

Colossians

The Proclamation of Christ
that Leads to Spiritual Maturity

by Dave Hagelberg

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Scripture quotations are the author's own translation, which is intended to be a word for word translation in order to reflect the original sentence structure.

Preface

This crucial letter, which speaks so clearly about the way in which we should grow to maturity in Christ, is intensely studied by scholars whose detailed debates on the nature of “The Colossian Heresy” obscure the actual purpose of the letter, which is to help a good church grow to maturity.

We would grow to maturity in Christ, and yet we find ourselves subjected to – and even subjecting others to – rules that sound much like “Do not eat...! And do not taste...! And do not touch...!” We should be very concerned to learn that these sorts of things “have the appearance of wisdom... but they are of no value against the gratification of the flesh.” If these things do not grow us to maturity in Christ, we certainly need to learn what this letter teaches us about how that can happen in our lives.

Abbreviations Used in the Endnotes

Bible Versions

ASV	American Standard Version
ESV	English Standard Version
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
KJV	King James Version
NASB	New American Standard Version
NET	New English Translation
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
RSV	Revised Standard Version
TEV	Today's English Version

Other Abbreviations

BDAG	Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich <i>Greek Lexicon</i> (see Bibliography)
EBC	<i>The Expositor's Bible Commentary</i> (see Bibliography for volume applicable to Colossians)
LXX	Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament

Authorship

The ancients accepted this letter as a letter of Paul,¹ but some modern scholars have rejected that. They observe that even though in some ways Colossians is very similar to Paul's letter to the Ephesians, in other ways it is very different. For instance, there are 34 words that appear in Colossians but nowhere else in the entire New Testament. That is offered as evidence that Colossians is different enough from the "true" Pauline epistles that it was not written by Paul. However, similar numbers can be found for letters that these same people accept as Pauline. For instance, there are 31 words that appear in Galatians but nowhere else in the entire New Testament. So these numbers are not a strong basis upon which to claim that Paul did not write this letter.²

The observation that certain words are "missing" from Colossians is also brought forth as evidence against the letter's authenticity: the words "righteousness," "law," "salvation," and "believe" do not appear in Colossians. However, 1 Thessalonians is missing "righteousness" and "justify"; Philipians and 2 Corinthians are missing "justify"; 2 Corinthians is missing "law"; and Galatians and 1 Corinthians are missing "salvation." The absence of such words is not a strong basis upon which to claim that Paul did not write a letter.³

Theological differences are also used to "prove" that Paul did not write Colossians. One major example of this line of reasoning is that in Romans 12:4 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-21 Paul mentions the head as a member of the body, with no special honor or status. 1 Corinthians 12:21 reads "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'" However, in Ephesians 1:22; 4:15 and 5:23 and also in Colossians 1:18; 2:10, and 19 the head symbolizes Christ. Some would call this an "advanced theology," which Paul could not have written. However, that is very subjective reasoning. Could not Paul have had one intent in Romans and 1 Corinthians, and a different intent in Ephesians and Colossians? If we had a better sampling of Paul's teaching through the years – if for instance we could examine every sermon he preached and every letter he wrote – then we would be able to describe any progress or theological development through his life. However, with such a small sample of his work, these so-called "theological developments" are not a strong basis upon which to claim that Paul did not write Colossians.

¹ According to O'Brien (p. xli), Irenaeus, *Adv Haer* 3.14.1; Tertullian, *De Praescr Haer* 7; and Clement of Alexandria, *Strom* 1.1 all accept Colossians as a letter of Paul's. The letter is accepted as a part of the canon by Marcion, and it is included in the Muratorian canon.

² O'Brien, pp. xlii-xliii.

³ O'Brien, pp. xlii-xliii.

The author of this letter, Paul the apostle, was a church planter, a leader of a church planting team, and then a coach of church planters. He traveled, he wrote, and he spoke to support church planting. Even while he was under house arrest in Rome, he was delighted to see the progress the gospel was making there in Rome, because of his bonds. It is that coach of church planters who wrote a letter to Colossae to help them grow to maturity in Christ.

Place and Date of Writing

From passages like Ephesians 3:1; 4:1; Philippians 1:7, 13, 14; Colossians 4:3, 10, 18; Philemon 1, 9, 13, and 23 we understand that these four letters were written while Paul was a prisoner. The connections between Colossians and Philemon,⁴ and the many similarities between Ephesians and Colossians, suggest that those three letters were written during the *same* imprisonment. It is more difficult to demonstrate that Philippians was written during the same imprisonment as the others. Indeed, in terms of content Philippians stands out from the others, perhaps because of the special relationship that Paul had with them (they had been supporting him with prayer and finances for more than ten years) and the distinct purpose of that letter.

Even so, the idea in Philippians that we need to rejoice in, glory in, and boast in Christ is closely related to Colossians 3:1, 2, 16, and 17 where we read “keep seeking the things above, where Christ is.... Concentrate on the things above.... Let the word of Christ dwell among you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to the Lord... giving thanks to our God and Father through Him.”

Another distinctive in Philippians is found in Philippians 1:20-24 and 2:17. There Paul wrote like a man that was threatened with death, but the other three letters do not have the same tone of impending death. If it was the same imprisonment – and it does not have to be – then either the threat of death significantly increased or decreased during that imprisonment, or Paul only felt it was appropriate to speak of such a personal concern to his ministry partners in Philippi.

There are two rather weak factors that link Philippians with Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon:

1. Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; and Philemon 1:1 all have Timothy as co-author. That is not a very strong link because 2 Corinthians also gives Timothy as

⁴ In both Col. 4:10-12 and Philem. 23-24 Epaphras, Mark, and Aristarchus are with Paul. Onesimus is from Colossae (Col. 4:9), and is the runaway and now believing slave on whose behalf Paul writes to Philemon.

co-author, and Paul, Silas and Timothy are listed as co-authors of 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

2. Paul only uses the word “chains”⁵ concerning himself in Philippians (four times) Colossians (once in 4:18), Philemon (twice), and 2 Timothy (once). Of course the use of the word in 2 Timothy weakens the strength of this evidence.

So, it does seem likely that those four letters were all written from the same imprisonment, but this cannot be stated with certainty.

Concerning the matter of the location of that imprisonment, we know that Paul was imprisoned for one night in Philippi, for two years in Caesarea, and for about three years in Rome. In 2 Corinthians 11:23 Paul compares himself with the false apostles, writing “I have... been in prison more often....” These words suggest that he suffered from other imprisonments as well. In AD 96 Clement of Rome wrote that Paul was imprisoned seven times.⁶ So it is quite possible that besides the imprisonments we know of in Caesarea and in Rome Paul could have written Colossians (and with it Philemon and Ephesians) during some other imprisonment, assuming one of the other imprisonments, though never detailed in the New Testament record, was long enough to allow for those three letters to be written. That does seem to be a modest enough assumption. If however, the three letters were written during a known imprisonment, Rome seems to be slightly more likely than Caesarea, for the following reasons:

1. Some manuscripts⁷ have a note in them that the letter was “written from Rome by Tychicus and Onesimus.” Although those are not the authors in Colossians 1:1, this does seem stronger evidence than the note in the Marcionite prologue to the letter that says “the Apostle already in fetters writes to them from Ephesus.”⁸

2. Eusebius⁹ mentions that Aristarchus was Paul’s fellow prisoner in Rome. Since he is Paul’s fellow prisoner while he wrote Colossians, that implies that Colossians was written in Rome.¹⁰

3. Eusebius and Acts 28:16 and 30 suggest that in Rome Paul would have had enough personal freedom to have a secretary to help him write the letter, and

⁵ δεσμός/*desmos*

⁶ Clement of Rome, *ad Cor* 5.6, cited by O’Brien, p. lii.

⁷ K, L, and others.

⁸ Quoted in O’Brien, p. lii.

⁹ *History*, 2.22.1

¹⁰ O’Brien, p. l.

to have contact with people like Timothy, Mark, Justus, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas.¹¹

We know that Onesimus fled from his Philemon's home in Colossae to the city where Paul was imprisoned. It was about 900 miles (or 1400 kilometers) from Colossae to Rome, whereas it was only 100 miles (or 160 kilometers) from Colossae to Ephesus. (Those are the distances in a straight line, of course the actual distances of those journeys would be considerably farther.) Some argue that 900 miles was too far for Onesimus to flee, that he would be arrested along the way, and it would be too expensive. Others say he would have robbed his master first, and would seek the anonymity of Rome, not the nearness of Ephesus. Likewise some say that Paul wanted Philemon to prepare a guest room for him, which would have been too casual a statement if he was talking about the 900 mile journey from Rome to Colossae, but very reasonable if he was talking about the 100 mile journey from Rome to Ephesus. However, Paul was clearly asking and expecting a great deal of Philemon, and staying as his guest could have become a significant compliment or even a mock threat in their relationship. These issues of distances are very hard to assess.

Likewise some would argue that there is significant "theological development" between the time 1 Corinthians and Romans were written and the time Colossians and Ephesians were written, particularly concerning Christ as the Head of the church. Accepting this idea might influence when and where Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon were written, but see the discussion of this issue in the Authorship section above. As noted there, just because Paul used the body and members metaphor in 1 Corinthians and Romans but was silent about the idea that the Head is Christ, that does not mean he was unaware of the idea when he wrote 1 Corinthians and Romans. It may just mean that the idea did not particularly support the point he wanted to make. If these issues of "theological development" are subjective even in normal literature, how much more subjective are they when we believe that the content of these letters was revelation from God? Accepting the idea of "theological development" suggests (but does not quite require) the idea that Paul himself was coming up with the profound theology that he presented in his letters. It suggests that it took Paul many years of theological reflection to arrive at all those theological ideas. That sort of reasoning allows little space for the revelatory work of the Holy Spirit.¹²

¹¹ O'Brien, p. 1.

¹² For example, in his introductory remarks about the high Christology of Colossians, Moule (pp. 5-6) wrote, "it may have taken St Paul some time to reach so articulate an expression of these convictions as is found in Colossians...."

If indeed Paul wrote the Prison Epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon) from the house arrest in Rome that is described in Acts 28:16-31, then these letters can all be dated sometime in AD 60-62. In AD 62 Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis were damaged by a serious earthquake¹³ which is unmentioned in this letter. That suggests that at least Colossians was written before the earthquake.

The above discussion contains many assumptions and possibilities, with little definitive fact. There simply is not enough textual or historical information to bring certainty to this question, but it seems fair to say that Colossians (with Ephesians and Philemon) may easily have been written during some otherwise unknown imprisonment, but *if* they were written during a known imprisonment, then they, with Philippians, were likely written while Paul was under house arrest in Rome, which was around AD 60-62.¹⁴ However, the reader should be wary of any conclusions about the meaning of a particular text if it is dependent upon any particular theory about when and where the letter was written.

¹³ Barth, p. 485, cites *Sib* XII, 286 and Eusebius (*Chron* II, 154) for this.

¹⁴ See "Place and Date of Writing" in this author's commentary, *Philippians: An Ancient Thank You Letter*.

The City of Colossae

In what was then the Roman province of Asia, now part of western Turkey, the cities of Colossae,¹⁵ Laodicea, and Hierapolis were all located near the upper reaches of the Lycus River, which was a southern tributary of the Meander River.¹⁶ Colossae was located in the hills south of the river valley, overlooking the valley.

