of the invisible God.

a. Unlike human beings generally, who are made *according to* (*kata*) or *in* (*en*) the image of God (LXX Gen. 1:27, 9:6), Jesus *is* the image of God (also 2 Cor. 4:4). He is distinctive; he exceeds humanity's general correspondences with God.

b. As said in Heb. 1:3, he is "the radiance of the Glory and [the] exact representation of his nature." He is God incarnate. As the apostle John will put it later in Jn. 1:1-2, 14: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* ² *He was in the beginning with God. . . .* ¹⁴ *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

2. Christ is the "firstborn *over* all creation" (taking the genitive phrase *pasēs ktiseōs* [all creation] as what Daniel Wallace calls a genitive of subordination; see NEB, NKJV, REB, HCSB, NET, NIV).³¹

a. "Firstborn" here cannot mean that he was the first among beings that were created because the following verse makes clear that he is the one through whom *all creation* came into being. Christ, in terms of his divine nature, preexisted all creation and thus cannot himself have been created.

b. Rather, firstborn "takes on a metaphorical significance based on the ancient attribution of preeminence to the first to be born."³² In this context, the emphasis is on rank. In saying he is the "firstborn" over all creation he means he is "supreme over" all creation.

3. That Christ is indeed supreme over creation ("for") is clear from his role in the creation of all things and from the Father's purpose for all creation.

a. Paul stresses that absolutely everything that was created, which excludes only God, was created by the Father through the agency or instrumentality of Christ (see Jn. 1:3). The totality is emphasized by "all the things in the heavens and on the earth," which he specifies includes the visible but also the invisible. And lest there be any question, he spells out that the invisible things include any and all spirit beings and heavenly powers – whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities.

³¹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 104.

³² Moo, 119.

b. These various terms (thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities) were mentioned in Jewish literature as powerful angelic or spirit beings. Paul uses several of these terms in Eph. 1:21. In Eph. 6:12 it is clear that "rulers" and "authorities" are spirit beings. Generally, the reference by Paul is to hostile rather than friendly powers, but here the meaning probably is broader. Moo states:

It is certainly the case that 1:20 and 2:15 imply hostility toward God and/or humans on the part of the powers; but the inclusive language of this verse suggests that Paul is setting up that specific point by asserting Christ's supremacy over the entire angelic realm. The existence of spiritual beings of various sorts and their critical impact on the affairs of human beings were fundamental components of the ancient worldview. This belief was apparently an important catalyst for the Colossian false teaching, and Paul's emphasis here on Christ's supremacy to these powers reminds the Colossians that they are utterly unable to rival Christ in any way.³³

c. All things not only were created by God *through* him but were created *for* him in the sense everything was created to be subject to his lordship. Michael Bird comments, "the universe exists in order to be his designated domain of authority."³⁴ All of creation is subordinate to him.

4. Christ is before all things in that he preexisted all created things. He was the instrument or agency through which all things were brought into existence by God. As John says in Jn. 1:1-2, Jesus was there when the beginning began. There is God and everything else – all created things – and he is on the "God side." Paul is hammering the point of Christ's supremacy.

5. He not only is the preexistent one through whom all creation came into being; he also is the one in whom all things hold together. Apart from Christ's continuous sustaining activity, all would disintegrate. He is *that* cosmically significant. In the words of Heb. 1:2-3a, *[I]n these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.*

C. Supreme in redemption (1:18-20)

1. Verse 18 marks a shift in perspective that continues for the rest of the section (hymn). Verses 15-17 viewed Christ in terms of cosmic power and authority; from here on the view is of Christ as Savior.

³³ Moo, 122-123.

³⁴ Michael F. Bird, *Colossians and Philemon*, NCC (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 53.

2. Christ is the head of the body, the church. This expresses the church's vital union with Christ. Headship in this context refers to Christ's leadership or control over his people as well as their dependence on him for life and power. As his body, the church is the physical representation of Christ on earth.

3. Christ is the beginning, the founder, of a new creation, a redeemed and transformed existence. He is the founder of that new creation in that he is the firstborn from the dead, the first one to be raised to resurrection life, life in a glorified body that is no longer subject to death (Rom. 6:9) and thus is prepared for life in the new creation. As the first of the end-time resurrections, he is the firstfruits who guarantees the future resurrection of others (see 1 Cor. 15:20, 23) into the new existence. Beale states, "This is one of the clearest texts in the NT that Christ's resurrection is understood to be the beginning of a new creation, with more to come (i.e., of more resurrected ones from the dead to come; on which see almost identically 1 Cor. 15:20-23)."³⁵ Bird writes:

The Jewish hope of resurrection . . . looked ahead to the day when God would renew and recreate the entire world and return it to a period of Edenic goodness. Salvation is not escape from the created world through the release of an immortal soul encased in a body (as in Greek philosophy) or the liberation of the divine spark from its fleshly chrysalis (as in Gnosticism), rather salvation consists of the redemption of our bodies to live and abide in God's new world (Rom. 8:23). That new creation has kicked off, proleptically and quite unexpectedly, in the resurrection of Jesus.³⁶

4. Christ is the founder of this resurrection existence so that *in everything* he might have preeminence. In both present creation and redeemed creation, he is supreme in authority, honor, and power. Bird states, "The Jesus of Colossians brooks no rivals, be they the malevolent powers of the cosmos or brutal dictators in a foreign land."³⁷

5. The reason for Christ having first place in everything ("For"), his entitlement to that supremacy, is that he is the divine Son of God as indicated by the fact God was pleased for *all his fullness* – his word, wisdom, glory, Spirit, and power – to dwell in him. How can he not have such supremacy? The Colossians need not fear those supernatural powers under whose control men were supposed to live. Jesus, the one in whom the divine fullness resides, is the one mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim. 2:5-6).

6. In addition, as Christ was God's instrument of creation, God was pleased for him to be his instrument of reconciliation. O'Brien states, "Although there has been no previous mention of it, the presupposition is that the unity and harmony of the

³⁵ Beale, 104.

³⁶ Bird, 55.

³⁷ Bird, 56.

cosmos have suffered a considerable dislocation, even rupture, thus requiring reconciliation."³⁸ Sin has resulted in corruption, alienation, and fragmentation.

a. Paul indicates that Jesus is the means God has provided for reconciliation of *anything* that is estranged from him, whether the physical universe (Rom. 8:19-22), people (2 Cor. 5:16-21), or any spirit beings. No part of the rupture or dislocation in the creation's relationship to its Creator can be resolved apart from Christ; he is that great!

b. This does not mean that all estranged beings will in fact be reconciled to God. Scripture clearly teaches that demons and many human beings ultimately will be subjected to the eternal punishment of hell. Rather, it means that Christ's death is so powerful and significant that it holds the *potential* for universal reconciliation. 1 John 2:2 speaks of Christ as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world (*kosmos*), yet John is clear that not everyone appropriates that atonement. Christ is the universal atoner *in potential*.

c. The frustration and enslavement to decay presently experienced by the nonhuman physical creation as a result of human sin will be removed in creation's transformation into the new heaven and new earth. That transformation, that removal of the curse, is linked to Christ's atoning sacrifice, "the blood of his cross," in that it is linked to the resurrection, the transformation, of the redeemed in Christ. As the curse of creation came through mankind, so its redemption. That is what Paul means in Rom. 8:19-22 when he speaks of creation, which was subjected to frustration and enslaved to decay, eagerly awaiting the revelation of the sons of God that it might enter into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

d. Note that this reconciliation was brought about by an event in human history, Jesus' death on the cross. It was not accomplished in some nonphysical realm, simply by thoughts or desires; it involved a physical body bleeding on a cross. The physical can have profound spiritual consequences. (We do well to remember that when we start thinking that all that matters in terms of worshipping God is our state of mind, whether we are sincere in what we are doing, as though he could not possibly care about *how* we worship him, what we do physically in worshipping him.)

III. Reconciliation Appropriated by the Colossians (1:21-23)

²¹And you once were alienated and hostile in disposition as expressed in evil deeds, ²²but now he has reconciled [you] in the body of his flesh through death to present you holy and blameless and without accusation before him, ²³if indeed you remain in the faith, securely established and firm, not moving away from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven and of which I, Paul, became a servant.

³⁸ O'Brien, 53.

A. Once alienated now reconciled (1:21-22)

1. Emphatic position of "And you" stresses their involvement with this reconciliation. Paul is drawing a sharp before-and-after contrast ("once") to highlight God's mighty action.

2. Before they became Christians, they were estranged from God. And they were enemies or hostile in their mindset or disposition toward God in the sense they cared nothing about him. In Paul's words in Rom. 1:21b, they had become futile in their reasonings and their uncomprehending hearts were darkened. This hostile disposition was naturally manifested in evil actions, self-gratification that is contrary to God's will.³⁹

3. *But now* as Christians they enjoy a wonderful new status; their past has been wiped out. God has reconciled them to him through Jesus' crucifixion, through the death that Jesus suffered in his physical body on the cross.

a. Note that no credit is given to their response, the fact they had accepted God's gift. There is nothing meritorious in that. Their new position is the result of *God's* work. He provided for their redemption by the blood of his Son, brought the gospel to them through his servants, and provided them the freedom to accept it.

b. Paul's emphasis on the physicalness of Christ's sacrifice (1:20 – "blood of his cross") is possibly aimed at a tendency of the Colossian heresy, perhaps a Gnostic-like denigration of Christ's humanness. Later Gnosticism denied the incarnation (docetism), which false claim was circulating as early as John's writings (e.g., 2 Jn. 7). But that is speculation. He may simply be emphasizing Christ's physical suffering.

4. The purpose of God's reconciling work was to present them holy and blameless before him and free from accusation. All will stand before God for judgment (Rom. 14:10; Jude 24; Rev. 20:11-15), but Christians are declared blameless, without fault or stain (Eph. 1:4, 5:27 [before Christ]; Jude 24). We stand in the righteousness given to us in Christ.

B. Need to continue in the faith (1:23)

1. Paul reminds them that they must remain faithful to the end to be accepted on that great Judgment Day. He is not doubting that they will; he simply is stating a fact. They cannot abandon the apostolic gospel which they received; that is the ground of their hope. This reminder is timely given the threat to their faith posed by the Colossian heresy. Moo writes:

Paul is genuinely concerned that the false teachers might "disqualify" the Colossian Christians (2:18). This being the case, Paul would clearly want

³⁹ With the NET and NIV footnote (see also Moo, 140), the dative *en tois ergois tois ponērois* is "taken as means, indicating the avenue through which hostility in the mind is revealed and made known."

his words here to be taken with great seriousness. He wants to confront the Colossians with the reality that their eventual salvation depends on their remaining faithful to Christ and the true gospel. Only by continuing in their faith can they hope to find a favorable verdict from God on the day of judgment.⁴⁰

2. Paul adds that the gospel to which they need to hold "has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven." He again, as in v. 6, speaks hyperbolically about the amazing scope of the gospel's reach as confirmation that it is the authentic message. Unlike the localized heresy being promoted by some in Colossae, the gospel they had received had gone "everywhere," to far flung geographic locations and across religious, cultural, social, and ethnic boundaries.

a. In doing so, Paul is not speaking falsely or erroneously because it would be understood that he was speaking figuratively. If someone says, "Rory McIlroy drives the ball a mile," no one would accuse him of speaking falsely or erroneously because McIlroy literally drives the ball less than 500 yards. We would know the statement was an intentional exaggeration to emphasize McIlroy's exceptional driving distance. If someone says, "I've been all over the world," no one would accuse him of speaking falsely or erroneously because he had only been to 75 countries. We would understand he was emphasizing the extraordinary extent of his travel. If someone says, "That was the worst speech ever given," no one would accuse him of speaking falsely or erroneously because someone somewhere had in fact given a worse one. We would understand that he was emphasizing that the speech he heard was extremely poor.

b. There are other examples in Scripture. To pick one, when Luke says in Acts 2:5 that on the Day of Pentecost there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews "from every nation under heaven," one need not insist there were Jews from China, Australia, or South America. Inspiration does not abolish common figures and means of speech, such that if one were being inspired one could never say "McIlroy drives the ball a mile." Rather, the Spirit communicates through ordinary forms of speech.

4. Paul notes that this is the gospel of which he had become a servant, and indeed he had. He was doing all he could to tell the world what God has done in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

IV. Paul's Ministry (1:24 – 2:5)

A. In Christ generally (1:24-29)

²⁴Now I rejoice in the sufferings on your behalf, and I fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ for the sake of his body, which is the church, ²⁵of which I became a servant according to the commission of God that was given to me for you, to complete the word of God, ²⁶the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations but

⁴⁰ Moo, 144.

has now been revealed to his saints, ²⁷to whom God desired to make known what [is] the riches of the glory of this mystery regarding the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸We proclaim him, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, so that we may present every man perfect in Christ, ²⁹for which also I labor, struggling with all his energy that powerfully works in me.

1. Having just mentioned that he became a servant of the gospel, Paul says in v. 24 that he rejoices in the sufferings that servanthood brought into his life on behalf of the Colossians.

a. In keeping with the Lord's words to Ananias in Acts 9:15-16 (see also, 1 Thess. 3:3-4), Paul suffered much as a result of his commission as an apostle to the Gentiles. He endured many hardships in his ministry (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 4:9-13; 2 Cor. 6:3-10, 11:23-33).

b. As Moo notes, the second part of v. 24 (beginning with "and") "likely functions to explain how it is that Paul's sufferings are 'on behalf of' . . . the Colossians."⁴¹ Paul says his sufferings are in some sense for the sake of Christ's body, the universal church, and since the Colossian Christians are part of that body his sufferings are in some sense for them.

2. Paul's sufferings are for the sake of the church in that he fills up in his flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.

a. Obviously this does not mean that Christ's death lacks anything in atoning or reconciling efficacy (see 1:19-22, 2:14-15 and elsewhere in Paul's letters and the rest of the NT). Rather, "the afflictions of Christ" seems to refer to what in Jewish apocalyptic literature was called the "woes (or birthpangs) of the Messiah."

b. The Jewish understanding was that God's people would suffer in the days immediately before the coming of the Messiah. That suffering would "give birth to" his arrival, which they conceived mistakenly as a one-shot affair that would be accompanied by the arrival of the final state. That idea is modified in the New Testament in accordance with the truth the Messiah comes twice: first to inaugurate the kingdom of God and then to consummate or finalize that kingdom. Between those two comings of the Messiah, in this time of overlap between the kingdom and the present age, the afflictions of Christ continue as the sufferings of his people, those with whom he identifies (Acts 9:4, 26:15), until they reach their *appointed limit*. (Revelation 6:9-11 demonstrates the concept of a set quantity of righteous suffering.) Then Christ will return, consummating the kingdom, ushering in the final state. Wright puts it like this:

[The Messianic woes] is part of the view (shared by Jesus and Paul) that world history is to be divided into two ages – the present (evil) age (cf. Gal. 1:4) and the age to come. When the great moment arrives for history

⁴¹ Moo, 150. He notes (fn. 6) that Murray Harris translates the *kai* here as "in that." See also, Pao (p. 123, fn. 10).

to move from one age to the next, God's people will suffer (so it was believed) extraordinary tribulations, which were to be understood as the birthpangs of the new age (Rom. 8:22). They are to be the accompaniment, or perhaps the foreshadowing, of the appearance of the Messiah.