In the fifth century BC Herodotus said Colossae was “a great city of Phrygia,”¹⁷ and in the fourth century BC Xenophon said it was “a populous city, wealthy and large.”¹⁸ Its wealth was primarily from its wool production. The valley was good place for sheep, whose wool would be dyed a distinctive deep red color. However, the city of Colossae must have experienced a serious decline because the geographer Strabo, who died around 25 AD, said that it was a “small town.”¹⁹ In contrast he also said that Laodicea prospered during the first century BC.²⁰ We know from Revelation 3:17 (“You say, ‘Rich I am; I have become rich; and I have no needs’”) that in the later part of the first century AD Laodicea was physically wealthy. Likewise Strabo²¹ wrote that Hierapolis prospered during the time our letter was written, particularly because of the healing benefits of its hot springs, which are today a world famous tourist destination known as Pamukkale, meaning “Cotton Castle.”

So it appears that Colossae had been declining, while the newer cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis had prospered. Colossae was probably the least significant city to receive a New Testament letter. In contrast, Ephesus, which received a very similar letter, was second only to Rome in its wealth, status, and fame. The site of Colossae is known but not yet excavated. Just as a little known village named Bethlehem in a little known Roman province experienced the greatest miracle, the birth of the Messiah, so a little known and declining city named Colossae

¹⁵ The city of Colossae was normally spelled Κολοσσαί/*Kolossai*, but it was sometimes also spelled Κολασσαί/*Kolassai* or Κολασσαί/*Kolasai*. In the various Greek manuscripts of this letter, the first two of those spellings are used.

¹⁶ The Meander River was famous for its turns and twisting. We do get the English word “meander” from the name of that river.

¹⁷ *History* 7.30.1.

¹⁸ *Anabasis* 1.2.6.

¹⁹ Strabo, *Geography* 12.8.13. Strabo was born in Pontus, about 410 miles (660 km) from Colossae. His *Geography* was a 17 volume work.

²⁰ Strabo, *Geography* 12.8.16.

²¹ Strabo, *Geography* 12.8.16.

received the New Testament letter which most thoroughly explains the cosmic glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Congregation in Colossae

Much has been written about this congregation, though little can be known with certainty. In the discussions that follow, biblical certainty is highlighted, historical probability is noted, and speculation is avoided.

The Origin of the Congregation

After explaining some things about Paul's ministry in Ephesus, Acts 19:10 tells us that the daily discussions in Tyrannus's lecture hall "went on for two years, so that all living in the province of Asia, whether Jews or Greeks, heard the word of the Lord Jesus." Also, as Demetrius the silversmith was stirring up the crowd in Ephesus against Paul, he said in Acts 19:26 "And you see and hear how not only in Ephesus but in almost all of the province of Asia this Paul by persuading has turned aside a considerable crowd of people, saying that those made by hand are not gods."

Further, in Acts 20:31 Paul reminds the Ephesian elders that he continually exhorted them for three years. This seems to mean that Paul used Ephesus as a base for three years starting in the summer of AD 53, and he, or teams he sent, went throughout the province of Asia planting churches. Since Paul called Epaphras his "beloved fellow slave, who is a faithful servant of Christ for you" in Colossians 1:7, it seems likely, though it cannot be stated with certainty, that Epaphras was a part of those church planting efforts that were launched from Ephesus into the entire province. If so, then the church might have been founded in AD 51-54. If as suggested above, this letter was written in AD 60-62, then the letter was written anywhere from six to eleven years later. However as noted above, there are a number of assumptions behind this statement, so these dates are far from certain.

We do not know whether Epaphras planted the church there as a part of a team, or singlehandedly, but Paul mentions no other Christian workers in Colossae, with the possible exception of Archippus in 4:17. According to Philemon 23, Epaphras was imprisoned with him when Paul wrote that letter.

Social Characteristics of the Congregation

Ethnically, the congregation would have consisted of the local Phrygian inhabitants and Greek settlers. Because there were certainly Jews in the region,²² they may have been in the congregation, but the evidence of that is indecisive.²³

Alexander the Great's victory in the Battle of Granicus in BC 334 ended Persian control and opened up the area to Greek influence. That would have brought some Koine Greek speakers into the area, but Phrygian, the local language, would have survived as well.²⁴ If there were any Jews in the congregation, they might have spoken Aramaic among themselves, and at least the more educated would have been able to read the Hebrew scriptures.

Although we do not know much in particular about the members of the congregation, this was not a major educational center or an intellectual center like Athens. It is difficult to even imagine that they were a congregation of scholars, knowledgeable in Jewish Wisdom literature and "incipient Gnosticism." They were farmers, housewives, slaves, tradesmen, merchants, and perhaps a few teachers. Some of them may have been Jews, and there might even have been a rabbi among them. This letter was written to a normal small-town congregation

²² Josephus (*Ant* 12.147-53) says that two thousand Jewish families were moved from Mesopotamia to Lydia and Phrygia by order of Antiochus III about 250 years prior to the writing of this letter. Perhaps it was their descendants' whose temple tax was seized by the Roman governor 120 years prior to this letter. Enough gold was seized in the district of Laodicea to be the standard temple tax of a population of 11,000 free adult male Jews (Bruce, "Jews and Christians in the Lycus Valley," pp. 4-7 and O'Brien, p. xxvii). However, the presence of Jews in the area does not prove that they were in the congregation.

²³ Against the idea that there were any Jews in the congregation, O'Brien (pp. xxviii-xxix) mentions Col. 1:12, 21, 27; 2:13; and 3:5-7. Let us consider those five passages and how much they say about the presence of Jews in the congregation. If Col. 1:12 and 21 were in a Jewish-Gentile context, they would support the idea that there were no Jews in the congregation, but the context is saved-unsaved, not Jewish-Gentile. Col. 1:27, which reads "to whom God wanted to make known how great are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ among you, the hope of glory" does strongly suggest that the congregation was predominantly Gentile. Col. 2:13, which reads "and you being dead in your transgressions and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive with Him..." would have been an odd expression to use to a predominantly Jewish congregation. To say that the list of sins in Col. 3:5 are Gentile in nature is dubious, to say the least. That list is human and universal. The use of the word "idolatry" there should not be taken to mean they worshipped images of gods – the point is that greed (perhaps a universal human sin) is idolatry, not that they were pagan idolaters. O'Brien also suggests that the scarcity of OT allusions or references to the reconciliation between Jew and Gentile imply a Gentile audience. Both of those are arguments from silence. One could as well claim that the reconciliation issue needed to be developed in Ephesus because of divisions in that congregation, but the congregation in Colossae was healthy in that regard. Col. 3:11 and 4:11 make it clear that the congregation should know about Jewish believers in Christ. Thus the most we can say with confidence is that the congregation was predominantly Gentile, though there may have been some Jews in it.

²⁴ Acts 14:8-18 gives us a little picture of the multi-lingual environment that Paul worked in. In Acts 14:11 we read, "But the crowds, seeing what Paul had done, shouted in the Lycaonian language saying, 'The gods, made like men, have come down to us!'" Paul and his team would have been speaking Koine Greek, and they would have been easily understood. However, surprised that these "gods" were among them, the people in the crowd spoke to one another in their mother tongue, which would have been incomprehensible to Paul. Quite possibly the people of Colossae were similarly bilingual or multi-lingual. Local languages and dialects tend to survive conquests.

like that. Doubtless from time to time varieties of false teachers would come through town bringing in their teachings. By various means they would try to gather followers. Paul knew that the believers in Colossae would, sooner or later, be targeted by these religious and philosophical peddlers, and by sending this wonderful letter he knew that the congregation would be equipped with all they needed to know in order to face any and all sorts of false teachers.

Spiritual Characteristics of the Congregation

As noted above, it is important that our conclusions be established upon what can be known with certainty because of biblical texts, rather than the opinions of scholarly tradition. So, here are all the comments Paul gives about the spiritual status of the Colossian congregation. First all the positive things he wrote about them are listed:

- “holy ones and faithful brothers in Christ” (1:2)
- “having heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and your love for all the holy ones” (1:4)
- “which is on account of the hope laid up for you in the heavens, which you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel” (1:5)
- “which has come to you – just as in all the world – and is bearing fruit and increasing just as also in you from the day you heard and came to understand the grace of God in truth” (1:6)
- “just as also you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow slave, who is a faithful servant of Christ for you” (1:7)
- “and who told us of your love in the Spirit” (1:8)
- “I am... rejoicing and seeing your orderliness and the strength of your faith in Christ” (2:5)

So they are faithful brothers, they have faith in Christ, they have love for all the holy ones, the gospel has been bearing fruit and increasing among them from the day they first heard and understood the grace of God, they understood the grace of God in truth, they learned the gospel from a faithful servant of Christ, they have love in the Spirit, and their orderliness and the strength of their faith in Christ give Paul joy! With all that it is not at all surprising to see in 1:3 that Paul thanked God for them.

In stark contrast with all those positive statements, only 2:20 *might* be interpreted as a rebuke against the Colossians: “If you died with Christ to the fundamental principles of the world, why, as if living in the world, are you submitting to its decrees...?” However, as explained in the discussion of 2:20 in this commentary, the present tense of the word “submit” might just as easily be seen as a simple present, so that the meaning is, “If you died with Christ to the

fundamental principles of the world, why, as if living in the world, submit to its decrees...?” Interpretive decisions like this need to be made in light of the context. The contextual statements on the spiritual life of the Colossian congregation are listed above, and they are overwhelmingly positive. Therefore the best interpretation of 2:20 is not a rebuke, but a rhetorical question that stresses the absurdity of submitting to religious rules for spiritual growth when we have all died with Christ. The verse should be translated, “If you died with Christ to the fundamental principles of the world, why, as if living in the world, submit to its decrees....”

In fact there are no clear statements of any spiritual failure or error in the congregation. So even if the details about the founding of the church in Colossae are murky, the congregation’s faith and love are portrayed as exemplary. They had not fallen into any heresies.²⁵

All that is not to say that there were no doctrinal dangers in the world around the congregation. Certainly they were – or would be – threatened by false teaching. Such threats, whether present or future, were addressed by Paul in passages like 2:4, 8, and 16-23. Paul was writing not to cure but to prevent.

Scholars that insist – despite the commendations of 1:2, 4, 6, 8; and 2:5 – that the congregation in Colossae has succumbed to some particular and intriguing false teaching are in effect unjustly accusing the Colossian congregation of being as deceived as the Galatians! If indeed the Colossians were “faithful brothers,” a much more likely scenario is simply that while they were together there in house arrest in Rome, Epaphras saw Paul writing and asked if his own beloved congregation could get a letter to coach them into even more faithfulness and fruitfulness. Alternatively, Paul listened to Epaphras talk about his congregation, and decided to write them, as he had written to the Ephesians, to encourage them to greater faithfulness and fruitfulness in a world that was certainly filled with seductive and ruinous ideas.

False Teachers in the Colossians’ World

Certainly there were false teachers in the environs of Colossae – false teachings destructive to Christian doctrine and Christian maturity have abounded throughout the ages. As an evangelist and church planter, Paul had years of interaction with many people concerning spiritual and philosophical issues. He would remember many of those conversations; he may even have studied some of the more common religious and philosophical views that he was coming up against in his church planting work, just as missionaries today study the culture

²⁵ Morna D. Hooker (pp. 315-331) holds this view. Barth (p. 384) agrees.

and beliefs of the people they work among. We learn from Acts 22:3 that Paul was trained in the Law by Gamaliel so he certainly knew Judaism well. He was probably amazed at the variety of religious and philosophical options that he came across in his travels. He would hear expressions like “all the fullness,” “the worship of angels,” “humility of mind,” and “severe treatment of the body”²⁶ from all sorts of religions and philosophies, and he knew all about “holy days,” “new moon festivals,” and “Sabbaths” from Judaism. He would even have heard the same expressions being used by different religions and philosophies with different meanings. He knew that all of those teachings were false. He knew the damage these false religions and philosophies could do in people’s lives, drawing them away from simple devotion to Christ. Paul opposed them all, and he did that with a selection of those catch phrases chosen from the all too many false religions and philosophies that he had already encountered and that they too might encounter.

Many scholars²⁷ have presented their suppositions about the false teachings which they say Paul was responding to in Colossians. Some hold that the false doctrines were one of several known religious or philosophical systems, like magic doctrines,²⁸ Jewish apocalyptic teachings,²⁹ mystical Jewish teachings, incipient Gnosticism, Neopythagorean Hellenistic teachings, or teachings from the Greek mystery religions. Others try to reconstruct a now unknown set of teachings which assembles all the the various catch phrases that Paul uses.³⁰ The amazing diversity of these opinions suggests that Paul was not targeting one specific set of false doctrines, but all the false doctrines that would assail Christ’s

²⁶ O’Brien (p. xxxii) suggests these as popular “catch phrases” or religious clichés.

²⁷ According to House (p. 46), J.J. Gunther says 19th- and 20th-century scholars came up with 44 opinions on the identity of these opponents (J. J. Gunther, *St. Paul’s Opponents and Their Background: A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings*, Novum Testamentum Supplement, Leiden: Brill, 1973, pp. 3-4.)

²⁸ Arnold, p. 243.

²⁹ Sappington, *Revelation and Redemption at Colossae*.

³⁰ House (p. 59) is one example of this approach. He wrote: “The most one can say of the error in Colossians is that it was a syncretism of Jewish, Gentile, and Christian features that diminished the all-sufficiency of Christ’s salvation and His personal preeminence.” According to O’Brien (pp. xxxv-xxxvii) other scholars offer much more specific descriptions of the false teachers that Paul was writing about. Bornkamm hypothesizes “a syncretism of Gnosticized Judaism and pagan elements.” Lyonnet hypothesizes “Judaizing Syncretism,” and Francis hypothesizes a “Jewish Christian mystical asceticism.” Dibelius must have thought of Paul as a very tolerant apostle, since he is generous in his praise of a congregation that supposedly “joined with their non-Christian teachers in a cultic life given over to the powers and were initiated into a cosmic mystery devoted to the elements,” believing that “initiation and submission to the powers would perhaps open the way to Christ.” In effect these scholars read Colossians and gather clues as to the nature of the false teaching, and then postulate an unknown religion or philosophy that matches those clues. Such a procedure gives far too much credence to a present day scholar’s ability to take a few clues and understand a whole religious system. This procedure would be like a blindfolded man from a far removed place and time taking five things from someone’s desk drawers, and then from those clues confidently assembling a portrait of the kind of man that worked at that desk. More importantly, would the Apostle Paul have been able to say to any of the congregations described by these scholars that he was “rejoicing and seeing your orderliness and the strength of your faith in Christ”?

church.³¹ For example, Paul wrote “If you died with Christ to the fundamental principles of the world, why, as if living in the world, submit to its decrees – ‘Do not eat! And do not taste! And do not touch!’” Those are not specific commands quoted from a particular set of false teachings. They are better described as a “template” which the reader is expected to use in any particular context. If Judaizers were present they would complete the template by saying “Do not eat pork.” Other religious teachers would have their own particular dietary restrictions with which they would complete that template. Others would complete “Do not touch...” with their prohibition concerning physical contact.

To conclude, it seems that Paul wrote this letter to a very healthy congregation to help them grow spiritually. Part of how he does that is by equipping them with principles they would need to understand how to face false teachers and false teachings. Understanding those principles, the congregation would be ready to withstand any sort of false teaching that would assail them.

³¹ Myrna Hooker (pp. 315-331) takes this position, but F.F. Bruce dismisses her view in his discussion of Col. 2 by saying “Paul’s language, however, points to a rather specific line of teaching against which his readers are warned” (“The Colossian Heresy,” p. 195) without actually pointing out which verses of chapter 2 do that, and in what way. Barth (p. 384) follows Bruce in this, although Barth agrees with Hooker that there was no heresy *inside* the Colossian congregation.

The Purpose of the Letter

The purpose of this letter, and indeed Paul's life purpose, was to proclaim Christ so that the readers can grow to maturity by knowing and loving Him. It is indeed by knowing and loving Him that believers can grow to maturity. In Colossians Paul emphasizes that knowing and loving Him must never be replaced by obedience to any list of religious rules. Rules do not empower spiritual growth. Neither does philosophy, severe treatment of the body, false humility, or great detail about visions.

That proclamation is partly formed in warnings against such false teachers and sin, and partly in teachings about who Christ is and what He has done for us. If it is understood in the mind and allowed to touch the heart, that proclamation empowers the grateful believer to live in a manner worthy of Christ, so that at the end of the age they can be presented to God as mature followers of Christ.

These five passages all demonstrate this single purpose in various forms.

1:9-12 Paul's prayer for the congregation

Therefore we also, from the day we heard, have not ceased praying for you and asking so that you might be *filled with the understanding* of His will *in all wisdom and spiritual insight, so that you might walk worthily of the Lord*, pleasing to Him in all things, in every deed bearing fruit, and *increasing in your understanding of God, with all power being strengthened* according to the might of His glory in all endurance and patience, *with joy giving thanks* to the Father who has made us fit for a share of the inheritance of the holy ones in the light.

1:22-23 Christ's purpose in the Cross for believers

...but now He has reconciled you by the body of His flesh through His death *to present you holy and unblemished and blameless before Him*, if indeed you remain in the faith, established, steadfast, and not moved from the hope of the gospel which you have heard, which is preached in all creation under heaven, of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

1:28-29 Paul's purpose in ministry

We proclaim Him, warning everyone and teaching everyone *with all wisdom, so that we might present everyone mature in Christ Jesus*, for which I toil, struggling by the working of the One working in me with power.

2:1-2 Paul's purpose with the Colossians and others he has not met

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and those in Laodicea and as many as have not seen my face in person, *so that their hearts might be*

encouraged, being drawn together in love and into all the riches of the certainty of insight, into understanding of the mystery of God, even the Father and the Christ....

4:12 Epaphras' purpose in his prayers for the Colossians
Epaphras, who is one of you, greets you. He is a slave of Christ, always struggling for you in prayer, *so that you might stand mature and fulfilled in all the will of God.*

Translation

1:1 Paul, apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother
1:2 To those in Colossae, holy ones and faithful brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
1:3 We thank the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, always praying for you,
1:4 having heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and your love for all the holy ones,
1:5 which is on account of the hope laid up for you in the heavens, which you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel,
1:6 which has come to you – just as in all the world – and is bearing fruit and increasing just as also in you from the day you heard and came to understand the grace of God in truth,
1:7 just as also you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow slave, who is a faithful servant of Christ for you,
1:8 and who told us of your love in the Spirit.
1:9 Therefore we also, from the day we heard, have not ceased praying for you and asking so that you might be filled with the understanding of His will in all wisdom and spiritual insight,
1:10 so that you might walk worthily of the Lord, pleasing to Him in all things, in every deed bearing fruit, and increasing in your understanding of God,
1:11 with all power being strengthened according to the might of His glory in all endurance and patience,
1:12 with joy giving thanks to the Father who has made us fit for a share of the inheritance of the holy ones in the light.
1:13 It was He that delivered us out of the authority of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son He loves,
1:14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.
1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation,
1:16 because by Him all things were created, in the heavens and on the earth, the seen and the unseen, whether thrones, whether lordships, whether rulers, whether authorities, all things were created through Him and for Him,
1:17 and He is before all things, and by Him all things hold together,
1:18 and He is the Head of the Body, the church. He is Source, Firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself might be first among all things,
1:19 because in Him all the fullness was pleased to dwell,
1:20 and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, making peace through the blood of His cross – through Him – whether the things on earth or the things in the heavens.
1:21 And you formerly were estranged and hostile in your minds as you showed by your evil deeds,
1:22 but now He has reconciled you by the body of His flesh through His death to present you holy and unblemished and blameless before Him,

1:23 if indeed you remain in the faith, established, steadfast, and not moved from the hope of the gospel which you have heard, which is preached in all creation under heaven, of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

1:24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you and in my flesh I fulfill what is lacking in the affliction of Christ for His body, which is the church,

1:25 of which I myself have become a servant, as God has arranged it, having given to me, for you, to fulfill the Word of God,

1:26 the mystery hidden away from the ages and from the generations – but now revealed to His holy ones,

1:27 to whom God wanted to make known how great are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the nations, which is Christ among you, the hope of glory.

1:28 We proclaim Him, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we might present everyone mature in Christ Jesus,

1:29 for which I toil, struggling by the working of the One working in me with power.

2:1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and those in Laodicea and as many as have not seen my face in person,

2:2 so that their hearts might be encouraged, being drawn together in love and into all the riches of the certainty of insight, into understanding of the mystery of God, even the Father and the Christ,

2:3 in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden.

2:4 Now I am saying this lest anyone deceive you by persuasive words.

2:5 For if I am absent in the flesh, I am, however, with you in spirit, rejoicing and seeing your orderliness and the strength of your faith in Christ.

2:6 Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him,

2:7 rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving.

2:8 Watch out lest anyone take you captive through a philosophy, an empty deception according to human tradition, according to the fundamental principles of the world, and not according to Christ,

2:9 because in Him dwells all the fullness of deity bodily,

2:10 and in Him you have been filled, in Him who is the head over every ruler and authority.

2:11 In Him also you were circumcised with a circumcision accomplished without hands, by the disarming of the sinful body – the flesh, the circumcision that Christ accomplishes,

2:12 being buried with Him in baptism, in whom also you were raised through faith in the power of the God that raised Him from the dead,

2:13 and even though you were dead in your transgressions and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive with Him, forgiving us all our transgressions.

2:14 He erased the record of debts against us, with its decrees, which was hostile to us, and He lifted it up out of our midst, nailing it to the cross.

2:15 Disarming the rulers and authorities, He publicly shamed them, displaying them in a triumphal procession, by the cross.

2:16 Therefore do not let anyone judge you concerning eating or drinking or in the matter of a holy day or a new moon festival or Sabbaths,

2:17 which were a shadow of the things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

2:18 Let no one rule against you, taking pleasure in humility of mind and the worship of angels, going into things he has not seen, puffed up in vain by his fleshly mind.

2:19 That kind of person is not holding fast to the Head, from Whom the whole body, supported and knit together through the joints and ligaments, grows with growth from God.

2:20 If you died with Christ to the fundamental principles of the world, why, as if living in the world, submit to its decrees –

2:21 “Do not eat...! And do not taste...! And do not touch...!”