Paul's appropriation of this idea is, like all reusing of Jewish material, reshaped by the facts of Jesus' death and resurrection. Instead of the old and new ages standing as it were back to back, he understood them to be overlapping. Jesus' resurrection had inaugurated the new age, but the old would continue alongside it until Jesus' second coming. The whole of the time-span between the Lord's resurrection and his return was, then, the period of the turn-around of the eras: and therefore the whole period would be characterized by 'the Messianic woes'.⁴²

3. Paul rejoices in his bodily sufferings because they contribute to the total of sufferings to be endured before the consummation of the age to come. By personally absorbing a disproportionate share of the afflictions of Christ, the predetermined measure of suffering the righteous must endure, he reduces the amount of suffering left for fellow Christians. His sufferings thus benefit even Christians he never met, such as the Colossians.⁴³

4. Paul says he became a servant of the church in accordance with the commission God gave him as an apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15, 22:21, 26:17-18; Rom. 11:13; Gal. 2:8), which includes the Colossians. The essence of that commission was for him "to complete (or fulfill) the word of God," meaning to bring it to maximum effect, to accomplish God's purposes for it through conversion and transformation.

5. He describes the word of God he was commissioned to "complete" as the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. The word "mystery" refers to God's veiled plan, to divinely foreordained events that were concealed by God but hinted at by holy men of old.⁴⁴ Paul says that mystery has now been revealed to God's saints, meaning it has been revealed to them in the message of Christ that was preached to and believed by them. That is how the revelation takes place.

6. God desired to make known to the saints, to all who would receive his revelation, the riches of the glory of this mystery regarding the Gentiles.⁴⁵

a. Paul is not referring merely to God's plan to bring the Gentiles into the people of God. His intention to bring the Gentiles into the blessing of the Jews is all over

⁴² Wright, 88.

⁴³ See, e.g., O'Brien, 80; Wright, 89; Ben Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 144-145; Bird, 66; Pao, 125-126.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Wright, 91; Bird, 67; O'Brien, 84.

⁴⁵ I take the phrase *en tois ethnesin* to be the dative of respect, as in the Tree of Life version; see Murray J. Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 121.

the O.T. (e.g., Gen. 12:3, 18:18, 22:18; Deut. 32:43 [Masoretic text]; Isa. 11:10, 42:6; Ps. 18:49, 22:27-28, 117:1). Rather, the mystery that was newly revealed related to the *manner* in which that intention would come to fruition. It would not be by Gentiles converting to Judaism, becoming faithful adherents of the Mosaic law. Rather, as Paul explains in Ephesians 2-3, it would be by the Messiah setting aside the Mosaic law, breaking down that dividing wall, so that Jews and Gentiles would be made into a new unified body, a Spirit-forged family, of full and equal members.⁴⁶ Indeed, Christians by the second century would speak of themselves as a "third race" or "new race," neither Jewish nor Gentile.⁴⁷

b. He describes the mystery as "Christ in you" – in Gentile Christians like the Colossians – and adds that this relationship with Christ, his dwelling in them by the Spirit, carries with it the expectation, the sure hope, of sharing in the glory that God is going to bestow on his people in the resurrection at the consummation of the kingdom (see Col. 3:4; Rom. 8:19; Phil. 3:21; 2 Thess. 1:10).

(1) In Rom. 8:10-11 Paul makes explicit the link between Christ being in you and sharing in the resurrection of the righteous – ¹⁰*But if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin but the Spirit is life because of righteousness.* ¹¹*And if the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.*

(2) In Rom. 5:2 he says that those who stand in the grace of God by faith in Christ "boast in the hope of the glory of God."

(a) Colin Kruse comments:

The 'glory of God' about which we rejoice/boast in hope is the restoration of the glory lost at the fall. The status humanity enjoyed, being created in the image and glory of God, was marred by sin. In the case of believers, this is in the process of being restored as we are 'being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory' (2 Cor. 3:18). It will be restored fully when our hope of sharing in the glory of God reaches its consummation in the new age (8:18-21, 30; cf. 1 John 3:2-3).⁴⁸

(b) Thomas Schreiner similarly states:

The parallels in Romans 8 (8:17, 18, 21, 30) demonstrate that this glory is an eschatological reality, not a present possession. The already-not yet character of Paul's eschatology emerges in this paragraph. Believers are righteous in God's sight, enjoy the eschatological covenant of peace, and stand in the end-

⁴⁶ See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 314; Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 231-232; Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 440-441.

⁴⁷ O'Brien (1999), 195.

⁴⁸ Colin G. Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 227-228.

time gift of grace. Nonetheless, the full promises of salvation have not yet been realized. We still await future glorification, which will involve moral perfection and restoration to the glory Adam lost when he sinned. . . . Believers are certain now that the glory Adam lost will be restored to them. Indeed, the glory restored to believers will be even greater than the glory Adam once had, for believers will be conformed to the second Adam, Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29).⁴⁹

7. Pursuant to the commission to "complete the word," to accomplish God's purposes for it through conversion and transformation, Paul and his companions proclaim Christ, which involves them in warning and teaching every person (whom God brings into their orbit being the understood limitation) in all wisdom that they may present everyone perfect (or fully mature) in Christ.

a. People must hear the gospel message and be admonished and instructed as to what its acceptance means in a person's life. This act of warning and teaching is to be in all wisdom, meaning in conformity with the truth of God.

b. Their goal in this proclaiming, warning, and teaching is to present every person before God at the final judgment as someone who had become a fully mature Christian in this life. They are committed to maximizing the word's impact in this world, to bringing about its full flowering, however they may fall short.

8. Paul adds that he personally labors for that purpose, struggling to be faithful to that commission with all the energy that God powerfully works in him. Paul puts great effort into his ministry – he struggles, he works, he toils, he labors – but he understands that it is God's power that working through him. Moo comments: "All Paul's work would be of little effect if it was not done through the power of Christ. Paul can brag that 'I worked harder than all of them' (1 Cor. 15:10), but at the same time what he accomplishes in his ministry is always and only 'through him who gives me strength' (Phil. 4:13)."⁵⁰

B. To the Colossians specifically (2:1-5)

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in [the] flesh, ²so that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and [brought] into all the riches of the fullness of understanding, into the knowledge of the mystery of God, [which is] Christ, ³in whom are all the hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴I say this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. ⁵For even though I am absent in the flesh, nevertheless I am with you in the spirit, rejoicing to see your well-ordered condition and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

⁴⁹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 254-255

⁵⁰ Moo, 163.

1. Having spoken of his struggling to maximize the word's impact in this world, he says he mentions that because ("For") he wants the Colossians and the others in the Lycus Valley he has never met to know that he is struggling *for them*. They are objects and beneficiaries of his efforts as well as those he has met personally.

2. He is struggling for all of them so that their "hearts" (their inner person, the deepest part of their being, not just their emotions) may be encouraged, which takes place through or in association with their being knit together into a fellowship, a community of love, as a result of his labor. In other words, as they hear about the effects of Paul's struggles – the establishment of churches all over the Mediterranean world which share a common faith, baptism, and salvation – they identify with those fellow Christians, are built into an extended family, and are thereby encouraged by being part of something so much bigger than themselves or their local group, a powerful and worldwide movement of God.

3. And in addition to struggling so that their hearts may be encouraged, he is struggling that all of them may be brought into all the riches of a full understanding, that is, that they may be brought into the knowledge of the mystery of God, [which is] Christ, in whom are all the hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

a. He fights the fight with a goal of deepening all Christians' grasp God's work in Christ, whether through his personal presence, by word of mouth from those he has instructed, or by letter. Christ is the center of God's plan for creation, the implications of which are inexhaustible; in him are all the hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

b. Because Christ is the one in whom *all* the hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found, it is foolish to make anything other than him the key to wisdom and knowledge, to understanding the truth about God or how to relate to him. This is obviously relevant to the Colossian heresy but also to so much of what is passed off today as spiritual wisdom and knowledge (e.g., the limitless power of the inner self).

4. He says explicitly that he is telling them this so that no one may deceive them by fine-sounding arguments. However smoothly the false teachers may pitch their error, they are making something other than Christ the key to wisdom and knowledge, to understanding the truth about God or how to relate to him. They are claiming the real answer to fullness with God lies in mystical experiences and satisfying intermediate spirit beings. That is enough for the Colossians to know that the false teachers' claims are baloney.

5. Paul writes those deception-resisting truths about Christ because ("For"), though he is physically absent, he is "with [them] in the spirit" and delighted "to see" their well-ordered condition and the firmness of their faith in Christ. In other words, he knows from being with them in the spirit how well they are doing spiritually, and he is trying to arm them against the deception to prevent it from damaging that condition, from putting them out of order or weakening their faith in Christ.

a. It is not clear what being with them in the spirit means, but it seems to involve more than a mere figurative presence, as we might say "I'm with you in spirit" as an expression of empathy, to let people know our concern and attention is focused on them. Paul has other ways of saying those things. Rather, he seems to be referring to an actual presence, albeit nonphysical, through which he "saw," perceived in some way, how they were doing.

b. I am inclined to think he was given a visionary experience of their assembly, taken there in the S/spirit, which gave him insight into their condition. He was, after all, caught up to the third heaven, as he reports in 2 Cor. 12:2-4, and Ezekiel was transported in spirit to Jerusalem (Ezek. 8:3, 11:1). Paul does not stress his visionary experiences except when he is driven to do so to counteract some detrimental claim (2 Cor. 12:1), which may explain why he just mentions it here in passing. Also, he may downplay it because the false teachers were promoting visionary experiences as part of their heresy.

c. There is a similar reference to his being present in the spirit with the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 5:3-5. There a stronger case can be made for his being present in spirit in the reading of his letter in the assembly, through which his spirit is represented, but as I say, the presence referred to in Colossians involves Paul perceiving their condition, which points to a different kind of presence.

6. The "well-ordered condition" that Paul delights to see probably refers to their not having broken from the truth they had received; they remained in line with it, correctly arrayed in relation to it. They have not strayed from the truth of Christ. On the contrary, their faith in him is firm. That is the condition Paul wants to protect by telling them the truths about Christ that will help them resist the false teachers.

V. Exhortation, Warning, and Commands Regarding False Teaching (2:6-23)

A. Exhortation to continue to live in Christ (2:6-7)

⁶Therefore, as you received the Christ, Jesus the Lord, continue to walk in him, ⁷having been rooted and being built up in him, being established in the faith just as you were taught, [and] abounding in thanksgiving.

1. Given his desire to protect them from fine-sounding arguments that would pull them from the truth of Christ ("Therefore"), Paul commands them, as those who had "received the Christ, Jesus the Lord" to continue to walk in Christ.

a. The word "received" was common in speaking of the passing on of the authentic tradition. The implication is that they had received from Epaphras the authentic gospel, the message about Jesus that was preserved and passed on to them.

b. They are to continue to walk in Christ, meaning they are to continue to live in accordance with the truth about him that they had accepted. This command sums up all the implications the gospel is to have for our lives. Jesus is to remain the sphere or environment of our entire lives, the permanent and constant motivator and director of all we do.

2. Continuing to walk in Christ presupposes being rooted in him, having been attached to him by faith, and it involves or results in being built up in him, being established in the faith that was delivered, and abounding in thanksgiving. As we walk in Christ, live out our confession, the Spirit transforms us to be more like him and solidifies our conviction about the truth of the gospel, all of which leads to our abounding in thanksgiving to God for the gift of Christ.

B. Warning about and debunking of the false teaching (2:8-15)

⁸Watch out lest there will be anyone who takes you captive through the philosophy that is empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. ⁹For in him all the fullness of the Deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰and you have been filled in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.

¹¹In him you also were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands in the putting off of the body of the flesh in the circumcision of the Christ, ¹²having been buried with him in the baptism in which you also were raised with [him] through faith in the working of God who raised him from the dead. ¹³And you, being dead in the transgressions and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, he made you alive with him, having forgiven us all the transgressions, ¹⁴having canceled the certificate of indebtedness that was against us because of legal demands, which was opposed to us; he has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. ¹⁵Having disarmed the rulers and authorities, he made a public spectacle [of them], leading them in a triumphal procession through him.

1. Paul warns them strongly not to be taken captive, not to be carried away into slavery, by the false teachers' alleged philosophy, which is in reality empty deception.⁵¹ Unlike the gospel, the word of *truth* (1:5), their teaching is false, a deception. And unlike the "glorious riches" (1:27) and *treasures* of wisdom and knowledge (2:3) that are part of the mystery of Christ that was presented to them, their teaching is empty; it offers nothing of value.

2. Paul says the false teaching is "according to" (*kata*) the tradition of men, "according to" (*kata*) the elemental spirits of the universe, and *not* "according to"

⁵¹ I take the clause *kai kenēs apatēs* (and empty deception) epexegetically, which I render as "philosophy that is empty deception." See e.g., Beale, 174 (fn. 17). Murray Harris states, "The single prep. and art. qualifying both nouns suggest that one conceptual entity, not two, is being named (cf. R 737) and therefore that *καί* is epex. 'through a philosophy which is empty deceit' (sim. Barth-Blanke 3, 310), 'through hollow and deceptive philosophy' (TNIV), 'through an empty, deceitful philosophy' (NET)." Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon (Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament)* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 83.

(*kata*) Christ. I have rendered each *kata* as "according to" simply to reflect that the same preposition is repeated, but as Harris points out, the preposition has a different sense in each of these uses.⁵²

a. The first "according to" denotes the origin or source of the philosophy: the tradition *of men*. It is likely that the heretics had put forth their teaching as "tradition," thereby pointing to its antiquity, dignity, and revelational character. (In 2 Thess. 2:15 Paul tells the Thessalonians to "stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us.") Paul rejects any divine origin for the heretics' teaching, making clear that it was a human fabrication, one which stood against the apostolic tradition which centered on Christ Jesus as Lord.

b. The second "according to" describes the content or substance of the teaching: the elemental spirits of the universe, meaning it is centered on those powers. In the teaching at Colossae these spiritual beings were seen as controlling the heavenly realm and humanity's access to God's presence. One needed to placate or appease these powers, at least in part through subduing the flesh, to gain "fullness" with God.