2:22 (which is all headed for decay in being consumed) according to the commands and teachings of men?

2:23 These sorts of things have the appearance of wisdom in self-imposed worship and humility of mind and the severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value against the gratification of the flesh.

3:1 Therefore, since you have been raised with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

3:2 Concentrate on the things above, not on the things upon the earth.

3:3 For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

3:4 When Christ – who is our life – is revealed, then you also with Him will be revealed in glory.

3:5 Therefore put to death whatever of you is earthly: sexual immorality, filth, passion, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry;

3:6 on account of which the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience.

3:7 You also used to walk among them, when you were living among them.

3:8 But now you too must take off all these things: wrath, anger, evil, slander, obscene speech from your mouth.

3:9 Do not lie to one another, having stripped off the old man – with its deeds –

3:10 and having put on the new man, who is being renewed into understanding according to the image of its Creator,

3:11 where there is not Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, foreigner, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all, and in all.

3:12 So as the chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience,

3:13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, if anyone has a complaint against someone; just as Christ forgave you, so also you should forgive.

3:14 But upon all these put on love, which is the perfect bond.

3:15 And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, into which also you were called in one body – and be thankful.

3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell among you richly in all wisdom, teaching and warning one another as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to the Lord.

3:17 And whatever you might do, in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to our God and Father through Him.

3:18 Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

3:19 Husbands, love your wives, and do not become bitter against them.

3:20 Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is pleasing in the Lord.

3:21 Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

3:22 Slaves, in all things obey those that are your masters according to the flesh, not for appearance' sake as pleasers of men, but in singleness of heart, fearing God;

3:23 And whatever you might do, work at it wholeheartedly, as for the Lord, and not for men,

3:24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of an inheritance, for you serve the Lord Christ as slaves.

3:25 But the one doing evil will be paid back for the evil he has done, and there is no favoritism.

4:1 Masters, provide your slaves with what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in the heavens.

4:2 Persist in prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving,

4:3 praying at the same time also for us, that God would open up for us a door for the Word, to speak the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in chains,

4:4 so that I might make it known as I ought to tell it.

4:5 Walk in wisdom before those outside, redeeming the time.

4:6 Let your conversation always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you must give an answer to each person.

4:7 Tychicus will let you know all about my situation. He is a beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow slave in the Lord.

4:8 I am sending him to you for this very purpose, so that I might know your situation, and so that he might encourage your hearts.

4:9 He is with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother who is one of you. They will tell you all about the situation here.

4:10 Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, greets you, as does Mark the cousin of Barnabas (you have received instruction about him, if he comes to you receive him),

4:11 and Jesus who is called Justus. Of those out of the Circumcision, they alone are my coworkers for the Kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort for me.

4:12 Epaphras, who is one of you, greets you. He is a slave of Christ, always struggling for you in prayer, so that you might stand mature and fulfilled in all the will of God.

4:13 For I bear witness concerning him that he has great zeal for you and for those in Laodicea and Hierapolis.

4:14 Luke the beloved doctor and Demas greet you.

4:15 Greet the brothers in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church in his house,

4:16 and after this letter has been read among you, see to it that it is also read in the Laodicean church, and also that you read the Laodicean letter.

4:17 And tell Archippus, "Pay attention to the ministry that you received in the Lord, so that you complete it."

4:18 I, Paul, write this greeting by my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you. Amen.

Outline

1:1-12 Introduction

1:1-2 *Paul begins with greetings.*

1:3-8 *His opening continues with thanksgiving for the congregation.*

1:9-12 *His opening concludes with prayer for the congregation.*

1:13-23 Foundational Theology

1:13 *Paul teaches briefly on the work of the Father.*

1:14-21 *That work was through the Son, so Paul goes on to tell about the Son and what He has done for us.*

1:22-23 *His work climaxes in us being reconciled to God and also, if we are faithful, us being presented to the Father.*

1:24-3:4 The Gospel and Christian Growth

1:24-2:5 *As a servant of that gospel, Paul works to present everyone mature in Christ.*

2:6-7 *The Colossians should live in Christ as they have received Him.*

2:8-23 *They are warned about false teachings, none of which admit who Christ is and what He has done for us.*

3:1-4 *This section concludes with a summary of the true way to grow as a Christian: draw near to Christ.*

3:5-4:6 Living out the Truth in our Lives

3:5-17 *Here is how we are to live out this truth about our new life, negatively and positively.*

3:18-4:1 *This is how to live it out in our households.*

4:2-6 *This is how to live it out before outsiders.*

4:7-18 Conclusion

4:7-9 *Paul gives introductions for the letter bearers.*

4:10-18 *Paul closes with specific greetings.*

Commentary

1:1-12 Introduction

As is appropriate in Greek letters of that era, Paul introduces his letter with greetings, thanksgiving, his reasons for thanksgiving, and prayer.

1:1-2 Paul begins with greetings.

These opening verses give information concerning the identity of the senders and the recipients.

1:1 Paul,³² apostle³³ of Jesus Christ³⁴ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

As gentle and as encouraging as this letter is, **Paul** does not shrink from using the term **apostle** to describe himself. He writes representing **Christ**. As we read this letter, we not only learn about the theology, the heart, and the pastoral method of a first-century Christian leader, we learn of the theology, heart, and pastoral method of the Lord that sent him.

In this and several other letters³⁵ from **Paul**, **Timothy** is mentioned as a co-author or co-sender,³⁶ but always with the clear impression that the reader is hearing from **Paul** himself.³⁷ Perhaps **Paul** includes **Timothy** as a co-author in order to elevate Timothy's status in their eyes, because he hoped to send **Timothy** to Colossae once he knew how things would go with his trial.

³² Many Jews in that era would have a Greek name that sounded similar to their Hebrew name. In this case שְׂאוּל / *Sha'ul* used the name Παῦλος / *Paulos* when he was in Greek or Roman society. Cross-cultural missionaries today sometimes do the same thing.

³³ The term ἀπόστολος / *apostolos* literally means “sent one,” or “messenger.” The context indicates whether or not an ἀπόστολος / *apostolos* has special status or authority.

³⁴ Most of the very earliest manuscripts, accepted by many translators, read “Christ Jesus” rather than **Jesus Christ**. The majority of the manuscripts, including C of the fifth century, have **Jesus Christ**. See Appendix A: Manuscript Variations on textual criticism.

³⁵ **Timothy** is given as co-author or co-sender in 2 Cor., Phil., Col., 1 Thes., 2 Thes., and Philem.

³⁶ Barth, p. 137, uses the expression “co-sender.”

³⁷ Note for instance the further mention by **Paul** of **Timothy** in 2 Cor. 1:19; Phil. 2:19, 22; 1 Thes. 3:2, and 6, as well as the first person singular usages like λέγω / *legō* (“I say”) six times in 2 Cor., twice in Phil., once in Col., and once in Philem.

At the same time, **Paul** clearly distinguishes between his status as **apostle** and Timothy's status as **brother**.³⁸ Furthermore, Paul is not an **apostle** by human appointment, but **by the will of God**.³⁹

1:2 To those in Colossae,⁴⁰ holy ones and faithful brothers⁴¹ in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴²

The very first thing Paul says about the members of the congregation in **Colossae** is that they are **holy ones**, or “saints.”⁴³ The Old Testament idea⁴⁴ behind this word suggests “separation.” God has separated them from all others, or dedicated them, to be His church. This is how He wants them to think of themselves. They are “separated-out ones” now; that is their new identity. It is theirs because of the transformational work⁴⁵ which **Christ** has done for them and in them.

Concerning the expression **holy ones**, in some parts of Christendom this term is translated “saints” and given all sorts of connotations about exemplary or miraculous spiritual life, but those ideas are not in this text. They are **holy** not at all because they perform well as Christians or obey a proper list of rules, but

³⁸ The same distinction is made in 1 Cor. 1:1 and 2 Cor. 1:1.

³⁹ The same assertion is made, with the same terms, in 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; and 2 Tim. 1:1. In Acts 26:17 when Paul is giving his testimony of his conversion, he quotes Christ saying “I am sending you” (ἐγὼ ἀποστέλλω σε/*egō apostellō se*). From the very beginning of his Christian experience, **Paul** knew that **God** had sent him.

⁴⁰ See the Introduction concerning the city of **Colossae**.

⁴¹ Although the usage of the Greek word ἀδελφός/*adelphos* certainly can include women, it does not stress the specific inclusion of women, so it has not here been translated “brothers and sisters.” That translation would have given the impression that the Apostle Paul lived in the 21st century rather than the first century.

⁴² Two early manuscript (B of the fourth century and D of the sixth century) and nine later ones omit the words **and the Lord Jesus Christ**, but three of the earliest (K, A, and C) and the bulk of later manuscripts include these words. In his work on textual criticism F.F. Bruce holds that the expression should be omitted, saying “certainly no reason for deliberate omission suggests itself,” ignoring the obvious possibility of *unintentional* omission, a simple scribal error somewhere in the first 200 years of scribal activity. Surely when the errors are unintentional we should expect more omissions than additions, and surely we should allow that most errors were unintentional. See Appendix A on textual criticism. With the possible exception of Gal. and 1 Thes., whose readings are complicated by some manuscript variation, all of Paul's letters to churches have this identical greeting, **grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**.

⁴³ This is the plural of the word ἅγιος/*hagios*, here taken as a noun and translated **holy ones**. It could possibly be taken as an adjective, in which case it would be translated “To those in Colossae, holy and faithful brothers in Christ.” The Greek form of the noun and the adjective are the same.

⁴⁴ The Hebrew root is שָׁדַף/*qds*. That the basic idea of this word is “separation” or “dedication” in the OT is clear because, as *EBC* points out, “holiness is ascribed not only to persons (Lev. 20:7; Dt. 7:6; 2 Kings 4:9, *et al.*), but also to places (Ex. 29:31; Lev. 6:16, 26; Dt. 23:14; Ps. 65:4, *et al.*) and things (Ex. 28:2; 29:6; 30:25; Num. 5:17, *et al.*)”

⁴⁵ Justification through the imputation of Christ's righteousness would be legal transformation; adoption and reconciliation would be relational transformation; and regeneration would be the transformation of the person's nature. These rich and vast theological terms are used to describe our new identity, what we actually are. Put briefly, we *are* **holy ones**.

purely because **Jesus Christ** has forgiven their sins, transformed them through the new birth from dead in sin to alive in **Christ**, and given them His righteousness with that new life hidden in Him. He has sanctified them.⁴⁶ Giving them this life and status was not at all unjust of Him, because their unholiness was sufficiently punished at the cross through the blood of **the Lord Jesus Christ**. Understood properly, there is a great deal of assurance in these words.

But in other parts of Christendom believers are taught that rather than having the essential nature of a **holy** one, they have the essential nature of a sinner. Rather than being exalted to heights beyond the biblical meaning, this term is ignored. Believers are taught that fundamentally they are now still sinners.

Paul would have us understand that although we still do sin, since we have been transformed into **holy ones**, sin is contrary to our fundamental nature. He has no doubt, and he would have no doubt in their hearts, that since they have believed that **Jesus Christ** has saved them from their sins, they have been made **holy**. Without that kind of assurance, it would be difficult for them to really hear the rest of what Paul has to say to them – note for instance how his commands from 2:6 through 3:17 are consistently undergirded by reminders of the grace we have experienced. If someone is not really sure he has experienced that grace (or thinks that that grace might be temporary in his or her case), then the strength of that undergirding is broken. So, in summary, they are not **holy ones** because they live in ways that are pleasing to God, but because God made them **holy ones**. Paul will later explain that having been made **holy**, they ought to live in ways pleasing to God. That may be a bit of a mental tongue twister, but it is an essential point in biblical theology.

Paul also assures them here that he thinks highly of their spiritual maturity – they are **faithful brothers**. Already in the second verse Paul is clear that he has no complaint about their spirituality. He could not have said this to the erring Galatians or the sinning Corinthians, but to the Colossian congregation he can say it without any reservation. So this letter is the sort of teaching that good Christians need to hear.

They are **brothers**, just as Timothy is a brother. Paul was ethnically Jewish, the congregation was made up of Phrygians, Greeks, and perhaps Jews, but they were **brothers** because of what **Christ** did for them. In 3:11 Paul will emphasize that for us in **Christ**, race and ethnicity are irrelevant; here he limits himself to

⁴⁶ This is more clear in Paul's greetings in 1 Cor. 1:2, where in addition to the word used here (*ἀγιος/hagios*), Paul tells they have been made **holy** (using the perfect participle of the verb *ἀγιαζω/hagiazō*) in or by **Christ**.

simply referring to the Colossian congregation as **brothers**. As Barth⁴⁷ points out, this is not a letter in which a master condescends to write to his subordinates. Even though he is an apostle, he and they are all **brothers**.

As he so often does in the opening words of his letters, Paul brings a Greek and a Hebrew element into his greetings, transforming the usual Greek greeting into a blessing of God's **grace** upon the congregation.⁴⁸ **Peace** is of course the Hebrew element. He is not succumbing to mere tradition, but is giving a greeting that actually brings real **grace** and **peace** to his readers. May our words likewise convey **grace** and **peace**!

1:3-8 *His opening continues with thanksgiving for the congregation.*

Paul is earning the right to be heard, and he is orienting them to what he will say in the rest of the letter. In that era denominations and terms like “evangelical Christian” did not exist. The now famous apostle may have been unknown to them (or perhaps if the historical reconstruction is correct, Paul did not want to presume that Epaphras had already told the congregation about the apostle that had sent him from Ephesus back to Colossae), so Paul takes more time to introduce himself. In 1:4-5 he is approving of their faith, perhaps to help them understand that he is on their side, and not part of a false religion that would say “I have something better for you.” In 1:6 he is assuring the congregation not only that what they have come to believe is true, but also that they are not alone in their faith. Finally in 1:7-8 he is assuring them that he is a close friend and coworker of Epaphras, the one that brought this new Good News to them in the first place.

Paul continues his opening comments by telling them how he thanks God for them. In doing this he assures them that he and they are on the same track, that they believe the same gospel and worship the same God.

1:3 We thank⁴⁹ the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, always praying for you,

⁴⁷ P. 145.

⁴⁸ Χαίρειν/*chairein*, “to greet,” becomes χάρις/*charis*, **grace**.

⁴⁹ This verb (εὐχαριστέω/*eucharisteō*), the related noun (εὐχαριστία/*eucharistia*), and the related adjective (εὐχάριστος/*eucharistos*) are used in 1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:15, 17; and 4:2. In 1:3 Paul himself is giving thanks, in 1:12 his prayer is that they will be giving thanks, and the other four are commands that the congregation give thanks, commands that can only be obeyed if we have a deep understanding of that grace that undergirds the commands of Colossians. Duty can drive our obedience to Law until we run out of our own strength, but only a deep appreciation of God's grace that overflows into thankfulness yields the obedience that the Lord is seeking.

In nine out of Paul's thirteen New Testament letters,⁵⁰ he follows good Greek letter writing style in that he gives thanks for his readers, and that thanksgiving also gives the reader a first look at what he will be saying in his letter. However, he is not just following a fashion here. He knows that the spiritual fruit he has heard about there in Colossae is the work of God, and he is delighted when he comes upon it. Thankfulness and praise to God flow freely from the heart of the apostle that deeply understood the working of God's powerful grace. The content and structure of this letter in fact show that he wrote to ensure that that very grace would have its deepest working in the lives of the Colossian believers. He will concentrate on that grace, and utterly avoid giving any commands to the congregation until 2:6 where he has firmly established that grace in their understanding. Only then does he give any commands, and even then from 2:6–3:17 whenever he does command anything, he undergirds that command with grace.

Here in these early verses Paul briefly touches upon the relationship that **our Lord Jesus Christ** has with **God the Father**. In this passage it is not said that the **Father** is *our Father*, nor that He is *our God*. Here He is **the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**. Our relationship with the **Father** has yet to be described.

Paul says he is **always praying for** them. If we were to interpret this and similar passages in Paul's letters⁵¹ in a harshly literal sense, we might think that Paul was like a monk that **always**⁵² spent every single moment sequestered in prayer, a picture contrary to the facts we have about him in Acts. However, Paul was a man of prayer, and here he is using language very familiar to readers of letters in the ancient Greek world. This kind of exaggeration was very normal in such opening greetings. In fact Paul was diligent and consistent in praying for them.⁵³ This expression can also be translated "always in our prayers for you" or even "always whenever we pray," thus making it clear that he is not claiming that he prays for them every moment of every day. The readers understood that Paul was simply encouraging them by assuring them of his frequent and diligent prayer for them.

⁵⁰ 2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 Timothy, and Titus are the exceptions to Paul's normal pattern. O'Brien, p. 8, describes a pattern common in ancient Greek letters: 1) thanksgiving to the gods, 2) optional but common assurance that the gods are being petitioned for the good of the reader, and 3) reasons for the thanksgiving to the gods. Paul clearly conformed to that pattern but fills it with Christian content. This would be one example of how he, as a cross-cultural missionary, contextualized his work. He adopted culturally acceptable forms, and infused them with Christian content.

⁵¹ See Rom. 1:8-10; Phil. 1:4; 1 Thes. 1:2; 2:13; 3:10; 5:17; and 2 Tim. 1:3.

⁵² This word, **always** (πάντοτε/*pantote*), is used 41 times in the NT; twelve of those times are about prayer, and eight of those twelve are in opening verses of Paul's letters.

⁵³ O'Brien, *Philippians*, p. 57.

His expression of thanksgiving to **God** and his reasons for that thanksgiving continue in one long sentence until the end of verse 8, when he shifts to tell them about his prayers to God for them. In all this Paul is also modeling the heart attitude of gratitude which is so central in this letter.

1:4 having heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and your love for all the holy ones,

Here Paul tells us just why he and Timothy are giving thanks and praying. He has not met them, but he has heard about them, as we shall read, from Epaphras. Colossae was such a small town, and so far from Rome, that it must have been an encouragement to them to read that news of their **faith in Christ Jesus** and their **love for all the holy ones** had reached Paul the Apostle.

Their **faith** is **in Christ Jesus** while their **love**⁵⁴ is **for all the holy ones**. Without the former, one cannot have the latter. We do not know how the

⁵⁴ This is the well-known word ἀγάπη/*agapē*, which was rare in non-Christian Greek literature. Although this word and the verb ἀγαπάω/*agapaō* are often said to express “unconditional love” or “altruistic love” in contrast to φιλέω/*phileō* which is said to refer to “the love of friendship and feeling” (*Agape and Eros* by Anders Nygren was a major work with this point of view), in fact the use of these words in the Septuagint and the NT shows that it is more complicated than that.

- In 2 Sam. 13 the Septuagint uses both ἀγαπάω/*agapaō* and φιλέω/*phileō* for Amnon’s violent and sexual **love** for Tamar.
- Both ἀγαπάω/*agapaō* and φιλέω/*phileō* are used in the expression “the disciple whom Jesus loves” in John.
- Both ἀγαπάω/*agapaō* and φιλέω/*phileō* are used to speak of the Father’s **love** for the Son (Jn. 3:35 and 5:20).
- In Jn. 12:43 ἀγαπάω/*agapaō* is used of a **love** that is not at all altruistic: “for they loved the glory of men more than the glory of God.”
- In Jn. 3:19 ἀγαπάω/*agapaō* is used for the **love** men have for darkness.
- In 2 Tim. 4:10 ἀγαπάω/*agapaō* is used of Demas’s **love** for the present age.
- In Lk. 11:43 ἀγαπάω/*agapaō* is used of the Pharisees **love** of “the seats of honor in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.” (See Mt. 23:6 where φιλέω/*phileō* is used of almost exactly the same **love**.)
- In Jn. 10:17 ἀγαπάω/*agapaō* is used with a condition: “This is the reason the Father loves Me: because I lay down My life....”
- In Jn. 14:21 ἀγαπάω/*agapaō* is used with a condition: “The one who loves Me will be loved by My Father....”
- In Mt. 5:46 ἀγαπάω/*agapaō* speaks of conditional **love**: “For if you love those that love you, what reward do you have? Don’t even tax collectors do that?”
- In Lk. 6:32 ἀγαπάω/*agapaō* speaks of conditional **love**: “And if you love those who love you, what kind of credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them.”

So ἀγαπάω/*agapaō* sometimes refers to conditional or worldly **love**. However, φιλέω/*phileō*, but not ἀγαπάω/*agapaō*, can simply mean “to kiss,” as when Judas kissed the Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane (Lk. 22:47). In John’s Gospel ἀγαπάω/*agapaō* and ἀγάπη/*agapē* are nearly indistinguishable from the words related to φίλος/*philos*, but Paul usually uses the ἀγάπη/*agapē* words in a purer sense. The exception would be 2 Tim. 4:10 in which Paul says that Demas loved (ἀγαπάω/*agapaō*) this world. We cannot say that ἀγαπάω/*agapaō* always refers to a divine love. Demas’s love for the world was not divine! See D. A. Carson’s April 1999 *Bibliotheca Sacra* article, “God Is Love.”

Colossians' **love for all the holy ones** was lived out; we only know that in Paul's eyes it was noteworthy.

As noted above concerning the term "brothers," later Paul will expand upon the **all** here in this verse, in that in the eyes of a mature Christian all racial distinctions are irrelevant. In 3:11 he wrote that now for us "there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, foreigner, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all, and in all." Their **love for all the holy ones** is in line with this truth.

Paul and the Philippians were engaged together in a partnership of gospel ministry, and in that context he prayed that their **love** would "still more and more abound in knowledge and all insight," so the Philippians' **love** seems to have been focused more towards the unsaved. On the other hand, here we read that the **love** of the Colossians was **for all the holy ones**, for believers.

Later in 1:6 and 2:5 he will further praise their faithfulness. Note the discussion under the section titled "Spiritual Characteristics of the Congregation" in the Introduction. As was pointed out above, the praise Paul gives them for their faithfulness shows that they had not succumbed to any false teachings.

Here in 1:4 he writes **having heard**, so we get the impression that he has never met them. That impression is confirmed in 2:1 where he wrote "For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and those in Laodicea and as many as have not seen my face in person."

1:5 which is⁵⁵ on account of the hope⁵⁶ laid up for you in the heavens, which you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel, News of their faith and love had reached Paul. Here he explains to them that love like that must spring from **the hope laid up for them in the heavens**.