(1) As I mentioned in the introduction, there is much debate about the meaning of the phrase *stoicheia tou kosmou*, but in understanding it to refer to spirit beings I am in good company. O'Brien says in his 1982 commentary, "The majority of commentators this century have understood the 'elements of the universe' in Galatians and Colossians as denoting spiritual beings, regarded as personal and active in the physical and heavenly elements."⁵³ Jerry Sumney says in his 2008 commentary, "Modern interpreters most often identify the *stoicheia* as angelic beings, believed by many in the ancient world to rule various parts of the cosmos."⁵⁴ It is rendered "elemental spirits" of the world or universe by RSV, NEB, NRSV, REB, NET, and ESV. The NIV has "elemental spiritual forces of this world," and NAB has "elemental powers of the world."

(2) A significant part of the resistance to understanding *stoicheia* as a reference to spirit beings is the notion that this usage of the word is not attested before the second century. For example, Sumney says, "There are, however, no extant first-century uses of this word that refer to such beings."⁵⁵ However, Clinton Arnold has demonstrated such uses in the traditions of magic and astrology. He states:

In summary, one may safely conclude that in the context of magic and astrology, even in Jewish and early Christian circles, the term *stoicheia* was indeed used of personalized spiritual forces that have significant influence over the affairs of day-to-day existence. . . .

⁵² Harris (2012), 159.

⁵³ O'Brien, 131-132.

⁵⁴ Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 131.

⁵⁵ Sumney, 131; see also, Moo, 189.

Furthermore, these traditions (including the demonic use of *stoicheia*) reach into the first century A.D. and even earlier.⁵⁶

c. The third "according to" introduces "the negation of the two preceding clauses (the essential weakness of this 'philosophy' was that Christ was neither its source nor its substance)."⁵⁷

3. Paul explains why he warns them not to embrace this teaching that is based on human wisdom and is centered on spirit beings rather than Christ ("For"). It is because Christ is the one in whom the whole fullness of the Deity, the divine nature, dwells (taking up the language of 1:19). Christ is the Deity in bodily form, God incarnate.

4. And they have been "filled" in Christ, in the one in whom the whole fullness of the Deity dwells. He does not specify with what they have been filled probably because he is countering a vague claim by the false teachers that they "offer [the Colossians] the means to attain real spiritual fullness, to move on from Christ to a deeper spiritual experience."⁵⁸ Bird is surely correct in stating, "The chief thought is of fulfillment or completion of communion with God by union with the Messiah."⁵⁹ Moo similarly comments, "And against [the false teachers'] claims Paul asserts again the exclusivity of Christ. In him, and in him alone, God has decisively and exhaustively revealed himself. All that we can know or experience of God is therefore found in our relationship with him."⁶⁰

5. Paul adds that Christ is the head of every ruler and authority, referring to spirit beings as in 1:16. As I said, the various terms used in 1:16 (thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities) were mentioned in Jewish literature as powerful angelic or spirit beings. Paul uses several of these terms in Eph. 1:21. In Eph. 6:12 it is clear that "rulers" and "authorities" are spirit beings. Moo comments:

The authority of Christ over spiritual beings that the language of 1:16-17 (and 20) implies is explicitly claimed here. "Head" (*kephalē*) is a metaphor that undoubtedly includes this notion of "authority over." Yet, as we noted in our comments on 1:18, authority is only one aspect of a broader metaphorical allusion. As the head is the animating and directing force of the body, so Christ is the source of the spiritual beings' existence (1:16) and the one who ultimately determines what they can and cannot do. Christians need not fear these "powers," therefore, because they are firmly under the control of their own "head," the one in whom all the fullness of deity has come to reside.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 173.

⁵⁷ Harris (2012), 159.

⁵⁸ Moo, 195.

⁵⁹ Bird, 77.

⁶⁰ Moo, 195.

⁶¹ Moo, 196.

6. Paul says that in addition to having been filled in Christ, in him they also were circumcised with a circumcision that was not performed by human hands, meaning it was done by God.

a. This nonphysical circumcision which they received in Christ involved the putting off of the body of the flesh in the circumcision of the Christ, meaning the circumcision performed by Christ (perhaps through the Spirit) or by God in association with Christ. In other words, Christian conversion, entering into Christ, involves a nonphysical circumcision whereby Christ/God removes the "body of the flesh" in the sense he removes the controlling power of our fallen, fleshly nature. The old self, the body as captive to sin, what Paul in Rom. 6:6 refers to as the "body of sin," is done away with that we should no longer be enslaved to sin. (NIV renders it "Your whole self ruled by the flesh.") We are not the same person in a new situation but a new person in a new situation. Moo states:

The "circumcision of the heart" that Moses called for and that Paul identified as marking the new covenant people of God has been definitively accomplished in our union with Christ. This is "Christ's circumcision" (possessive genitive), and it fully provides for that subduing of the "flesh" for which the false teachers were advocating elaborate and strenuous rules.⁶²

b. Paul explains that the circumcision of which he is speaking, the putting off of the body of the flesh that they experienced in Christ, occurred in conjunction with their having been buried with Christ in baptism (as made explicit in NRSV – when you were buried with him in baptism).⁶³ Eduard Lohse states, "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."⁶⁴

(1) As Moo points out, "The reference is certainly to water baptism (as opposed, e.g., to 'baptism in the Spirit')."⁶⁵ He explains:

Paul's logic runs like this: you have been spiritually "circumcised." This "circumcision" took place when you were buried with Christ and raised with him. And this burial and resurrection with Christ happened when you were baptized. As this paraphrase of Paul's argument also reveals, the popular explanation that Paul uses baptism as a symbol of our death to the old life (when we are plunged beneath the water) and resurrection to new life (when we arise out of the water) is also wide of the mark. Baptism does not symbolize what happened when we were converted; it somehow is integrally involved in that conversion itself. The

⁶² Moo, 200.

⁶³ See, e.g., Moo, 201; Pao, 166; Sumney, 138.

⁶⁴ Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, Hermeneia, trans. by William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 103.

⁶⁵ Moo, 202.

best way to account for this and at the same time to do justice to Paul's constant emphasis on our faith as the key to our coming to Christ (as he does at the end of this very verse, as if to guard against a possible misunderstanding) is again to recognize a broadly attested New Testament theological concept dubbed by James Dunn "conversion-initiation." The New Testament connects our coming to Christ (being converted and initiated into the new covenant community) to faith, to repentance, to the gift of the Spirit, and to water baptism, in various combinations. Any of those, in a kind of metonymy, could be used to connote the whole experience – implying, of course, in each instance, the presence of all the others. Water baptism, then, as a critical New Testament rite intimately connected to our conversion experience, could be used as a shorthand for the whole experience.⁶⁶

(2) Sumney writes:

Verse 12 continues the discussion of the means of access by which believers have come to possess fullness in Christ, but now the writer explicitly names baptism as that means. Believers received "the circumcision of Christ" when they were "buried with him in baptism." . . . Baptism enacts a central part of the gospel story. But it is more than a reenactment, because the baptized not merely observe but also participate in the action; in baptism they are buried and raised with Christ. They become a part of the gospel narrative as they are brought into Christ and are made to share in central elements of its story.

This verse shares so many things with Rom 6, . . . [T]he common elements in these passages demonstrate that the early church understood baptism as an act in which the believer identifies with Christ, particularly with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, and in this act receives forgiveness and relationship with God. . . . Baptism provides the entrance into the "fullness" that believers have "in him." Since the readers have been baptized, they have been identified with the gospel story, possess its blessings, and so, by implication, do not need the new regulations and experiences that the visionaries urge on them.⁶⁷

(3) David Hay writes;

The Colossians in baptism were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, the circumcision of Christ (v. 11). These former pagans have experienced in Christ a kind of spiritual circumcision, evidently in the event of baptism, a stripping off of the sin-prone flesh (Gk. *sarx*). . . . It involves not the outward removal of a small amount of physical skin

⁶⁶ Moo, 202.

⁶⁷ Sumney, 138-139.

from male converts, but rather the excision of the entire "Old Being" of those who are baptized, females as well as males.⁶⁸

c. Notice that baptism is not analogized to the old covenant rite of physical circumcision. Rather, it is said to be the time when our *spiritual* circumcision, the circumcision made without hands, takes place.⁶⁹ So attempts to dismiss or diminish the significance of baptism by analogizing it to physical circumcision – e.g., claiming that as an analog of old covenant circumcision it cannot relate to salvation because the NT makes clear that old covenant circumcision is irrelevant to salvation – are misguided. Nor can the verse be used to justify infant baptism by analogy to old covenant circumcision.

d. It is possible that Paul characterized the putting off of the old self that occurs in baptism as a kind of circumcision because the false teachers made a point of circumcision. That would not be surprising given the Jewish element in the teaching. But whether they pushed circumcision or what they said about it is unknown.

7. Paul says that in their baptism they not only were buried with Christ but also were raised with him. There is a sense in which Christians already participate in the new life of the resurrection.

a. That is what Paul refers to in Rom. 6:4 when he says that we were buried with him through baptism into [his] death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so also we might *walk in newness of life*. But, of course, there is a "not yet" aspect to this resurrection life that will be realized only when the Lord Jesus returns.

b. Paul may here stress the already aspect, the new life in and with Christ, because it "counteracts the false teachers' insistence that a Christian must go on to add something to his or her experience in order to attain spiritual fullness and find liberation from the 'powers.'"⁷⁰ In Christ we have all there presently is to have. The "not yet" is not something a Christian needs to do anything to attain; it is the blessing they will be given. It is the completion of what we have already received in Christ.

8. He makes clear that their resurrection with Christ that took place in their baptism took place through their faith in the working of God who raised Jesus from the dead.

a. Though baptism is part of conversion, the blessings associated with it are not bestowed by God independently of a person's faith. One must be submitting to the immersion because of one's faith in Christ as he is revealed in the gospel.

⁶⁸ David M. Hay, *Colossians*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 90-91.

⁶⁹ As Moo observes (p. 202), "Paul does not compare baptism with (literal) circumcision; he identifies baptism as the 'place' where our spiritual circumcision takes place."

⁷⁰ Moo, 204.

b. Paul here describes the object of faith as "the working of God who raised Jesus from the dead." He is referring to the working of God in Christ, to Jesus as the Messiah, reflected profoundly in his raising him from the dead as the firstfruits of the resurrection, a pivotal work in the inauguration of the new age.

9. Before their conversion to Christ, they were dead in their transgressions and in the uncircumcision of their flesh. In other words, they were alienated from God, dead spiritually, which state resulted from their sins and their callousness to the things of God, the sinful nature, from which those sins flowed. As Moo states, "Paul thus attributes spiritual 'deadness' both to 'the actual definite transgressions' and to 'the impure carnal disposition which prompts them.'"⁷¹

10. God removed the alienation, made them alive spiritually, "with him," meaning Christ, referring to the fact their spiritual resurrection was tied to their participating in Christ's resurrection by their being buried and raised with him through faith in or at the time of their baptism. As God's power raised Christ from physical death, so his power raised them from spiritual death (see Eph. 1:18 – 2:6), which is a prelude to their ultimate physical resurrection. He explains in the final clause of v. 13 that this being made alive with Christ is, for them and for all Christians ("us"), bound up with God having forgiven all our sins.⁷²

11. Paul expands on God having forgiven us all our sins by declaring that he canceled the certificate of indebtedness that stood against us, was opposed to us, because of our failure to comply with God's demands.

a. The word *cheirographon* refers generally to a handwritten document (*cheir* meaning "hand" and *graphie* meaning "writing"). But more specifically, it refers to a written acknowledgement of a debt issued by a debtor to his creditor, what we would call an IOU.⁷³

(1) Pao states:

Most agree that [*cheirographon*] is taken from the fields of commerce and law in reference to a "certificate of debt" (NASB; cf. ESV, NLT, TNIV, NET, NIV), and in this context would refer to an IOU from human beings to God. This meaning is supported by the widespread use of this term in contemporaneous papyri and would be immediately understood as such by ancient readers.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Moo, 207.

⁷² The possessive pronoun "our" being implied by the article; see, e.g., Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 215-216 and most English translations.

⁷³ See, e.g., BDAG, 1083 ("certificate of indebtedness"); Lohse, 108; O'Brien, 124; David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 151; Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians*, AB, trans. by Astrid B. Beck (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 370. Beale, 197.

⁷⁴ Pao, 170.

(2) Hay states:

[T]he term suggests a document written by a person who will be held responsible for any failure related to the document. The choice of this word implies that the incriminating document in 2:14 was written not by God (or by any human amanuensis simply taking dictation from God), but rather by the persons "against whom" the document stands (all of "us"). Hence the term suggests not a law imposed by God but rather a promissory note drawn up and signed by humans, who have failed to live up to their own promises.⁷⁵

(3) Moo states:

The standard meaning of [*cheirographon*] is "certificate of indebtedness," a document recording debts that one is obliged to pay, what we would call an "IOU." . . . And, on the whole, there is insufficient evidence to give to the word any nuance beyond its general well-attested meaning of "IOU." As Moule succinctly puts the idea, "I owe God obedience to his will. Signed, mankind."⁷⁶

b. *Cheirographon* ("certificate of indebtedness") is followed immediately in the Greek text by "the *dogma*" (*tois dogmasin*). Paul uses this word *dogma* in Eph. 2:15 in reference to the Mosaic law, but the word simply means "legal requirements," rules or commandments that are to be obeyed. It is broad enough to encompass the law written on the Gentiles' hearts to which Paul refers in Rom. 2:14-15 (though the word is not used there). Moo observes, "Colossians, of course, lacks any reference to the Mosaic law, but it would be typical of Paul's theology of the law to extend the word to include all 'decrees' of God that regulate human conduct, whether found in the law of Moses or more generally in God's revelation to all human beings" (citing Lightfoot and Luz).⁷⁷

c. The noun *dogma* is in the dative case (*dogmasin*), which can have a causal meaning.⁷⁸ With Moo and others, that is how I think it is intended here. Our obligation to obey God's will, our certificate of indebtedness, became an indictment against us because of our default on the obligation, because of our failure to discharge our acknowledged debt by failing to obey God's demands. Moo puts it like this: "A preferable interpretation, then, is to view the 'decrees' as explaining the reason why the 'IOU' was 'against us.' All we humans had, as it were, 'signed' an IOU promising God perfect obedience, and this document has come to stand against us 'because' of God's 'decrees' that we have failed to keep."⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Hay, 97.