So already right here in the fifth verse Paul has begun to say that in the normal Christian life, a loving heart towards others is **on account of** something that

⁵⁵ This translation has added the words **which is**. The NIV translation instead adds the expression "the faith and love that spring..." That translation is possible because the prepositional phrase that connects vs. 4 with vs. 5 (διὰ τὴν ἐλπίδα/ *día tēn elpida*, **on account of the hope**) does not indicate whether it refers to one antecedent (which would be "love") or to more than one antecedent (which would be "faith" and "love"). If the NIV is correct, then the words "which are" should be added instead of **which is**. However, it seems to this author that while the love the Colossians had was certainly **on account of the hope** they had, it seems to be going too far to say that the faith they had was also **on account of the hope** they had. In fact, just the reverse is true: their **hope** sprang from their faith! Because they believed, they had **hope**. Because they had **hope**, they had love.

⁵⁶ In Greek, as in English, the word **hope** (ἐλπίς/*elpis*) can refer to the state of our hearts as we are hoping for something, as in Rom. 5:4 and 1 Cor 13:13, or the thing or person actually hoped for, as here in Col. 1:5 and also in Col. 1:27. Here since this **hope** is **laid up for you in the heavens** it is clearly the hoped for thing rather than the hoping process.

God has done for us. We shall hear more about this **hope laid up for us in the heavens**. What we understand from this passage is that their love for other believers springs from this **hope**, and that they know about it because they know about **the gospel**. Attitude and activity which are not founded upon an understanding of that grace are not the kind of thing that Paul is thankful about.

Here we read that we have a **hope laid up in the heavens, on account of** which we can love our brothers. Later in 3:3 we read that our “life is hidden with Christ in God,” on account of which we can “think on the things above.” It may be that the mention here of our **hope** which is **laid up in the heavens** is a hint or anticipation of the life that we have which is “hidden with Christ in God,” especially since both are tied so closely to the life that is pleasing to God. This seems all the more likely because in 1:27 “Christ in you” is “the hope of glory.” This **hope** is no wistful aspiration, far off in the afterlife. Since it is **laid up in the heavens** for us it is all the more sure, and a crucial piece of our spiritual life.

This wonderful triad of faith, love, and **hope** is also placed together in Romans 5:1-5; 1 Corinthians 13:13; Galatians 5:5-6; Ephesians 1:15-18; 4:2-5; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; and 5:8. Because the same terms are also together in Hebrews 6:10-12; 10:22-24; 1 Peter 1:3-9, and 21-22, as well as in Barnabas 1:4 and Ignatius’ letter to Polycarp 3:2-3, some scholars suggest that this “triad” was common in the New Testament era and was a sort of summary of the Christian life.⁵⁷ Faith is also mentioned in 1:23 and 2:7; love in 1:8, 13; 2:2; and 3:14; and **hope** in 1:23 and 27.

They had **already heard about** this **hope**. In this section of introductions, Paul is reassuring them that he is not bringing a different teaching from what Epaphras had brought them. They **have already heard** these things.

Even though some⁵⁸ might be tempted to say that the expression, **the word of truth, the gospel**, was written in deliberate contrast with the false teachings that threatened the Colossian congregation, the use of almost exactly the same expression in Ephesians 1:13, “the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation,” shows how speculative that approach is.

The term **gospel**⁵⁹ is used about 77 times in the New Testament. In secular Greek literature this term simply referred to “good news” of various kinds. In Mark 1:1, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” it seems

⁵⁷ O’Brien, p. 11, tentatively agrees and mentions the work by A. M. Hunter, *Paul and his Predecessors*.

⁵⁸ O’Brien, p. 12, holds that Paul intended this contrast.

⁵⁹ εὐαγγέλιον/*euangelion*

to refer to the narrative of the life of the Lord Jesus as recorded by Mark.⁶⁰ That meaning was picked up in Christian literature outside the New Testament, so of course the first four books of the New Testament themselves began to be called “gospels.” Other non-canonical writings on the life of Christ were also called “gospels.”

After He was rejected by the nation (as described in Matthew 13) there is a shift in the emphasis of the Good News, from the *political* fact that the King is here and the Kingdom is about to appear, a Kingdom in which all citizens will be right with God (as in Matthew 4:23 and Mark 1:15), to the *personal* fact that because the Savior King has come righteousness with God is available now, and all that receive that righteousness will at some future point participate in the coming messianic Kingdom (as in Mark 10:29-30). In other words, the emphasis shifts from an impending collective aspect to a present individualistic aspect of the **gospel**. The **gospel** is the message of the first and second coming of the Messiah, who freely transforms our nature, our legal standing, and our relationship with God, a transformation that every person needs in order to be a part of that coming Kingdom.

The political side of this Good News, that the Kingdom of God is coming to this earth, will be realized according to God’s own timetable, but meanwhile everyone needs to hear and believe the Good News: because of the coming King’s death and resurrection, salvation from sin and its power is God’s free gift to any who will simply believe this Good News. This salvation includes being given Christ’s perfect righteousness, being brought into a personal relationship with God Himself, and being transformed from a “dead in sin” being into an “alive in Christ” being. The condition for this gift is simple: on the cross Christ did everything to make this happen, we are simply asked to believe it. There are no other requirements for us to attain. It is a **gospel** of grace because no action or activity of a recipient can affect whether or not he receives that gift.

This **gospel** is very much a statement: salvation is freely provided by God to all who believe in Jesus. However, it is also very personal: salvation is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. In one sense it is very political and collective: the Messiah will come and with His Kingdom He will put an end to the succession of the kingdoms of the earth. On the other hand it is very individualistic: each person that would be included in that wonderful Kingdom must believe the **gospel**. It is very contemporary in that the one who believes becomes a new creation; he or she is immediately born again. It is also timeless, both because

⁶⁰ It is possible that in Mk. 1:1 Mark has in mind the normal NT definition of **gospel**, the message of the coming Kingdom and deliverance from sin, and he is saying that the story he is telling about the life of the Lord Jesus, from His birth to His resurrection, is the beginning of that Good News.

those personal changes are forever, and the Kingdom that is coming is eternal. For these reasons, and perhaps for many more, the simple **gospel** will be presented in a wide variety of ways in various cultures and various settings. In other words, the “packaging” of the **gospel** presentation will vary, but the content must remain consistent and true to the Word of God.

1:6 which has come to you – just as in all the world – and⁶¹ is bearing fruit and increasing just as also in you from the day you heard and came to understand⁶² the grace of God in truth,

Perhaps to encourage them, here and in 1:23 Paul emphasizes the fact that they are involved in something much much bigger than the Lycus River Valley. They were probably amazed at the transformations that they were experiencing, this wonderful **fruit** that the gospel was producing. Even more amazing is the fact that this same gospel is doing the same thing **in all the world**.⁶³ Although what was happening in the congregations in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis had never happened before in their valley, it was actually the normal⁶⁴ thing that happens when people anywhere hear and come to know **the grace of God in truth**.

The expression **bearing fruit and increasing** is used about 15 times in the Old Testament, starting with Genesis 1:22. It seems like Paul is drawing upon that

⁶¹ All of the very early manuscripts omit the **and** (*καὶ/kai*), but the majority include it. It is not surprising that this verse has a textual problem in it because it is rather hard to read, both in Greek and in translation. At first it seems like the phrase **just as** is too frequent in verses 6 and 7. As punctuated above, the first **just as** says that what has happened among them is happening all over the known **world**. It seems like the second **just as** says that the gospel is **bearing fruit and increasing** among them now **just as** it did when it first arrived. Certainly this verse is more complicated than it appears to be at first glance.

⁶² The verb ἐπιγινώσκω/*epiginōskō*, here translated **came to understand**, is used 44 times in the NT. Despite its use in Mk. 2:8 (“Immediately Jesus knew in His spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts...”) it does not mean “to know by revelation,” as is obvious from Mt. 7:16 (“By their fruit you will recognize them.”) It generally refers to the experience of gaining understanding, so when it is used concerning facts it is often translated “realize,” as in Mk. 5:30; Lk. 1:22; Acts 19:34; and 22:29. When it is used to mean that someone **came to understand** the identity of the person they are looking at, it would be translated “recognize,” as in Mt. 14:35; 17:12; Mk. 6:33, 54; Lk. 24:16, and 31.

⁶³ This term, κόσμος/*kosmos* (here translated **world**), has a variety of meanings. It can certainly refer to all humanity, as in Jn. 3:16 and Rom. 3:19. In this verse there is some hyperbole, as there was in Paul’s praise to the Romans that their “faith is proclaimed throughout the whole κόσμος/*kosmos*” (Rom. 1:8), and in the complaint of the Pharisees that “the κόσμος/*kosmos* has run after Him” (Jn. 12:19).

⁶⁴ This sense that they are experiencing what the gospel usually does is heightened by the triple use of καθὼς καὶ/*kathōs kai* (literally “just as also”) in verses 6-7. Paul wants them to understand that they are part of something that is happening – or will soon happen – **in all the known world**.

idea,⁶⁵ which in the Old Testament is always about the multiplication of human and animal populations, in a fresh way here, expressing both the idea of the **fruit** of the Spirit (as in Galatians 5:22 and Colossians 1:10) and the idea of the **increasing** numbers of new believers.⁶⁶

It was easy for Paul to adapt the Old Testament idea of **bearing fruit and increasing physically** to the New Testament idea of **bearing fruit and increasing spiritually**, because in the New Testament the New Creation and its growth and **fruit** draws from the Original Creation and its people's growth. Just as the people of the Original Creation were to be fruitful and increase in number, so the people of the New Creation are to be fruitful and increase in number.

Despite how many people say that “mere intellectual assent” is not sufficient to save, and that what they call “saving faith” has some special intrinsic difference from the simple normal meaning of the word faith, Paul refers to the moment they came to faith in Christ as **the day you heard and came to understand the grace of God in truth**. There is no warning here against “mere intellectual assent.”⁶⁷ Here hearing, understanding and (in the next verse) learning are used as synonyms of believing. He could as well have written, “from the day you came to believe the message of the grace of God in truth, just as also you believed the message from Epaphras....” This is so, because coming to believe and coming to **understand** accomplish the same thing in the process of our salvation. When someone says, “I understand now that Jesus died for *me*, and that by *His* death *my* sins are paid for,” we ought not to question his salvation and ask him whether he has merely understood the propositions of the fundamental Christian message or whether he has also believed it with saving faith. Paul simply does not leave any theological room for a person that understands the depths of his need for salvation, and comes to **understand** that Jesus died for his sins, but does not experience salvation in Christ.

Here and in the next verse, as Paul writes of hearing, understanding, and learning, we see the first of a strong emphasis on the purity of the Colossians' present knowledge. It is as if he were telling them here, “You've got it right.” In later verses he will likewise tell them that they must not be tricked into looking for

⁶⁵ The LXX never uses the idea of “fruit” in its translation of the expression **bearing fruit and increasing**. So if Paul is drawing on that OT expression, he is drawing upon the Hebrew (פרה/*prh* and רבה/*rbh*) rather than the LXX translation (αὐξάνω/*auxanō* and πληθύνω/*plēthunō*). Paul also may be drawing upon the Lord's parable in Mk. 4, but the combined expression **bearing fruit and increasing** does not appear in that parable. However, **increasing** (αὐξάνω/*auxanō*) does appear there in Mk.4:8 and **bearing fruit** (καρποφορέω/*karphoreō*) appears in Mk.4:20. (In the NIV of Mk. 4:8 **increasing** is translated “multiplying,” and **bearing fruit** is translated “produced a crop.”)

⁶⁶ Chrysostom takes these words this way, according to Moule, p. 51.

⁶⁷ Paul adds the phrase **in truth** because what they came to understand is in accordance with the **truth**.

“more” which is really not more at all, but perversion. The Colossians are at a healthy or even pristine point in the life of the church; as discussed in the Introduction, false teaching has not had any success in corrupting them. The Galatians were already corrupted and the Corinthians had gotten badly off track in different ways, but this congregation, far away in little Colossae, had not succumbed to those temptations. (Some years later the Lord Himself would have a similar attitude towards the congregations in Smyrna and Philadelphia, as recorded in Revelation 2-3.) In Colossae there was always a danger of false teachers that would try to break into the congregation with their own brand of spirituality. However, the believers there had left all that for Christ, delighted with the Good News they learned from Epaphras. If this is indeed true, then any “Colossian Error” so much debated by Bible interpreters was not actually *in* the Colossian congregation, even though a plethora of false teachings might threaten them from outside the congregation.

In Colossians 1:5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 27, 28; 2:2, 3, 7; 3:16; and even a bit in 4:5 there is a strong emphasis on knowledge. This brief letter has quite a lot to say about knowledge.⁶⁸ This may have been due to the context of the congregation in Colossae, threatened by false teachings, but that cannot be said with certainty.

1:7-8 just as also⁶⁹ you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow slave, who is a faithful servant of Christ for you,⁷⁰ and who told us of your love in the Spirit.

The grace of God, which they have come to understand, is exactly that which they **learned from Epaphras**. Paul here endorses both **Epaphras** and the gospel that **Epaphras** taught them. He also commends them for their response to the gospel, their **love in the Spirit**.

⁶⁸ A comparison of the use of these knowledge terms in Colossians and all Paul’s other writings shows that these words are more densely packed in Colossians than in Paul’s other writings, except that οἶδα/*oída* and γινώσκω/*ginōskō* are often used in Paul’s other letters to point to other things besides knowledge (as in “you know that...”).

⁶⁹ The majority of Greek manuscripts have a καὶ/*kai* here, which has been translated **also**. It seems easier to imagine a scribe accidentally omitting a καὶ/*kai* rather than intentionally or accidentally adding one.

⁷⁰ Although p^{46} , 8 , A, B, D, G, H, I, M, and 1739 all read ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν/*huper hēmōn* (“for us”), the majority of Greek manuscripts and C of the fifth century have ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν/*huper humōn* here, meaning **for you** or “on your behalf.” The latter reading also has strong support from the ancient translations and quotes from the early church fathers. Accepting ὑμῶν/*humōn* seems preferable, particularly in light of the great humility of the Apostle Paul. Paul might say **Epaphras** is his **beloved fellow slave** and **a faithful servant of Christ for** them, but it is very hard to imagine him saying that while **Epaphras** may be a **fellow slave**, he is also *Paul’s servant*. In other words, Paul did not treat other church planting missionaries as his staff, even if some of those that later copied manuscripts had no problem with that. In none of his letters does he ever call anyone his διάκονος/*diakonos* or a διάκονος/*diakonos* on his behalf.

These two verses, with Colossians 4:12 and Philemon 23 teach us all we can learn for sure about **Epaphras**.⁷¹ It is clear that Paul valued him and endorsed his ministry, and that it was **Epaphras** that brought the gospel to Colossae.

Epaphras was a man of exemplary prayer, and he was in close enough contact with Paul that Paul could include his greetings at the end of this letter. Since he told Paul of their love in the Spirit, we also know that **Epaphras** valued the congregation in Colossae. Paul says he was “one of you,” so he was probably from Colossae. In Philemon 23, Paul calls **Epaphras**⁷² his “fellow prisoner,” so it is fairly certain that **Epaphras** was confined to the same house that Paul was in at the writing of Colossians as well as at the writing of Philemon.⁷³

So if indeed **Epaphras** was with Paul in Rome as this letter was being written, then he was not able to pastor and teach the congregation in Colossae. It may well be that Paul wrote this letter to provide that congregation what **Epaphras**, their founding pastor, was not able to give them, that is, further insight into who **Christ** is and what He has done for them, so that the gospel would continue “bearing fruit and increasing” despite the various false teachings that they were likely to be exposed to in the days and years to come. **Epaphras** himself might have done some of that for them had he been with them, but Rome was preventing that.

If the congregation loved **Epaphras**, mentioning him this way gains Paul access to their hearts. Also, if they are impressed with the apostolic letter, it becomes a strong endorsement for **Epaphras** in case he ever gets out of house arrest and returns to Colossae. Paul has clarified the interpersonal relationships involved and so is in a better position to proceed with all that he wants to do in his letter.

1:9-12 *His opening concludes with prayer for the congregation.*

In 1:3-4 Paul mentioned that he has been praying for them because he heard of their faith and love, but then instead of immediately elaborating on what sort of prayers he is praying, he assures them that he and they have the same gospel.

⁷¹ Concerning **Epaphras** and his possible connection with Paul’s church planting teams based in Ephesus, see the discussion in the Introduction in the section titled The Origin of the Congregation.

⁷² The name **Epaphras** is a shortened version of the name Epaphroditus, but this man was not the same man as the Epaphroditus in Phil. 2:25 and 4:18 who was from Philippi in the province of Macedonia. **Epaphras** was from Colossae in the province of Asia (*EBC*).

⁷³ As was discussed in the Introduction in the section titled Place and Date of Writing, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon were probably all written at about the same time, during the same imprisonment. It is possible that Paul called **Epaphras** his fellow prisoner in Philemon 23 because they were previously imprisoned together (Bruce, p. 182, and O’Brien, p. 15), but the natural meaning is that they were prisoners together at the time Philemon was written.

With that clear, Paul returns to the subject of his prayers for them, describing what he prays for them, and why he is praying that way for them.

Because he has heard of their faith and love, the ongoing and diligent prayer of the apostle is that they would have spiritual insight, insight which is meant to transform their lives, so they become even more fruitful, spiritually wise, empowered, patient, and thankful to God, the God who saved them through His Son.

1:9 Therefore we also, from the day we heard, have not ceased⁷⁴ praying⁷⁵ for you and asking⁷⁶ so that you might be filled⁷⁷ with the understanding⁷⁸ of His will in all wisdom and spiritual insight,

Having established that they really are “on the same team,” Paul tells them his actual prayer request for them. His prayers for them center around their having **understanding⁷⁹** of God’s **will**, and (in verse 11) power to actually do God’s **will**. Paul was praying for them in this way, and he was writing this letter to them, because he felt that proper **understanding** was crucial for Christian growth. His prayer recorded here corresponds well with his purpose in ministry, as stated in 2:1-5. Being **filled** with **wisdom** and **understanding** is a part of growing to maturity in Christ. Churches and ministries that suggest that there is

⁷⁴ Note the discussion under 1:3, where the same kind of normal exaggeration also occurs.

⁷⁵ In the NT this word, *προσεύχομαι/proseuchomai*, is always used of prayer to God.

⁷⁶ In the NT this word, *αἰτέω/aiteō*, is used about 31 times when people ask something of men, 32 times when people ask something of God, and 6 times when people ask something of the Lord Jesus. It means “ask.”

⁷⁷ Because both Paul (in Col. 1:19, 24, 25; 2:2, 3, 9, 10; 4:12 and 17) and years later the Gnostics frequently used the idea of fullness, O’Brien (p. 20) follows many others in suggesting that Paul was reacting to false teachers that had claims about fullness. Is it not possible that Paul was the first to make these claims of fullness, proactively dealing with all sorts of false teachings? Might Paul simply be saying, “This is the fullness available to us. Do not be tempted to try other religions or philosophies. You are already full here in Christ!” Is it not also possible that the later Gnostics were responding to the increasingly popular Christian faith’s use of the idea of fullness? A third possibility is that there was no connection at all, and the idea of fullness was developed independently in both the NT and in the later Gnostic writings.

⁷⁸ The word *ἐπίγνωσις/epignōsis* brings us to a discussion that is similar to the discussion above about fullness. This word, *ἐπίγνωσις/epignōsis*, suggests to O’Brien (p. 21) that it is being used to put down the false teachers, who – it is supposed – offered *γνώσις/gnōsis*, as the Gnostics did many years later. However, it is more likely that Paul was the earlier teacher, and **understanding** was important to him.

⁷⁹ The words used to mean “to understand” in verse 6 (*ἐπιγινώσκω/epignōskō*) and **understanding** in verse 9 and also in verse 11 (*ἐπίγνωσις/epignōsis*) are closely related, even though verse 6 is about their experience of initial salvation, while verses 9 and 11 are about ongoing maturity in the Christian life, knowing the will of God and simply knowing God. Apparently **understanding** is crucial in both our initial salvation and our ongoing growth as believers. There is no consensus among scholars about the effect of the prefix *ἐπι/epi* upon the noun or the verb. Perhaps it is only a stylistic matter, but perhaps it indicates something more serious. Some scholars (for instance Martin, p. 29) say that Paul uses it to distinguish true knowledge from the “Gnosis” that the false teachers were offering to the Colossians, but as noted in the Introduction, there is no actual evidence of Gnostic false teaching during this era.

no place in the Christian life for **wisdom** or **understanding** will undercut the spiritual growth Paul is praying for in this passage.

Even though it happened 35 years earlier, it seems that the Apostle Paul is doing exactly what the original apostles said in Acts 6:2-4 that an apostle should do: “It is not right for us to leave the word of God to wait on tables.... But we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.” Following that same principle, Paul is praying and he is teaching.

In Philippians 1:9 Paul prayed that their “love will still more and more abound in knowledge and all insight...” In Ephesians 1:17-18 he prayed that the Father would give them “a spirit of wisdom and revelation.” So we see that despite the various purposes of these three Prison Epistles, in each Paul prayed that the congregations would grow in **understanding**. Paul was showing us that prayer-fueled **understanding** was crucial to spiritual growth.

That the congregation would **be filled with the understanding of His will in all wisdom and spiritual insight** *precedes* discussion of the fruitful and thankful life that is so pleasing to God (1:10-12) just as the **understanding** of undergirding truth must logically *and* experientially precede its application in life.⁸⁰ Genuine Christian life is a life motivated by an understanding *thankfulness* (see 1:12) rather than driven by dutiful observance of rules and regulations. The careful student will frequently observe this very thing in this letter.

In recent years people have been talking about “multi-tasking.” They mean that we, like computers, can be doing more than one thing at once. Certainly if Paul had **not ceased praying for** them, all the while carrying on the daily activities and ministries that we see him engaged in in Acts, then he too was “multi-tasking.” He was teaching and he was **praying**. He was evangelizing and he was **praying**. He was making tents and he was **praying**. However, if by “multi-tasking” we mean that we are answering our e-mail, eating lunch, and sharing the gospel with someone over the phone, are we also **praying**? It may be true that we can get more done if we “multi-task,” but only if one of those things is “persisting in prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2).