⁷⁶ Moo, 209-210.

⁷⁷ Moo, 210.

⁷⁸ Wallace, 167-168.

⁷⁹ Moo, 211.

12. This IOU that became an indictment against us because of our default, our disobedience, has been canceled, has been taken out of the way, by being nailed to the cross. In other words, in the forgiveness of all our transgressions that Christ made possible through his atoning sacrifice on the cross, the divine claim against us was removed. Moo gives the basic flow of vv. 13-14 as follows: "God has made alive with Christ us who were dead by forgiving our sins, in that he has cancelled the IOU; in fact, God removed this IOU from the situation by nailing it to the cross."⁸⁰

13. By forgiving all our sins, canceling our defaulted IOU, God disarmed the spiritual powers by eliminating the only weapon they had for gaining mastery over us. If we are already reconciled, if our debt has been removed, there is no need to heed the alleged dictates of those spirits to try to gain God. Their "hook" has been destroyed.

a. The fact the sin problem was resolved totally apart from the spiritual powers of the universe, exclusively through Jesus Christ, revealed openly that these beings had no real power. They were all "smoke and mirrors" or "paper tigers." The utter completeness of Christ's work exposed their irrelevance.

b. This public exposing of the salvific irrelevance of these powers is pictured as leading them as captives in a victory parade. As conquered enemies were paraded by the returning victor, so God through Christ (or "by the cross" if one takes *en autō* to mean "in it" instead of "in him") has utterly vanquished the powers the heretics were promoting.

C. Command not to submit to spiritual powers (2:16-23)

¹⁶Therefore, do not let anyone pass judgment on you with regard to food and drink or in the matter of a feast or a new moon or sabbaths, ¹⁷which things are a shadow of the coming things, but the substance belongs to the Christ. ¹⁸Let no one condemn you who delights in humility [techniques] and worship of the angels, which he has [purportedly] seen on entering [heaven]; he is puffed up without reason by his mind of the flesh ¹⁹and not holding fast to the head from whom all the body, nourished and knit together through the ligaments and sinews, grows with the growth [that is] from God.

²⁰Since you died with Christ [out] from [under] the elemental spirits of the universe, why as though still living in [the] world do you let yourselves be ordered about – ²¹"Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" ²²(which all [concern things that] are [destined] for perishing with use) – according to human commands and teachings? ²³These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in terms of self-imposed piety and humility [techniques] and harsh treatment of the body but are not of any value against indulgence of the flesh.

1. Given what he has just explained about the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ and the disarming of "rulers and authorities" ("Therefore"), Paul tells them not to let the false teachers take them to task (condemn them) regarding Jewish kosher laws,

⁸⁰ Moo, 211.

extended to include wine (as they had been by Paul's day), and Jewish holy days (1 Chron. 23:31; 2 Chron. 2:4, 8:13, 31:3; Ezek. 45:17; Hosea 2:11).

a. The Jewish element of this heresy apparently included urging those practices on people, presumably as part of the larger system that centered on spirit beings. According to Lohse, "The 'philosophy' made use of terms which stemmed from Jewish tradition, but which had been transformed in the crucible of syncretism to be subject to the service of 'the elements of the universe.'"⁸¹ O'Brien likewise notes that at Colossae "the sacred days were to be kept for the sake of the 'elemental spirits of the universe' . . ."⁸²

b. Since *all* spiritual powers have been disarmed in that a full relationship with God has been provided in Christ, there is no reason to seek to satisfy those powers by heeding their alleged dictates. There is no reason to "dance to their tune" regarding these Old Testament rituals or anything else.

2. These regulations were part of the Mosaic law, the law of the old covenant, and thus were only a shadow of the coming fulfillment of God's purposes in the new covenant instituted by Christ (Heb. 10:1). Christ's work rendered the old covenant obsolete or no longer operative (2 Cor. 3:4-18; Gal. 3:15-4:7, 4:21-31; Heb. 7:11-22, 8:6-13).

a. Though the universal moral requirements that were incorporated into the Mosaic law have an ongoing or renewed applicability in the new covenant, the civil and ritualistic or ceremonial elements of that law, things like the food laws and holy days that have no counterpart in the law of the heart to which all humanity was subject (Rom. 2:14-15), do not. Those "amoral" elements were designed, at least in part, to keep Israel separated from the Gentiles, and thus untainted by pagan practices, in order to help them serve as a witness to their Gentile neighbors of the blessed life that exists under God (Deut. 4:6-8; Ezek. 5:5; Isa. 42:6, 49:6). As such, those commands have no ongoing or renewed applicability. Since God *has not* bound those rules on the Colossians, the spiritual powers *cannot* bind them.

b. It is interesting that regarding these more orthodox tenets of Judaism, Paul says essentially that they have "had their day." They were a shadow that has been displaced by the substance. The less "orthodox" elements of the heresy are condemned as teachings of men (e.g., 2:8, 22).

3. Nor are they to let themselves be condemned by anyone who delights in humility [techniques] and worship of the angels, which he had purportedly seen on entering [heaven]. This verse is descriptive of the heretics. They emphasized ascetic practices such as fasting and apparently also emphasized visionary experiences in which they allegedly participated with angels in heavenly worship of God.

⁸¹ Lohse, 116.

⁸² O'Brien, 139.

a. Many English versions render *katabrabeuō* as disqualify or rob or cheat or defraud, but it can mean simply condemn.⁸³ With O'Brien, Moo, Pao, and others, and in line with the NET ("pass judgment") and NLT ("condemn"), I think that is the meaning here. It parallels the verb judge/condemn (*krinō*) used in v. 16.

b. Those doing the judging that they are commanded to reject are described literally as those who delight in or insist on "humility" (*tapeinophrosunē*), but it is widely recognized from the context that it has a negative connotation. It is variously rendered "asceticism" (ESV), "ascetic practices" (HCSB), "self-abasement" (NRS, NAS, NRSV, NASU, NAB), and "self-mortification" (NEB, REB). The NKJV and NIV go with "*false* humility," but that misses the likely ascetic aspect. As Moo notes, "But the context (see v. 23) does suggest that the word refers in general to ascetic practices that the false teachers may have used to prepare themselves for or to stimulate visionary experiences."⁸⁴ I think "humility techniques" implies the harsh treatment of the body while preserving the word "humility."

c. The phrase "worship of angels" can mean either worship directed toward angels (objective genitive) or worship offered by angels to God (subjective genitive). It is the same ambiguity in a phrase like "appreciation of the workers." It could mean either appreciation someone has for the workers or the appreciation the workers have for someone else.

(1) Drawing on the work of a scholar named F. O. Francis and some others who elaborated on his thesis, O'Brien, Dunn, Barth and Blanke, Sumney, Witherington, and Bird in their commentaries on Colossians favor the sense of angels worshipping God. They do so in part because the heresy has a strong Jewish flavor, and in the words of Dunn, "worship of angels is something one would not expect in any of the forms of Judaism known to us for this period."⁸⁵ In fact, there was broad opposition within Judaism to angel worship. Dunn writes:

[W]e would have to envisage a very syncretistic form of Judaism, unlike anything else we know of. This, however, hardly squares well with the evidence of a Jewish character for the "philosophy" which relished not simply odd bits and pieces abstracted from Judaism but the identity markers which marked out ethnic Jews anxious to maintain their ancestral traditions (circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath in particular; see on 2:11 and 2:160.⁸⁶

(2) If the reference is to angels worshipping God, then part of the appeal of the false teachers was their offer of a kind of mystical worship experience, a visionary participation with angels in heavenly worship. Presumably this came only to those who satisfied the alleged demands of these angels. The fact the

⁸³ BDAG, 515.

⁸⁴ Moo, 226.

⁸⁵ Dunn, 179-180.

⁸⁶ Dunn, 180.

Colossians did not have this grandiose experience was probably presented as an indication of their spiritual lack. If they would buy what the heretics were selling, if they would dance to the tune of the spiritual powers, their insufficiency would be overcome, the proof of which would be their visionary participation in heavenly angelic worship.

(3) If, on the other hand, the Colossian heresy was an unprecedented syncretistic form of Judaism in which angels were worshiped, then that worship was part of how one appeased them to gain fullness with God. Worshiping them would make them more favorably inclined.

d. Verse 2:18b is also difficult. Indeed, Bird says, "The Greek here is notoriously obscure."⁸⁷ It says literally, "which [or 'which things'] he has seen entering into."

(1) Many English versions take "entering into" metaphorically and understand the preceding clause as its object, which yields something like, "going into detail about the things he has seen," referring to things seen in a vision. Other English versions take "entering into" as "dwelling in" or "taking a stand on," which yields something like, "dwelling in the things which he has seen" or "taking a stand on the things which he has seen."

(2) But I am persuaded, with O'Brien, Dunn, Witherington, Bird, and Beale (who specifies entering into the heavenly *temple*) that it is best rendered along the lines "which he has seen *on entering [heaven]*," there being examples in extrabiblical literature in which this word "entering into" (*embateuō*) refers to entering into heaven in a vision.⁸⁸ In other words, the false teachers claim to have had visionary experiences in which they were with the angels worshiping in heaven. (I insert "purportedly" because it is clear from the next clause that Paul rejects the claim.) Bird writes:

A plausible scenario, then, is that the teachers propagated the necessity of ascetic practices leading to visions of the angelic praises of heaven. This was a means to assuaging, pleasing, or submitting to the "rulers and authorities" who exercised some form of influence over them. . . . What is at stake is not only the claim to possess special access to the operation of a heavenly liturgy, but the status and prestige that these visions afford their participants. The teachers are also seers, and their accounts of visions

⁸⁷ Bird, 86, (fn. 38).

⁸⁸ Dunn, 183. Beale argues (p. 229-230) that the neuter plural relative pronoun (*ha*) may be limited in its reference to the masculine plural "angels" as a *constructio ad sensum* and thus properly be rendered "whom." But *ha* ("which" or "which things") may be used because it refers to *the phrase* "worship [fem. sg.] of the angels [mas. pl.]" rather than to a single word. C. F. D. Moule says, "Sometimes a neuter relative is used where strictly a masculine or feminine might have been expected – presumably with reference to the 'whole idea' of the preceding clause rather than to the single word which is the immediate antecedent of the relative." *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 130. Thus, the relative pronoun is neuter because it refers to the phrase and is plural because angels is plural (and/or their worship is understood to involve multiple acts).

combined with the prowess of their instruction invest them with a special authority . . .⁸⁹

4. Paul proceeds immediately to undercut the validity of the heretics' claim, asserting that the person claiming this is puffed up without reason by his fleshly mind. In other words, his "visions" are of no value or are delusions.

5. He adds that they had ceased holding to the head, Christ, indicating that the false teaching was presented from within the Christian community. Moo comments, "The false teachers were apparently professing Christians who, because of their preoccupation with rules and spiritual beings and visions, had lost contact with the only effective source of spiritual growth."⁹⁰ Christians only serve the growth of the body as conduits of Christ's will. When they detach from him and pass on merely *human* philosophy, they are of no value.

6. Given that they had died with Christ out from under the elemental spirits of the universe, meaning that the forgiveness/reconciliation they received in having died with Christ deprived all the spiritual powers of any leverage over their lives, Paul asks why they would act as though that had not occurred, as though they still belonged to the world, and let themselves be ordered about by human commands and teachings that were alleged to satisfy those spiritual powers. The Christian has no need to appease or placate *any* spiritual powers. We have gone over their heads in our relationship with Christ.

7. These human commands and teachings were part of an ascetic regimen that included restrictions on eating and drinking, restrictions regarding things that perish with use (i.e., are consumed).

a. Paul parodies the teachings as being fixated on keeping people away from certain material things: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" He explains that their manmade rules – the self-imposed piety, humility techniques (forms of deprivation), and harsh treatment of the body that they prescribe – have an *appearance* of wisdom. They do so because from a worldly perspective it seems that subjecting the body to deprivation and suffering is a way of winning points with God. But in addition, there is actual benefit from spiritual disciplines like fasting where one asserts control over the impulses of the body. Note that the early church fasted on occasion (Acts 13:2-3, 14:23). So ascetic practices have a kind of natural appeal for the religiously minded. Asceticism has been a feature of many religions throughout history.

b. But Paul says the ascetic practices the false teachers were prescribing have no value in restraining the indulgence of the flesh, in subduing sinful impulses. This presumably is because they are associated in some way with placating spirit beings and thus are not part of a connection with the Head, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the source of spiritual power and growth. It is only spiritual disciplines that are

⁸⁹ Bird, 86.

⁹⁰ Moo, 230.

undertaken in a proper relationship with Christ that become avenues for the growth he provides. Moo comments:

Paul, of course, does not want to suggest that appropriate discipline of the body is of no spiritual importance; we are, he insists, supposed to "honor God with our bodies" (1 Cor. 6:20). But the false teachers were both imposing rules on others that they had no right to impose (vv. 16 and 18) and, more seriously, elevating their rules and practices and giving spiritual beings so much credit that they were, in effect, losing contact with Christ, the only source of spiritual power and growth (v. 19). It is for this reason that the "regulations" of the false teachers could not accomplish the "subduing" of the sinful nature that they were promising.⁹¹

c. Frank Thielman comments:

Paul responds to a false teacher who apparently claimed that various invisible beings must be placated by an ascetic regimen ("human tradition," as Paul calls it in Col. 2:8). The regimen involved restrictions on eating and drinking and insisted on the observance of particular festivals (2:16). Paul summarizes its ascetic requirements ironically in the phrase, "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" (2:21), and says that this regimen involves "harsh treatment of the body" (2:23).

Beneath these teachings lies a perverse understanding of creation, both visible and invisible (cf. Col. 1:16). The false teachers seem to have elevated angelic beings to such a status that they believe these beings pose a threat even to Christians. They also seem to think that ascetic discipline that denies the body food, drink, and other sensory pleasures is the means by which these beings can be placated and their threat neutralized.⁹²

d. The false teachers may have tied their ascetic regimen to appeasing the spirit beings only indirectly. In other words, the claim may have been that their ascetic practices paved the way to visionary experiences and that the visionary experiences were part of satisfying these beings.

D. The right perspective for Christian living (3:1-4)

Therefore, since you were raised with Christ, seek the things above, where Christ is, seated at God's right hand. ²Set your minds on the things above, not the things on the earth. ³For you died and your life has been hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ, who is your life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

1. Given the fatal flaws of the heretics' teaching that he has just highlighted ("Therefore"), flaws that are brought into full relief by the greatness and significance of Christ, Paul calls them in view of their having been raised with Christ to

⁹¹ Moo, 242.

⁹² Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 472.

seek the things above, where Christ is, seated at God's right hand. They need to focus on the things above to have and maintain the proper perspective on the false teaching.

2. As he said in 2:12, they were raised with Christ through faith in or at the time of their baptism in that they were made alive spiritually; their alienation was removed by God. As God's power raised Christ from physical death, so his power raised them from spiritual death (see Eph. 1:18 - 2:6), which raising is a prelude (the "already") to their ultimate physical resurrection (the "not yet").

3. In light of their sharing in Christ's resurrection life, he commands them to "seek" the things above, meaning to seek that frame of reference. As put in v. 2, they are to "set their minds on" the things above. The "things above" to which he is referring are things of the heavenly realm, the realm where Christ presently is and the realm that is contrasted to "the earth" (v. 2b).

4. The things about the heavenly realm on which they are to focus relate to the person and authority of Christ, who is seated at God's right hand, the position to which he was enthroned after his resurrection and ascension (as the apostles preached based on Ps. 110:1).

a. He is God's unique Son, the faithful One who is the center of God's plan, the instrument of all God's purposes, and the Lord of all. That reality is contrary to the focus on lesser things that characterizes the false teaching.

b. Though the false teachers boast of heavenly visions, they ironically have rejected the true heavenly perspective by elevating spirit beings to a role that denigrates the absolute supremacy of Christ. In that respect, their minds are really on earthly things.

5. The Colossians' focus on the heavenly realm is fitting because ("For") they died with Christ, which is implicit in their having been buried with him in baptism (2:12), and through the resulting forgiveness/reconciliation, they died out from under the elemental spirits of the universe (2:20). Those spiritual powers were deprived of any leverage over their lives. This new resurrection life is currently hidden with Christ in God in the sense its presence is not now obvious, free of all ambiguity. Moo remarks, "We have certainly not been physically transported to heaven; nor do we, who belong to the heavenly realm, look any different from those around us who still belong to this world."⁹³

6. But that will all change on the last day. When Christ returns to consummate or finalize the kingdom he inaugurated at this first coming, they and all Christians will be revealed with him in glory. On that day, there will no longer be any ambiguity about the identity or blessedness of the people of God. To quote Moo again:

Our identification with Christ, now real but hidden, will one day be manifest. As John puts it, "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and

⁹³ Moo, 250.

what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). . . . As the text in 1 John suggests, the believer's appearance "in glory," or "in a state of glory," will mean a final transformation into the "image" of Christ (see esp. Rom. 8:29) by means of resurrection (1 Cor. 15:43; cf. also Rom. 8:18; Phil. 3:20-21).⁹⁴

VI. Living in Light of Who They Are in Christ (3:5-17)

A. Put Away the Sins of the Past (3:5-11)

⁵Therefore, put to death the body parts as used for earthly purposes: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶Because of these things the wrath of God is coming [on the sons of disobedience], ⁷in which you also once walked, when you were living among them. ⁸But now you also must put away all such things: wrath, anger, malice, slander, and shameful speech from your mouth. ⁹Do not lie to each other, having taken off the old man with his practices ¹⁰and having put on the new [man], who is being renewed in knowledge [and] in accordance with [the] image of the one who created him, ¹¹where there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave [and] free, but Christ is all and is in all.

1. Given the heavenly perspective he has just urged on them and the fact they died with Christ (3:3) ("Therefore"), Paul commands them literally to put to death "the members which are on the earth." The meaning seems to be, as I have rendered it, to put to death the body parts as used for earthly purposes, purposes contrary to the heavenly perspective, which sinful purposes are then identified in the remainder of the verse.⁹⁵

2. Though Christians have died with Christ in that the old man under sin and condemnation no longer exists because of the forgiveness/reconciliation received in their union with Christ, and have died out from under the elemental spirits of the universe for that reason, we still must work in this overlap of ages to live in accordance with that truth. As Lohse says, "Let the old man, who has already died in baptism, be dead."⁹⁶ Moo states:

We who have died to "the elements of the world" (3:3; 2:20) and to the power of sin (Rom. 6:1-6) because of our union with Christ are to "become" dead to sin in the realities of everyday life. But this "putting to death" of sin is not only demanded by our incorporation into Christ; it is also empowered and effected by it. Union with Christ, because it puts us in a new relationship to sin and brings us into the sphere of the Spirit's power, *will* impact the way we live. Ultimately, then, the imperative "put

⁹⁴ Moo, 252.

⁹⁵ Wilson (p. 244) quotes Moule (115): "It seems best (although it is decidedly odd) to treat the phrase as meaning 'your limbs as put to earthly purposes.'"

⁹⁶ Lohse, 137.

to death" in this verse must be viewed as a call to respond to, and cooperate with, the transformative power that is already operative within us.⁹⁷

3. Specific sins identified

a. sexual immorality – The word *porneia* is a very broad term that includes fornication, which is consensual sexual relations between two people who are not married, and all other sexual sins defined in the Torah. *Porneia* is always emphatically forbidden (1 Thess. 4:3; Gal. 5:19-21; 1 Cor. 5:10ff, 6:9ff; 2 Cor. 12:21; Eph. 5:3). As Ernest Best notes, "*Porneia* has a wide range of meanings in relation to sexual behavior including fornication, adultery, homosexuality, prostitution, incest; 'fornication' is therefore too narrow a translation."⁹⁸ Sam Storms states:

Every Greek lexicon or dictionary of the NT is in agreement, that *porneia* refers to any form of sexual activity before or outside the relationship of monogamous marriage between a man and a woman. It can refer to pre-marital sex, adultery, homosexual practice, prostitution, bestiality, and all other expressions of sexual activity outside the marital relationship between a husband and wife.⁹⁹

b. impurity – This refers more generally to any kind or moral corruption, but in Paul's letters it is used especially of sexual sins (Rom. 1:24; 6:19; 1 Thess. 2:3, 4:7).¹⁰⁰ Indeed, it occurs frequently with the first term (2 Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3; Rev. 17:4).

c. lust – This refers to shameful and powerful sexual desires that lead to sexual sin. It is becoming obsessed with and dominated by improper sexual urges.

d. evil desire – This is longing for what is wrong, for what is ungodly. In this context, the emphasis is almost surely on misdirected sexual desire. Of course, not all sexual desire is evil. It is a natural and proper part of being human. Indeed, that desire is part of what draws men and women together in marriage, and it obviously serves in procreation. But that desire must be directed toward proper objects that it not give birth to sin.

e. greediness or insatiableness – This word has "the general sense of an 'inappropriate desire for more,' but this general sense would, of course, include the uncontrolled desire for more and greater sexual experiences."¹⁰¹ It is idolatry because the object of greed is placed at the center of one's attention and devotion. Moo comments:

⁹⁷ Moo, 255.

⁹⁸ Ernest Best, *Ephesians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 475.

⁹⁹ Sam Storms, "[The Problem of 'Porneia'](#)," retrieved on 10/2/19.

¹⁰⁰ Wilson, 245; see also, Moo, 256.

¹⁰¹ Moo, 257.

Jewish writers habitually traced the various sins of the Gentiles back to the root problem of idolatry; and especially was this true of sexual sins. Putting some other "god" in the place of the true God of the Bible leads to the panoply of sexual sins and perversions that characterized the Gentile world. Paul reflects this tradition here: sexual sins arise because people have an uncontrolled desire for more and more "experiences" and "pleasures"; and such a desire is nothing less than a form of idolatry.¹⁰²

4. Those who live this way, who live in rebellion against the holy God, are going to face his wrath on Judgment Day; they will suffer eternal condemnation. As Paul wrote in Eph. 5:5-6, *For this you must know for sure: No sexually immoral or impure or greedy person (who is an idolater) has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.* ⁶*Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on the sons of disobedience.* Moo states:

The warning of judgment in this verse therefore underscores the need to take seriously the exhortation that Christians do away with such conduct. Putting to death sins like those mentioned in v. 5 is vital because God will visit with his wrath those who continue to practice them. And putting to death sins like these is possible (even "natural") because God has given his people, through his Spirit, a new power to conform their conduct to God's holy demands.¹⁰³

5. There is a difficult textual issue regarding the phrase "on the sons of disobedience," which is why it is in brackets in the translation. Depending on which translation you use, it may not be in your text. Its absence does not change the meaning, but in that case, the final clause must be rendered in some way other than "among them."

6. They not only must put to death all sexual sins in which they participated in their pre-conversion lives, but now, having been given new life in Christ, they also must put away all such things as wrath, anger, malice, slander, and shameful speech from their mouth.

a. wrath and anger – There is little difference between them. They refer to outbursts of temper that destroy harmony in human relationships.

b. malice – This is an evil disposition toward another, an intention to harm.

c. slander – This is telling falsehoods about another person, defaming his character.

d. shameful speech from your mouth – This covers any improper speech, the kind of thing that would bring shame on one. It refers particularly to filthy

¹⁰² Moo, 258.

¹⁰³ Moo, 258.

language or abusive speech. Given that the other vices relate to personal hostility, the emphasis is probably on the latter.

7. He commands them not to lie to one another.

a. The phrase "to one another" indicates the focus is on lying within the community of faith. As the preceding vices were destructive of community, so too is lying. Still remarks, "Lying ruptures relationships, erodes trust, and capsizes community."¹⁰⁴ This does not imply, of course, that lying to those outside the community of believers is acceptable. Paul simply is highlighting the sin in the context of the community.

b. In support of his command, he suggests lying is characteristic of the "old man," the condemned sinner who was living under Satan's power, whom they had taken off in their union with Christ, and is contrary to the "new man" whom they had put on. It is inconsistent with life in Christ.

c. The "new man" who was put on at their baptism into Christ is "being renewed in (*eis*) knowledge," meaning God is progressively enlightening the Christian, the regenerated man, as to his nature and will. This is a renewal because it is the undoing of the darkness of understanding and the ignorance that befell mankind in its collective rejection of God.

(1) Paul says in Rom. 1:20-21 – ²⁰*For his invisible [attributes] are clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood by the things made, both his eternal power and deity, so that they are without excuse, ²¹because having known God, they did not glorify [him] as God or give [him] thanks, but they became futile in their reasonings and their uncomprehending hearts were darkened.*

(2) He says in Eph. 4:17-18 – ¹⁷*Therefore, I say this and solemnly declare in [the] Lord: you [are] no longer to walk as the Gentiles also walk, in [the] futility of their minds, ¹⁸being darkened in understanding, having been alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.*

d. This "new man" is also "being renewed . . . in accordance with [the] image of the one who created him."¹⁰⁵ In other words, he is being renewed to accord with, to conform to, the image of God, and we know from 1:15 that Christ is the image of God. So the Christian, the new man, is being progressively transformed into the likeness of Jesus. This is the transformation to which Paul refers in 2 Cor. 3:18 – *And we all, with*

¹⁰⁴ Still, 328.

¹⁰⁵ Sumney (p. 202) says, "Verse 10 says this renewal of the new self takes place in two ways: 'in knowledge' and 'in accord with the image of the one who created it.'" See also, Moo, 269. Against the claim that "in accordance with [the] image of the one who created him" defines the knowledge that God supplies instead of constituting a second way in which the new man is being renewed, Sumney states (p. 202, fn. 30), "it seems more probable in this context, where identity with Christ has been prominent, that the author wants to assert that the new self is renewed in the image of God."

unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from glory to glory, as from [the] Lord, [the] Spirit.

8. In this community of individuals who are being transformed toward the likeness of Christ, the old divisions, hostilities, and resentments of human fallenness no longer hold sway. In the community of the redeemed, the church of Christ, "there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave [and] free, but Christ is all and is in all." As Paul expressed it Gal. 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

a. Barbarians were those who did not speak Greek, and Scythians were extreme examples of barbarians, little better than savages (more like the modern sense of "barbarian"). The differences do not cease to exist, but they cease to be barriers.

b. Christ's sacrificial work created "one new man" not only from the diversity of Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:14-16) but from the diversity of all humanity. That is why Paul rebuked the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 11:17-32 for maintaining socioeconomic and class distinctions in the very assembly in which the Lord's Supper was shared. The fact they did so meant they had missed an essential aspect of the Lord's Supper. That ritual meal simply cannot be eaten in a segregated, class-conscious assembly. Doing so denies the very oneness, the division-transcending unity, that the Supper symbolizes (1 Cor. 10:17).

c. It is the unified diversity of the church that proclaims the Lord's glory, his multifaceted wisdom, to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:4-10). No other ruler could succeed in forging a true unity, a unity of heart, from such different groups of people, but the Lord is so great that he causes members of all people groups to lift their eyes above their differences to their shared bond in him. Only he is worthy of that division-transcending allegiance.

B. Put on the Graces of Christ (3:12-17)

¹²Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, ¹³bearing with one another and, if anyone may have a complaint against anyone, forgiving each other. Just as the Lord forgave you, so also you [should do]. ¹⁴And over all these things [put on] love, which is a uniting bond of perfection. ¹⁵Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which [peace] indeed you were called in [the] one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and instructing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in your hearts to God with gratitude. ¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or in action, [do] all things in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

1. Because they have put on the new man who is being transformed toward the likeness of Christ ("Therefore"), they have a responsibility to put on the

qualities of Christ. We have a role to play in this transformation. Moo states, "The barriers erected by our identity in this world must be overcome in reality as we live out the new relationship in the body of Christ."¹⁰⁶ Paul lists some specific qualities.

a. heart of compassion – The word "heart" here (*splanchna*) is literally "bowels" or "intestines," but since that part of the body was associated in the ancient world with emotions, it is analogous to our use of "heart." A "heart of compassion" is a deep sensitivity to the needs and sorrows of others.

b. kindness – As paraphrased by someone, this is "the art of being a dear." It involves treating people nicely and doing nice things for them.

c. humility – This refers to true humility as opposed to the showy humility techniques of the heretics. It is what Paul describes in Phil. 2:3b-4 as considering others more important than yourselves and looking not to one's own interests but also to the interests of others

d. gentleness – This is to be shown in one's approach to people. It is the opposite of harshness and rudeness.

e. patience – This is to be shown in one's reaction to people. It is "the ability not to become frustrated and enraged but to make allowances for others' shortcomings and to tolerate their exasperating behavior."¹⁰⁷

f. bearing with one another – This elaborates on the patience with which they are to clothe themselves and is a product of the general attitude conveyed by all the virtues he is urging. There is to be a mutual tolerance and "putting up with." We need that from each other if we are to live as a community of peace and harmony.

g. forgiving those against whom we may have a complaint – There occasionally will be cause for complaint against others and against us, and forgiveness must be freely given.

h. He emphasizes and drives home the need for them to forgive one another by saying, "Just as the Lord forgave you, so also you [should do]." It is utterly inappropriate for one who knows the joy and release of being forgiven to refuse to share that blessing with another. And it is presumptuous to refuse to forgive one whom Christ has already forgiven.

Excursus on Forgiveness

I think a distinction needs to be made between actual forgiveness and a *willingness and desire* to forgive. A failure to do so creates confusion.

¹⁰⁶ Moo, 275.

¹⁰⁷ Still, 332, quoting Andrew Lincoln.

God is the epitome of love, mercy, and forgiveness, and yet he does not forgive the impenitent, those who refuse to humble themselves and seek his forgiveness. It is only those who in faith repent and are baptized who receive forgiveness. (On the link between repentance and salvation, see, e.g., Lk. 5:32, 13:3, 15:10, 24:45-47; Acts 2:37-39, 3:19, 5:31, 17:30, 20:21, 26:19-20; Rom. 2:4-5; Heb. 6:1; Jas. 2:14-26; 2 Pet. 3:9.) Why is that? It certainly is not because God is reluctant to forgive. He gave his one and only Son on a cross because he so loved the world, and he wants all people to be saved. So why doesn't he forgive the impenitent?

I suggest to you that "forgiving the impenitent" is an inherent contradiction, a logical impossibility like making a square circle. Forgiveness by its nature is a response to a desire to be forgiven; that is its implied and understood predicate. It cannot be forced on someone who does not want it. It makes no more sense to speak of forgiving someone who does not want it than to speak of answering someone who has no questions or to speak of selling something to someone who has no interest in buying. Whereas forgiveness brings healing and reconciliation, one-sided declarations of forgiveness of the impenitent leave the parties estranged.

Disciples must, like God, stand ready and eager to forgive all who have wronged them, bearing no grudge or animosity toward them, but as with God, they cannot forgive in the proper sense until the wrongdoer seeks it. That is why Jesus says in Lk. 17:3-4, "*If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him.*" And that is why in the parable of the unforgiving servant in Mat. 18:23-35 the refusal to forgive is in the face of one begging for forgiveness. Why do we think we can forgive the impenitent when God does not?¹⁰⁸

Nothing that I am saying weakens or changes our responsibility as Christians to deal with our side of forgiveness when we have been wronged. We must stand ready to forgive, having turned loose whatever anger, resentment, and desires for revenge the wrong may have engendered. Those attitudes will only consume us. We are not holding a grudge or harboring resentment while we wait for the wrongdoer to repent. Rather, our heart is ready to forgive, freed from the burden of the offense, whether the wrongdoer ever seeks our forgiveness. If he does, it is our joy to bestow it and be reconciled. If he does not, we are at peace with his being in God's hands.

In this regard, I recommend to you Chris Brauns's book *Unpacking Forgiveness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008). As observed by John Piper, whom Brauns quotes in an appendix (p. 211):

But even when a person does not repent (cf. Mat. 18:17), we are commanded to love our enemy and pray for those who persecute us and do good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27). The difference is that when a

¹⁰⁸ In Mk. 11:25a ("And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone") a desire or request for forgiveness by the offending party is understood or assumed.

person who wronged us does not repent with contrition and confession and conversion (turning from sin to righteousness), he cuts off the full work of forgiveness. We can still lay down our ill will; we can hand over our anger to God; we can seek to do him good; but we cannot carry through reconciliation or intimacy.

2. Paul commands them to put on love, which quality perfectly holds together the other virtues.

a. To the extent these virtues exist in an environment of love, they are united by love in that the expression of each is regulated by and in conformity with that overarching virtue. They are united by love in the sense one might say that various state laws are united by the U. S. Constitution. They all are regulated by and in conformity with that overarching law; they all have that common grounding.

b. If humility, for example, is pursued as an end in itself, as something divorced from love, it may be maintained to the detriment of someone for whom love requires boasting. You see this dynamic in 2 Cor. 11:16-28 where Paul abandoned his humility because love for others demanded that he do so in that situation. He hated being put in that position, which is why he protests, "I am speaking like a madman" (v. 23), but the Spirit at work in Paul knew that was the best approach for the Corinthians at that time.

c. It is true, of course, that love is the quality that binds the differing members of the Christian community into a harmonious, functioning body. It is the key to experiencing the oneness of the body that is ours because we share the one Spirit (1 Cor. 12:12-13); it is the glue and the grease. But with many commentators, I think Paul is here speaking, at least primarily, about love's effect in holding *the virtues* in their proper place.

3. The peace of Christ, the peace that Christ forged between formerly estranged and even hostile parties, is to "rule in their hearts," meaning regard for that blood-bought peace is to govern their lives at a deep, heart level. After all, they were called to live out that peace in the one body, in the community of the redeemed.

4. Paul adds to that admonition, "And be thankful." Moo remarks, "Believers who are full of gratitude to God for his gracious calling (v. 15a) will find it easier to extend to fellow believers the grace of love and forgiveness and to put aside petty issues that might inhibit the expression of peace in the community."¹⁰⁹

5. Paul commands them to let the word of Christ, the message about Christ, dwell in them richly. The emphasis of "in you" is corporate; the word is to richly dwell in them as a Christian community. In Moo's words:

¹⁰⁹ Moo, 285.

Paul is urging the community as a whole to put the message about Christ at the center of its corporate experience. Specifically, Paul urges them to let it dwell richly among them. The message about Christ should take up permanent residence among the Colossians (NJB: "find a home with you"); it should be constantly at the center of the community's activities and worship. "Richly" suggests that this constant reference to the word of Christ should not be superficial or passing but that it should be a deep and penetrating contemplation that enables the message to have transforming power in the life of the community.¹¹⁰

6. This rich indwelling of the word of Christ is fostered by or involves teaching and instructing one another with all wisdom. The church is to be soaked in the word of God, the Bible, because that is the message about Christ.

7. We cannot be content with simple or superficial truths but must teach and instruct with the wisdom necessary to explore and open the riches of that revelation. That takes dedication, discipline, effort, and a willingness to learn and to be taught. Walter Elwell and Robert Yarbrough write:

Martin Niemöller, heroic Christian leader and war prisoner in Nazi Germany, told of a young German minister who said that instead of study, he trusted the Spirit for his sermons. An older colleague commented: "As for me, the Holy Ghost never spoke to me in the pulpit. Yes, I remember, he did speak to me once. When I was going down the pulpit steps after a poor sort of sermon, the Holy Ghost spoke to me. He said only three words, and what he said was, 'Heinrich, you are lazy!'" In other words, "the Holy Spirit has much more important work to do than to substitute for human indolence."¹¹¹

8. This rich indwelling of the word of Christ in the community of faith is also fostered by or involves singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in their hearts to God with gratitude.

a. This certainly refers, in the first instance, to singing to God in the assembly of the saints for worship. Pliny's report to Emperor Trajan (A.D. 111-12) says Christians in Bithynia "were in the habit of meeting before dawn on a stated day and singing alternately a hymn to Christ as to a god."

b. Some think there is a distinction, albeit unclear, between psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, but I think they are essentially synonymous, being the three most common terms for religious songs in the LXX. Pao remarks, "Regardless of how the

¹¹⁰ Moo, 286.

¹¹¹ Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 15.

terms are to be understood, they all aim at confessing God's acts that climax in the life and ministry of Christ."¹¹²

c. The singing is to be "in [their] hearts" in that it "should be 'heartfelt,' sincere, proceeding from the inner being of each singer."¹¹³ As McKnight notes, it "refers to the depth of their praise."¹¹⁴ We must be expressing what we truly believe and feel for our songs to be pleasing to God.

d. Like prayer, the singing is directed "to God" (with NEB, NRS, NJB, NIV). Though some think Paul is saying their gratitude rather than their singing is to be directed "to God," that seems unlikely. As Fee explains: "Since the dative 'to God' not only goes naturally with the participle 'singing,' *but also stands closer to it in the sentence*, it is altogether unlikely that Paul intended it to modify ἐν τῇ χάριτι (even if he did intend 'with gratitude')."¹¹⁵

e. This singing to God that is done by the assembled believers is to be done with gratitude for who he is and for all he has done in Christ. McKnight says, "They are to praise God in a state of gratitude because of the cosmic reconciliation in which they are now participating."¹¹⁶ In that singing, the message about Christ is reinforced and embedded in the community. We are affected and blessed in hearing the praises we offer to God, just as we are in hearing prayers, but we are not the direct audience of those songs. We are beneficiaries.

9. Paul may address their worship here in part because of the nature of the Colossian heresy. Dunn states:

One feature of the Colossian "philosophy" which seemingly was proving attractive, however, was its adherents' experience of worship, of a worship shared, it would appear, with the angels (see 2:18, 23). Not surprisingly, therefore, this sequence of parenthesis is rounded off by a description of the worship which the Colossian Christians should be enjoying and, by implication, should find sufficiently fulfilling – at least enough to reduce the attractiveness of the Jewish angel worship.

The elements of Christian worship commended are not altogether surprising: "the word of Christ," teaching and admonition, and singing and

¹¹² Pao, 249.

¹¹³ Moo, 283. "The phrase ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν ('in your hearts') is often connected with ἐν τῇ χάριτι, giving the sense of 'with gratitude [or grace] in your hearts' (NIV, NRSV; cf. NASB), but it most naturally modifies the participle that immediately precedes it. Thus, the phrase should read, 'singing in your hearts.'" David F. Detwiler, "Church Music and Colossians 3:16," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (July-September 2001), 364.

¹¹⁴ McKnight, 333.

¹¹⁵ Fee, 656. Sumney states (p. 227), "Singing in worship has an important communal function, but its ultimate goal is to honor God. Thus, v. 16 ends by explicitly identifying God as the recipient of these songs. In the midst of a decidedly christocentric passage, Colossians makes God the ultimate object and audience of worship."

¹¹⁶ McKnight, 333.

thanksgiving, elements which have been a feature of typical Christian worship from the beginning till now.¹¹⁷

10. These general instructions are summed up in an exhortation of universal scope, covering every aspect of life: And whatever you do, in word or in action, [do] all things in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

a. A basic principle of Christian living is that we are to speak and act "always in concert with the nature and character of our Lord."¹¹⁸ As Dunn states: "[T]his attitude of praise, worship, and thankfulness thus commended is not a merely inward attitude or confined to what happens when Christians gather for worship. The same attitude should lie behind and come to expression in everything done by Christians, both in their speech and in their actions."¹¹⁹

b. Our relationship to God embraces our entire lives. As Bruce observed, when confronted by a moral issue, the question must be asked, "What is the Christian thing to do here? Can I do it without compromising my Christian confession? Can I do it (that is to say) 'in the name of the Lord Jesus' – whose reputation is at stake in the conduct of his known followers? And can I thank God the Father through him for the opportunity of doing this thing?"¹²⁰

c. Throughout our daily lives, we are to express our thanksgiving and gratitude to God the Father. And we do so, "through Christ" because he, not some spirit beings, is the one "who has opened the way for us to approach God."¹²¹

C. Behavior in the Christian Household (3:18 – 4:1)

¹⁸*Wives, submit to [your] husbands as is fitting in the Lord.* ¹⁹*Husbands, love [your] wives and do not be bitter toward them.*

²⁰*Children, obey [your] parents in everything for this is pleasing in [the] Lord.*

²¹*Fathers, do not antagonize your children, lest they lose heart.*

²²*Slaves, obey [your] masters according to the flesh in everything, not as men-pleasers who obey for show when being watched, but in sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.* ²³*Whatever task you perform, work from [the] soul, as working for the Lord and not for men,* ²⁴*knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; you are serving the Lord Christ.* ²⁵*For the one who does wrong will be repaid [for] what wrong he did, and there is no favoritism.* **4** *Masters, give to [your] slaves what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.*

¹¹⁷ Dunn, 235-236.

¹¹⁸ Moo, 291.

¹¹⁹ Dunn, 240.

¹²⁰ Bruce (1984), 160.

¹²¹ Moo, 292.

1. Having just insisted that Christian living encompasses our entire lives, Paul addresses what that means in the context of the household, for daily, ordinary relationships. He gives instructions for each side of three different relationships: wives and husbands, children and parent/fathers, and slaves and masters.

2. He commands wives to submit to their husbands as is fitting in the Lord.

a. As I said in the class on Ephesians, it is important to keep certain truths in mind when discussing the submission of wives to husbands. Men and women are created equally in the image of God and together comprise mankind (Gen. 1:26-27, 5:1-2). In 1 Cor. 11:11-12 Paul points out that men and women are dependent on each other. In 1 Cor. 12:12-27, he makes clear that all who are in Christ are part of Christ's body and are equally precious; there are no second-class citizens in the kingdom. Peter describes husbands and wives as "co-heirs of the gracious gift of life" (1 Pet. 3:7). In terms of one's standing before God, Paul says in Gal. 3:28 that there is neither male nor female in Christ Jesus.

b. That said, in the marriage partnership of two spiritually equal human beings, a man and a woman, the man bears the primary responsibility to lead the partnership in a God-glorifying direction. As Paul says in Eph. 5:23, the husband is head of the wife as Christ also [is] head of the church. God in his sovereignty has bestowed on the husband the responsibility of headship or leadership.

(1) A wife is to submit to her husband not because of his inherent qualities, who he is, but because God has placed on him the responsibility of leadership in the family. So when the husband has finally chosen a course of action, the wife is called to support and follow that choice. She is not to resent it and is not to sabotage or undermine it.

(2) Of course, if a husband chooses a sinful course of action, the wife cannot support it. The husband's authority is from the Lord, and he has no authority to push one of Christ's disciples into sin. To follow one's husband into sin is not a submission that is "fitting in the Lord."

c. In calling the wife to accept her husband's leadership, God is not saying that the wife is inferior to, less worthy, or less capable than her husband. Husbands and wives simply have different roles or functions.

(1) We ask, "*Why* did God place the leadership responsibility exclusively on the husband (and the men in the spiritual family) rather than letting the wife lead where she is the more (or equally) capable partner?" *Why* didn't he use a merit-based system, assign the roles on the basis of individual capability? Ultimately the answer is that God is sovereign (Ps. 103:19; 1 Tim. 6:15) and that he chose to do it that way.

(2) One could just as well ask why God gave the tribe of Levi the exclusive responsibility to care for the Tabernacle, or why he gave the family of Aaron the exclusive responsibility of serving as priests. Why limit those roles to people who happen to be born in a certain lineage rather than allowing everyone equal access to the roles?

(3) And that is precisely what led to Korah's rebellion in Numbers 16. Korah, a Levite, and 250 community leaders opposed Moses and Aaron on the basis that they should have equal access to God. All Israel was holy, so no one family line should be exalted to the priestly function. It was a challenge to God's right to choose select groups for specific roles. And, as you know, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram were swallowed by the earth, and the 250 community leaders were incinerated by God. The spirit of Korah is alive and well in those who deny the leadership role of men in the family and the church. As is usually the case, they have masked their rebellion with claims of insight and enlightenment, but it is still rebellion.

d. Understand that a submissive or nonleading role need not mean an inferior status.

(1) Jesus is God; he is one in nature, being, and essence with God the Father. So the Son is not inferior to or less worthy than the Father, yet he is functionally subordinate to the Father; he willingly submits to the Father's authority. This is made explicit in 1 Cor. 11:3 and is demonstrated by the fact he was sent by the Father (Mat. 10:40, 15:24, 21:37; Mk. 9:37, 12:6; Lk. 4:43, 9:48, 10:16, 20:13; Jn. 3:34, 4:34, 5:23, 5:30, 5:36-38, 6:29, 6:38-39, 6:44, 6:57, 7:16, 7:28-29, 7:33, 8:16, 8:18, 8:26, 8:29, 8:42, 9:41, 10:36, 11:42, 12:44-45, 12:49, 13:20, 14:24, 15:21, 16:5, 17:3, 17:8, 17:18, 17:21, 17:23, 17:25, 20:21; Gal. 4:4; Heb. 3:2; 1 Jn. 4:9-10, 4:14); spoke the words of the Father (Jn. 7:16, 8:26-28, 8:38-40, 12:49-50, 14:24, 15:15); came to do the Father's will (Jn. 4:34, 5:19, 6:38, 14:30; Heb. 10:5-9); revealed the Father (Jn. 1:18, 12:45, 14:7-9, 17:6, 17:26; Heb. 1:1-4); seeks to please, glorify, and honor the Father (Jn. 5:30, 8:29, 14:13, 17:1-5); and judges only as he hears from the Father (Jn. 5:30).

(2) If Jesus, being in very nature God, can submit to the Father's authority, then certainly a wife can submit to her husband's leadership without denying her equal dignity or value. She is acting like Christ! That parallel is specifically drawn in 1 Cor. 11:3.

e. The fact the wife is not the leading partner does not mean she is a silent partner. Because her husband is a sinful and flawed human being who can make selfish, poor, and even sinful decisions, she must help him in the discharge of his leadership responsibility. This often requires her to inform, question, advise, and correct her husband. Her submission to her husband does not mean she cowers silently and occasionally utters "Yes, O Great One." She is a nonleading partner and is called to use her abilities and gifts to bless her husband and the family to the glory of God.

f. In a healthy marriage, husbands and wives can almost always come to agreement on what course of action should be taken, but there may be times when they cannot. In those situations where a mutual decision cannot be reached, the wife is called by God to yield to her husband's decision. I think James Hurley captures very well the spirit in which such decisions should be made:

The manner in which such decisions are handled is crucial. The husband may not be high-handed and stubborn, knowing that she will finally have to give way. That is not the model of Christ's headship. Neither may the wife be grudging and resentful. That is not the manner of our response to Christ. In the last analysis, when the two can devote no more time to individual and joint seeking of the grace of God to permit them to come to one mind or to be willing to yield to the other, an exchange along the following lines is in order:

Husband: "Not because I am inherently wiser or more righteous, nor because I am right (although I do believe I am or I would not stand firm), but because it is finally my responsibility before God, we will take the course which I believe is right. If I am being sinfully stubborn, may God forgive me and give me the grace to yield to you."

Wife: "Not because I believe you are wiser in this matter (I don't) or more righteous, nor because I accept that you are right (because I don't or I would not oppose you), but because I am a servant of God who has called me to honor your headship, I willingly yield to your decision. If I am wrong, may God show me. If you are wrong, may he give you grace to acknowledge it and to change."¹²²

3. Paul commands husbands to love their wives and not to be bitter toward them.

a. Love is an essential quality in the lives of all Christians, but here it is specifically required of husbands in relation to their wives. The very fact he commands it shows that it involves an act of will. Biblical love is not infatuation; it is a self-giving commitment to another person's welfare. Of course, in a marriage this love exists in a context of natural affection and sexual intimacy, but that is not its essence.

(1) As Paul explains in Eph. 5:25-30, the model for this love that husbands are commanded to have for their wives is Christ's love for the church. The husband is to view his relationship with his submissive wife, not in terms of what he can demand from her, but in terms of how he can give to her. He is not to seek to harm or exploit her, to use her for his gain, but to bless her.

(2) A husband's commitment to his wife is to be so great that there is no sacrifice he is unwilling to make for her *genuine* welfare. If something is

¹²² James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 151.

needed for her *genuine* wellbeing – for her good, her flourishing – understanding that not every want qualifies, and can be given consistently with the responsibility to lead the family in a God-glorifying direction, the husband is called to deny himself, to sacrifice his preferences and wants, in order to bless her. After all, Christ gave himself up on a cross for the church! We are to love our wives that way.

b. Paul brings out what is implicit in the command to love by commanding the husbands not to be bitter toward their wives. In other words, they are "not to act with a heart of bitterness toward their wives."¹²³ This eliminates acting harshly or abusively toward them, all that we might call "being mean" to them.

4. Children are commanded to obey their parents in everything for this is pleasing in the Lord.

a. The commanded obedience is an element of their Christian discipleship that is rooted in the Old Testament commandment to honor one's parents (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16). In Rom. 1:30 disobedience to parents is cited as a sign of Gentile depravity, and in 2 Tim. 3:2 it is cited as a sign of the evil of the last days.

b. It is pleasing "*in* the Lord" in the sense explained by Sumney: "Children must obey their parents because they live in the sphere governed by Christ (O'Brien 225). This sphere includes expectations about the proper way to conduct themselves in relation to parents. Their participation in the new life calls them to obey their parents."¹²⁴

c. The term "child" primarily denotes relationship rather than age and can be used of adults. But judging from the parallel in Eph. 6:1-4, Paul probably has in mind "older children (perhaps what we should call teenagers) who were of an age to make a personal commitment to Christ, but still young enough to be living at home with their parents."¹²⁵

5. Fathers are commanded not to antagonize their children, lest they lose heart.

a. Paul gives the duty of fathers because, as the head of the household, they have the primary responsibility for training the children. What is said, however, naturally applies to mothers as well.

b. They are prohibited from "antagonizing" their children, meaning they are to strive to avoid provoking a rebellious or resentful attitude in them.¹²⁶ This rules out excessively severe discipline, unreasonably harsh demands, abuse of authority, arbitrariness, subjecting a child to humiliation, and all forms of gross insensitivity to a

¹²³ Moo, 303.

¹²⁴ Sumney, 245.

¹²⁵ C. L. Mitton, quoted in Andrew Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 403.

¹²⁶ Moo, 307.

child's needs and sensibilities. All of that is wrong, and a Christian parent is to have nothing to do with it.

c. They are not to antagonize their children because that would lead to their children "losing heart" in the sense of giving up trying to please their parents. In other words, it leads to their children going their own way in contradiction to the right path down which the parents sought to direct them.

6. Slaves are commanded to obey their earthly masters.

a. They are to do so not only when being watched but in sincerity of heart, meaning out of an inner commitment to obey his directives. They are to be motivated to serve in this way by their fear of the Lord because he calls them to be conscientious servants.

b. In every task they perform, they are to work for their earthly master from the soul/heart, as working for the Lord rather than men, knowing that the Lord whom they thereby serve will reward them with the glorious inheritance. By the same token, the one who does wrong by defying the Lord's will in this matter will be repaid by the Lord for that wrong, that rebellion. He will not be favored over other rebels and thus be spared.

7. Paul commands masters to treat their slaves justly and fairly, knowing that they also have a Master in heaven. O'Brien states: "The motivation for this is basically the same as the slave's motive for obeying his master: both alike have a greater Master in heaven. Both owe obedience to that heavenly Lord. And thus their own relationships with each other are to be understood in the light of this."

8. The relatively large space devoted to slavery here may be attributable to the circumstances. As Moo notes, "this letter is being sent along with Onesimus, a slave who is returning to be reconciled (Paul strongly hopes) with his master, Philemon."¹²⁷

Excursus on First-Century Slavery

Slavery was a basic social institution in the ancient world. S. Scott Bartchy writes, "As many as one-third of the population of the empire were enslaved, and an additional large percentage had been slaves earlier in their lives."¹²⁸

The Bible does not endorse or assume the goodness of any slavery; it simply tolerates in a specific social context a regulated form of a certain kind of slavery. It takes ancient slavery as a fact of life and regulates people's involvement in it. Unlike marriage and parent-child relationships, Scripture nowhere suggests that slavery was ordained or

¹²⁷ Moo, 298.

¹²⁸ S. Scott Bartchy, "Slave, Slavery" in Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds., *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 1098.

instituted by God. On the contrary, slavery was a product of sinful humanity. This is evident from the fact that in 1 Cor. 7:21 Paul urges, "Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you-- although if you can gain your freedom, do so" (NIV). He would never give such advice to spouses or to parents and children. In this regard, it is probably more than coincidental that, from all indications, neither Jesus nor the Apostles owned slaves.

The seeds for slavery's dissolution were sown in texts like Philem. 16 ("no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother"), Eph. 6:9 ("Masters . . . do not threaten [your slaves]"), Col. 4:1 ("Masters, provide your slaves what is right and fair"), and 1 Tim. 6:1-2 (masters are "brothers"). (Note also that Jesus' teaching about mercy and forgiving debts [e.g., Mat. 6:12, 18:23-34] implies the inappropriateness of debt-slavery.) As has been said, where those seeds of equality came to full flower, the very institution of slavery would no longer be slavery.

Early Christians understood this implication, the significance of these "seeds." They not only demonstrated a radically different attitude toward slaves, dealing with them as they did freemen, but began the practice of freeing slaves one by one as they had opportunity. There are reports of early Christians releasing huge numbers of slaves, regarding which Philip Schaff comments:

These legendary traditions may indeed be doubted as to the exact facts of the case, and probably are greatly exaggerated; but they are nevertheless conclusive as the exponents of the spirit which animated the church at that time concerning the duty of Christian masters. It was felt that in a thoroughly Christianized society there can be no room for despotism on the one hand and slavery on the other.¹²⁹

Paul Chamberlain writes:

In AD 315, only two years after the Edict of Milan the Christian emperor Constantine took the small step of criminalizing the act of stealing children for the purpose of bringing them up as slaves. Over the next few centuries, Christian bishops and councils called for the redemption and freeing of slaves, and Christian monks freed many themselves. The effects were stunning. By the twelfth century slaves in Europe were rare, and by the fourteenth century they were almost unknown on that continent, including in England.¹³⁰

I do not doubt that the Christian principles of equality and brotherhood should have flowered more quickly into the eradication of slavery, but that was the result of Christian dullness to the implications of the gospel not to the intent or purpose of God. And, of course, even after slavery was essentially eliminated in Europe under Christian influence, the Evil Empire struck back.

¹²⁹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Vol. II*, 5th rev. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891), 353.

¹³⁰ Paul Chamberlain, *Why People Don't Believe* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 141.

European slavery was revived by the British in the seventeenth century, followed by the Spanish and the Portuguese. The abolitionist movement of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was led by Christians, people like William Wilberforce, Charles Spurgeon, John Wesley, William Lloyd Garrison, Charles Finney, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. This movement was driven by the understood implications of certain of the above biblical texts and the outright condemnation of kidnapping and slave trading in Ex. 21:16 and 1 Tim. 1:10, activities that characterized Colonial slavery.

The fact God did not forbid Christians in the first century from owning slaves but rather tolerated a regulated form of first-century slavery does not mean that was his ideal for mankind, that he was just fine with it. His ideal is brotherhood and equality, but it is possible that the world had gotten so twisted that he was willing to tolerate less than his ideal as a concession to the hardness of men's hearts, similar to what he did, through Moses, in permitting divorce (see Mat. 19:3-9).

Or maybe he tolerated it because mandating the release of slaves in that specific social context would have caused anarchy and consequent suffering as the gospel exploded across the Roman world. In other words, perhaps the thorn of slavery was embedded so deeply in the society that it needed to be removed slowly. Perhaps society first needed to be altered under Christianity's influence to be able to handle such a change without overwhelming adverse side effects, without great ancillary suffering. James D. G. Dunn states:

[S]lavery was an established fact of life in the ancient world. As many as one-third of the inhabitants of most large urban centres were slaves. The economies of the ancient world could not have functioned without slavery. Consequently, a responsible challenge to the practice of slavery would have required a complete reworking of the economic system and a complete rethinking of social structures, which was scarcely thinkable at the time, except in idealistic or anarchic terms.¹³¹

Or maybe he tolerated it because he knew that mandating its abolition in that social setting would have triggered such an immediate and violent cultural reaction that the young church would be criminalized prematurely and thereby be crushed or at least prevented from spreading in the way that it did. In that case, you can see why God might want to plan for slavery's *gradual* death through the principles of equality and brotherhood rather than lead with that ethical mandate.

In the context of this regulated form of first-century slavery that God tolerated, if release was desired it needed to be worked out on an individual basis consistent with the principle of brotherhood. But as long as the relationship remained, the slave could not take advantage of having a brother for a master, and the master could not mistreat the slave.

¹³¹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 699.

That God tolerated a regulated form of first-century slavery does not mean he would tolerate that same form of slavery in a different social context, where it was not so tied up with the functioning of the society that mandating its removal would cause economic collapse, anarchy, and consequent suffering or where the entire church's survival or its launching into the world would not be jeopardized. Neither does it mean God would tolerate other forms of slavery, a slavery different from the slavery of the first century, such as the slavery that existed in early America.

That is why those believers in early America who cited the Bible in support of Colonial slavery were wrong. They were abusing the Bible by jumping from the fact God had *tolerated* an "apple," a modified form of first-century slavery, to the claim he had thereby *endorsed* an "orange," the slavery of early America.

Slavery in the first century was a very different institution from early American slavery. Bartchy states (paragraphs are not continuous in original):

Central features that distinguish 1st century slavery from that later practiced in the New World are the following: racial factors played no role; education was greatly encouraged (some slaves were better educated than their owners) and enhanced a slave's value; many slaves carried out sensitive and highly responsible social functions; slaves could own property (including other slaves!); their religious and cultural traditions were the same as those of the freeborn; no laws prohibited public assembly of slaves; and (perhaps above all) the majority of urban and domestic slaves could legitimately anticipate being emancipated by the age of 30.

It must also be stressed that, despite the neat legal separation between owners and slaves, in none of the relevant cultures did persons in slavery constitute a social or economic class. Slaves' individual honor, social status, and economic opportunities were entirely dependent on the status of their respective owners, and they developed no recognizable consciousness of being a group or of suffering a common plight. For this reason, any such call as "slaves of the world unite!" would have fallen on completely deaf ears. (From p. 69: "The great slave rebellions, all of which were led primarily by prisoners of war between 140-70 B.C.E., never sought to abrogate slavery. Rather, these rebels sought either escape or to turn the tables by enslaving the owners.")

Furthermore, by no means were those in slavery regularly to be found at the bottom of the social-economic pyramid. Rather, in that place were those free and impoverished persons who had to look for work each day without any certainty of finding it (day laborers), some of whom eventually sold themselves into slavery to gain some job security.

Large numbers of people sold themselves into slavery for various reasons, e.g., to pay debts, to climb socially (Roman citizenship was conventionally

bestowed on a slave released by a Roman owner), to obtain special jobs, and above all to enter a life that was more secure and less strenuous than existence as a poor, freeborn person.

Slaves were used for "an enormous variety of functions in enormously different circumstances," some of which when compared to New World slavery seem astonishingly responsible: "doctors, teachers, writers, accountants, agents, bailiffs, overseers, secretaries, and sea-captains."

Since slaves represented a substantial investment by their owners . . . , they could at least expect to receive enough food to keep them alive and working. Manumission could mean the end of that security. Epictetus [a first-century philosopher], himself an ex-slave, took pleasure in pointing out that the slave who thinks only of gaining his freedom may be reduced, when he is manumitted, to "slavery much more severe than before."

For many, self-sale into slavery with anticipation of manumission was regarded as the most direct means to be integrated into Greek and Roman society. For many this was the quickest way to climb socially and financially. As such, in stark contrast to New World slavery, Greco-Roman slavery functioned as a process rather than a permanent condition, as a temporary phase of life by means of which an outsider obtained "a place within a society that has no natural obligations of kinship or guest-friendship towards him."¹³²

Andrew Lincoln writes:

Many slaves in the Greco-Roman world enjoyed more favorable living conditions than many free laborers. Contrary to the supposition that everyone was trying to avoid slavery at all costs, it is clear that some people actually sold themselves into slavery in order to climb socially, to obtain particular employment open only to slaves, and to enjoy a better standard of living than they had experienced as free persons. Being a slave had the benefit of providing a certain personal and social security.¹³³

VII. Concluding exhortation and request (4:2-6)

²Persevere in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving, ³also praying at the same time about us, that God may open to us a door for the word, [a door] to speak the mystery of Christ, on account of which I also have been chained, ⁴so that I may reveal it as it is proper for me to speak. ⁵Walk in wisdom toward those outside, making the most of

¹³² S. Scott Bartchy, "Slavery (Greco-Roman)" in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:66-70.

¹³³ Lincoln, 418.

the time. ⁶Let your speech always be with grace, having been seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

A. Prayer generally (4:2)

1. Paul commands them to persevere or continue steadfastly in prayer. Prayer is to be a regular and ongoing part of the Christian life.

2. He says they are to "be watchful" in their prayers probably meaning they are to pray with spiritual alertness, with an awareness of the battle in which they are engaged and their current situation in it. They are to be "tuned in" to see what most urgently demands the power and protection of prayer.

3. And they are to pray with thanksgiving. As Moo remarks, "A true appreciation of the believer's status, 'dead' to the world and its powers, 'alive' to God in Christ with all one's sins forgiven, and destined for glory, will inevitably produce thanksgiving."

B. Request for their prayers (4:3-4)

1. Paul requests prayers for the missionary work in which he and his coworkers are engaged. Specifically, he requests prayers that God will grant them an opening to speak the mystery of Christ, to tell about Christ's role in God's plan. And he asks that they pray that he may use the opportunity, may preach about Christ, effectively. If Paul needed such prayers, who of us dares to go without them?

2. Between asking that they pray for openings for them to preach and for his effectiveness in presenting the message, he notes that the mystery of Christ is the message for which he is currently in chains. Whatever the particular charges leveled against him, the real reason behind all the opposition to and attacks on him is that he is speaking the truth of Christ in this dark world.

C. Conduct toward outsiders (4:5-6)

1. Having requested prayers for his evangelism, Paul instructs the Colossians regarding that same end. He tells them to "walk in wisdom" toward those outside, meaning outside the Christian community. He is not talking about tactical wisdom, about details of evangelistic strategy, but is exhorting them to live before the world lives that are characterized by the spiritual wisdom that centers on Christ. They are to live as the radically new people they are in Christ, which forms the background of evangelism.

2. He calls them to make the most of the time, meaning the time in which they (and we) live, this time before the Lord's return. He is urging them to use that time,

the time God has given, to best effect. In terms of outsiders, that refers "specifically to making the most of the 'open doors' (cf. v. 3) that God gives us to evangelize."¹³⁴

3. In that regard, they are to let their speech always be with grace, probably meaning that they should speak graciously, pleasantly, or winsomely. Their speech is to have been seasoned with salt in the sense it has, by being winsome, been made "tastier," more palatable. This is the default mode for Christians. (I put it that way because some circumstances may require a different approach.) The command that they formulate their speech this way is so that they will know how to answer each person. That is what it means to know how to answer people. Moo states, "We take it, then, that Paul is calling on Christians to speak with their unbelieving neighbors and friends with gracious, warm, and winsome words – all with the purpose of being able to 'answer' unbelievers."¹³⁵

VIII. Closing (4:7-18)

A. Tychichus and Onesimus (4:7-9)

⁷Tychichus, the beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow slave in the Lord, will make known to you everything about me. ⁸I sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know the things about us and [that] he may encourage your hearts. ⁹[He is coming] with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is [one] of you. They will make known to you all the things here.

1. Tychicus is delivering the letter and is himself a kind of living letter, one who will tell them more about Paul and his work than would be practical to put in a written letter.

a. Paul describes him as "the beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow slave in the Lord." He wants them to know that he is someone who deserves a respectful reception and hearing.

b. Tychicus also delivered the Ephesian letter (Eph. 6:21). Acts 20:2-5 identifies Tychichus as being from the province of Asia (v. 4) and someone who was with Paul in Greece and went with him to Troas at the end of his third missionary journey. In 2 Tim. 4:12 Paul says that he had sent Tychichus to Ephesus, and in Tit. 3:12 he says he is planning to send either Tychichus or Artemas to Crete apparently to free the way for Titus to come to him.

2. Onesimus, of course, is the subject of the letter to Philemon. I will say more about him when we look at that letter, but here notice Paul's description of him as "the faithful and beloved brother." He notes that Onesimus is one of them, a fellow Colossian, and that he also will be a source of information about Paul's circumstances.

¹³⁴ Moo, 329.

¹³⁵ Moo, 331.

B. Greetings from Paul's companions (4:10-14)

¹⁰*Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and [so does] Mark the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome him) ¹¹and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only ones of the circumcision who are fellow workers in the kingdom of God, who became a comfort to me. ¹²Epaphras, who is one of you [and] a slave of Christ [Jesus], greets you. [He is] always struggling in [his] prayers on your behalf, in order that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. ¹³For I testify for him that he has great toil for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. ¹⁴Luke, the beloved doctor, greets you, and Demas [does also].*

1. Paul sends greetings from three Jewish coworkers, Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus.

a. Aristarchus was a traveling companion of Paul from Thessalonica in Macedonia (Acts 19:29, 20:4, 27:1). He was dragged away by the crowd during the riot in Ephesus that was incited by the silversmith Demetrius (Acts 19:29). He was with Paul in Troas on the return leg of Paul's third missionary journey (Acts 20:3-6) and was on the ship with Paul that sailed from Caesarea for Rome, the one that was wrecked in the storm (Acts 27:2). Presumably he continued on to Rome with Paul. He is or was Paul's fellow prisoner probably because he had "volunteered to share the apostle's imprisonment in order to be of help to him."¹³⁶

b. Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, refers to John Mark (see Acts 12:12, 25, 13:13, 15:36-41), the one who failed to complete Paul's first missionary journey with Barnabas (having left them in Pamphylia – Acts 15:38). Moo comments: "Mark apparently had a significant ministry in Rome, since Peter, writing from there, also mentions him (1 Pet. 5:13). And it was probably from Rome that Mark wrote the gospel bearing his name."¹³⁷ "The Colossians [had] already received instructions about a possible visit by John Mark (from a previous letter or an oral report) and Paul underscores that he may send John Mark to them in the future and they should receive him accordingly."¹³⁸

c. Jesus was a popular Jewish name until the second century when tensions between Christians and Jews made it unpopular. He probably, like many Jews, had taken a second Greek or Roman name that sounded like his Hebrew name, and that is the name by which he was known (Justus). We know nothing about him.

d. These three are the only Jewish Christians in Paul's immediate circle of co-workers. He says they became a comfort to him, probably through ministering to Paul in some way during his imprisonment.

¹³⁶ Moo, 338.

¹³⁷ Moo, 339.

¹³⁸ Bird, 123.

2. He then sends greetings from three Gentile coworkers, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas.

a. Epaphras was mentioned in 1:7-8.

(1) He is from Colossae and was the one who brought the gospel to them. He was probably converted during Paul's ministry in Ephesus. Paul previously called him their "beloved fellow slave" and "a faithful minister of Christ on [their] behalf." Here he calls him a slave of Christ [Jesus].

(2) Paul reports that Epaphras is always struggling in prayer for them. Moo remarks, "It refers to strenuous and consistent intervention with the Lord on behalf of the Colossians – prayer needed especially in light of the danger posed by the false teachers."¹³⁹ Specifically, Epaphras prays that they may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. In other words, he is praying that they may stand firm as mature Christians, being solid in their convictions about the will of God so that people like the heretics cannot prey on them.

(3) He testifies that Epaphras "has great toil" for them and for those in Laodicea and Hierapolis. (Here the function of "For" is "not to ground or explain something in v. 12 but simply to add a further thought.")¹⁴⁰ The relatively rare word he uses (*ponos*) refers to work that involves much exertion or trouble. Moo comments:

We can only speculate about why Epaphras was having so hard a time. But it is surely natural to think that the onset of the false teaching was the cause. Ministers who are faced with threats to the spiritual well-being of their charges have to devote great energy to the defense of the gospel, and such work brings great stress, out of concern for the spiritual health of the community and because of attacks from opponents. Epaphras surely needed support from Paul in the midst of such a difficult and taxing ministry.¹⁴¹

b. Luke is also mentioned in Philem. 24 and 2 Tim. 4:11. He was, of course, a traveling companion of Paul and the author of Luke-Acts.

c. Demas is also mentioned in Philem. 24 and 2 Tim. 4:10. The latter, written a few years after Colossians, reports that Demas deserted Paul and went to Thessalonica because he loved the present age.

C. Request to greet others and instruction about letters (4:15-16)

¹³⁹ Moo, 344.

¹⁴⁰ Moo, 345; see also, Pao, 316-317.

¹⁴¹ Moo, 346.

¹⁵*Greet the brothers in Laodicea and Nympha and the church in her house. ¹⁶And when this letter has been read among you, see to it that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you also read the letter from Laodicea.*

1. It seems Paul asks that all the Christians in Laodicea be greeted, and then he mentions Nympha by name because he has some acquaintance with this person. It is unclear whether Nympha refers to a man or a woman, and there is a corresponding textual issue regarding the possessive pronoun (whether it is "his" or "her" house.) Most believe it is a woman (and the pronoun is "her"), but whoever this person is, he or she hosted a house church in Laodicea.

2. "Paul intends his letters to be read out in the assembled church and thus to function as authoritative."¹⁴² The letter "*from [not to] Laodicea*" may refer to Ephesians. Paul may have instructed Tychichus to circulate Ephesians by carrying a copy from Ephesus, where Tychichus would first arrive when coming from Rome, along the same route reflected in the order of the churches in Rev. 1:11 (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea). Colossae was just southeast of Laodicea, and in that scenario, Tychichus would come to Colossae from Laodicea bringing the letters specifically to the Colossians and to Philemon and the circular letter we know as Ephesians. If it refers to some other letter, it is not one God intended to preserve.

D. Instruction to Archippus (4:17)

¹⁷*Tell Archippus, "See that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord."*

1. Archippus is mentioned on Philem. 2 and described there as a "fellow soldier" of Paul and Timothy. He may be the son of Philemon and Aphia, but whoever he is, he almost certainly has some connection with Philemon's household or to the church that meets in his home.

2. Archippus is urged to complete the specifically Christian task he had been given. The particulars of that task are unknown. Moo remarks, "All we can conclude is that Archippus had been given a particular task related to his ministry, but what that task was – preaching? teaching young converts? – we simply cannot know."¹⁴³

E. Final, personal greeting (4:18)

¹⁸*The greeting [is] by my hand, Paul's. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.*

1. Regarding Paul's personally handwritten greeting, Moo states:

¹⁴² Wright, 159.

¹⁴³ Moo, 352.

Letters in the ancient world were often dictated to a trained scribe who could form letters that were small (to conserve valuable papyrus) and neat. The practice of adding a brief note in the author's own hand to authenticate the letter is known from the Greco-Roman world generally and is done by Paul also in 1 Corinthians (16:21), Galatians (6:11), and 2 Thessalonians (3:17). (Philemon also has a signature [v. 19], but it functions slightly differently.) In the latter text, Paul even claims that it is "the distinguishing mark in all my letters," so he typically took stylus in hand even when he did not explicitly indicate it.¹⁴⁴

2. In calling them to "remember [his] chains," Paul may be reminding them of his commitment and suffering for the Lord. But he almost certainly is soliciting their prayers as well as their interest and concern.

3. He ends with a "grace wish." "Their need to continue and grow in their faith in the face of false teaching will be undergirded and stimulated by the continuing work of God's grace in their midst."¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Moo, 353.

¹⁴⁵ Moo, 353.