⁸⁰ O’Brien, p. 22.

1:10 so that you might walk⁸¹ worthily of the Lord, pleasing to Him⁸² in all things, in every deed bearing fruit, and increasing⁸³ in your understanding of God,

If indeed Paul's prayer is answered, and they are filled with "the understanding of His will," they will be able to live in a way that is **pleasing to Him in all things**. This verse and the next two verses give more insight about what it is that is **pleasing to Him**.⁸⁴ Later when Paul gives his life purpose in 1:28 he will call all this being "mature in Christ Jesus."

Paul prays diligently **so that** they would have the knowledge, wisdom, and insight needed to **walk worthily of the Lord**. This is a simple way to express a profound New Testament truth. If we come to understand, deeply, through prayer and study,⁸⁵ that the King of Kings died on a Roman cross to obtain our perfect salvation, what sort of life should we live in response? With an overwhelming sense of thankfulness the Christian is empowered to do what is **pleasing to Him**. That is the core message of this letter – the rest is detail.

Is it exaggeration to draw the conclusion that prayer and teaching are therefore the crucial activities of Christian leaders? How distracted it seems we have become, so that prayer and teaching are so often pushed aside into the corners of our ministries!

This verse, describing the purpose of Paul's prayer for the Colossians, is similar to Philippians 1:10-11 "so that you can discern the things that really matter, so that you might be sincere and blameless into the day of Christ, being filled with the fruit of righteousness which is through Jesus Christ, to the praise and glory of God."

Those of us that are *driven* to be **pleasing to Him in all things** – but not out of that overwhelming sense of thankfulness – need to discover the centrality of thankfulness in this letter. Those of us that *understand* all about being **pleasing**

⁸¹ In the NT letters, "walking" is almost always used as a figure of speech for "living our lives." It is used that way in Col. 1:10; 2:6; 3:7; and 4:5. The Hebrew verb for walking, $\text{הלך}/halk$, also can express the same figure of speech. See for instance Gen. 5:22, "Enoch walked with God 300 years..." According to both Barth (p. 177) and O'Brien (p. 22) this usage is not found in Classical Greek.

⁸² The words **to Him** are not in the original Greek, but are used to make a better English sentence.

⁸³ The expression **bearing fruit** and **increasing** is repeated from 1:6, where it is the gospel that is **bearing fruit** and **increasing**. Is this a coincidence, or did Paul do this to suggest that mature believers become gospel-like?

⁸⁴ The four expressions, **bearing fruit**, **increasing**, "being strengthened," and "giving thanks," are all participles elaborating on the core idea of **pleasing to Him in all things**.

⁸⁵ It is appropriate to say "through prayer and study" here because the apostle prayed, and the apostle wrote this epistle, which they would study!

to Him in all things – but have lost that overwhelming sense of thankfulness – may find that the Lord’s message to the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2 has especial personal significance.

In these verses we see that **understanding** yields a worthy walk which is fruitful and in turn yields further **understanding**!

I:II with all power being strengthened according to the might of His glory in all endurance⁸⁶ and patience,

In the first part of this verse **power** words are piled up on one another to show the superlative abundance of **power** involved. In the second part of the verse two words with the basic meaning of **patience** are used. Both the first part and the second part begin with an **all**. There is some irony within this verse. We would like to think that if we are **being strengthened according to the might of His glory**, we would have no need at all for any **endurance** or **patience**, because we would be able to arrange things as we like. However, that is not the case in this particular passage. God strengthens us wonderfully, *and* He gives us **endurance and patience** to be His people in His way according to His timing. Here in this passage His **power** for us is primarily to help us bear up under difficult and trying circumstances, rather than to do away with such circumstances.

⁸⁶ This word, ὑπομονή/*hupomonē*, is closely related to the verb ὑπομένω/*hupomenō*, literally meaning “to abide under.” This word “is used in relation to adverse circumstances,” while the second word in this pair, μακροθυμία/*makrothumia*, is “the virtue needed when trying persons tax our self-control” (Martin, p. 32, who cites J. Horst, *TDNT*, iv, p. 384).

1:12 with joy⁸⁷ giving thanks to the Father who has made us⁸⁸ fit⁸⁹ for a share of the inheritance⁹⁰ of the holy ones⁹¹ in the light.⁹²

Paul goes on to further describe the worthy walk which he began writing about in verse 10. That walk should be characterized by joyous thanksgiving. It is essential to see here that Paul is not insisting upon proper politeness here. He is not saying that we must always say “thank you” when someone is kind to us. While people can be compelled to perform that sort of politeness, Paul is writing about something much more important here: an *attitude* of joyous thanksgiving. However, joyous thanksgiving cannot be legislated, insisted upon, or demanded – it must come from the heart and work outward, rather than being imposed on a person and then work inward.⁹³

⁸⁷ The expression **with joy** could be the end of verse 11 rather than the beginning of verse 12, but the passage seems to flow better as it is written here. In any case it is a very slight difference – either we must **in all endurance** and **patience** rejoice and be thankful, or in **all endurance** and **patience** we are to be thankful **with joy!**

⁸⁸ There are two very ancient manuscripts, **Ⲙ** and **B**, which have ὑμᾶς/*hymas* (“you”) here rather than ἡμᾶς/*hēmas* (**us**). While many would highly value those two manuscripts, the consistent reading (ἡμᾶς/*hēmas*) in so many other uncials and minuscules would seem to outweigh the reading of **Ⲙ**, **B**, and the several minuscules that read “you.” In terms of the content, it is hard to imagine Paul leaving himself out of the salvation that was his **joy**. It is easier to imagine an unintentional error to “you,” rather than an intentional change to **us** to make an easier sentence. Therefore, **made us fit** seems to be the original reading.

⁸⁹ Most of the earliest manuscripts, and the majority of manuscripts, read **made fit** (from the verb ἰκανόω/*bikanoō*), but some including the sixth century **D** read “called,” (from the verb καλέω/*kaleō*). The reading “called” can be easily dismissed, but it is interesting that the fourth century **B** reads “called and made fit,” strongly suggesting that prior to the fourth century there were some manuscripts that had “called” and some that had **made fit**. This is a good reminder that manuscripts that are often referred to as “the earliest manuscripts” are really just the earliest *extant* manuscripts, and during the several hundred years before those manuscripts were written there was already considerable variation in manuscript readings among the manuscripts that are now lost to us. That fact reduces the importance of the age of manuscripts, but does not affect the arguments for the majority text.

⁹⁰ These two terms, **share** and **inheritance** (μερίς/*meris* and κλήρος/*klēros*) also occur together in Acts 8:21. They seem to have very similar meanings. The term κλήρος/*klēros* literally refers to a small object like a pebble or stick that is marked and thrown like dice to make a random allotment, as in Mt. 27:35 and Acts 1:26. It is also used in the LXX translation of Jonah 1:7. As an extension of that meaning, it came to also mean the “lot” or “portion” that falls to you when you win the throw of the κλήρος/*klēros*. However, these two terms appear in the same verse together nine times in the Greek OT, and seven of those nine passages are about the lands that fell by lot to each of the tribes as their **inheritance**.

⁹¹ Barth (pp. 185-186) brings up a passage in the Qumran scrolls that speaks about “the portion of the inheritance of the holy ones.” In that passage **the holy ones** are angels. He then goes on to say that the “saints” or **holy ones** mentioned here are not angels but humans chosen by God because that is the consistent meaning of this term in Colossians and in the closely related Acts 26:18. O’Brien (pp. 26-27) with similar arguments agrees with Barth that these **holy ones** are believers, not angels.

⁹² Although the NIV reads “in the kingdom of light,” the Greek text actually only says **in the light**, as the NET, the HCSB, and the KJV read. The word “kingdom” does appear in verse 13.

⁹³ In fact, it seems that the more we legislate, insist upon, or demand joyous thanksgiving, the less joyous thanksgiving we get. Instead we get rebellion or external compliance; worse than that, by our unChristian use of power we teach people that external compliance is our goal, rather than the transformed heart that Paul is describing here.

Paul's prayers and much of this letter are meant to do just that. Although Paul is still describing the desired results of his prayers, in a sense this passage is the first of many commands which are closely followed by an "undergirding of grace." In other words, right after the command Paul gives a theological basis of grace for what he is asking of us. In this instance, verses 10, 11, and the beginning of 12 are a sort of command (though as noted above they are the intended result of his prayers), which is directly followed by a three-fold undergirding of grace: the rest of verse 12 through verse 23. These three passages are meant to inspire thankfulness. When we begin to understand (remember how important understanding is to Paul, especially in 1:6-10) that undergirding of grace, then the kind of obedience that Paul is asking for can work its way out from a grateful heart.

Why should we walk worthily of the Lord, why should we bear fruit, why should we increase in the knowledge of God, why should we be strengthened in endurance and patience, why should we **with joy give thanks to the Father?** The first of Paul's three answers to that question is, because He **has made us fit for a share of the inheritance of the holy ones in the light**, we can and should do all these things. We that were utterly unfit have been **made fit**.

What a beautiful expression to describe our salvation! He has **made us fit**. He has qualified us. Before we were **made fit**, it would have been completely inappropriate for us to have been in that **light**. However, now it is appropriate. This is indeed cause for **giving thanks with joy**.

Just as the tribes of Israel were each allotted a **share** of the land as an **inheritance**, so the Colossians have been allotted **a share of the inheritance of the holy ones in the light**. In this way, Paul is saying that the believers in Colossae have been given something far more wonderful than the sons of Israel were allotted in the Old Testament. The idea that the believers in Colossae have something greater than what the sons of Israel had is further developed in the next verse.

As is clear from the next verse, this **share of the inheritance of the holy ones in the light** not only speaks of our future destination, but also our present situation.

We should search our hearts, and ask for the help of close and reliable friends, to learn how we ourselves actually answer those questions in our lives and ministry, in our families, in our churches. If we discover that the answer is "Because I told you to, and I am the leader here!" or "Because you need to learn to respect

authority,” then we discover that we have slipped into an unbiblical and deadly pattern, and we need to repent before we become like the Pharisees or the Galatians.

Does Paul ever say, “By my apostolic authority I command you to...?” Never! He was probably most sorely tempted to do that when he sent Onesimus back to his owner, Philemon, but even there he wrote inspiring a thankful response to God’s gracious love for us, rather than commanding submission. Reading that brief letter, we see that he never actually commands Philemon to free Onesimus, but clearly he used a grace-based approach to inspire Philemon to do the right thing. That letter in our New Testament is a concrete model of a biblical theology of transformation.

1:13-23 Foundational Theology

These truths about God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ need to be understood if we are to be “filled with the understanding of His will in all wisdom and spiritual insight.”

1:13 Paul teaches briefly on the work of the Father.

1:13 It was He⁹⁴ that delivered us out of the authority of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom⁹⁵ of the Son He loves,⁹⁶

In the previous verse Paul used Old Testament terminology, but applied it in a new way to believers in Christ that now have their “share of the inheritance,” much like the tribes each received their share in the Land of Israel. The imagery is continued here. Just as in Exodus the nation of Israel was **delivered**⁹⁷ from a land of **darkness** into a new **kingdom** in Canaan, so we have been **delivered**

⁹⁴ For the sake of English style, a new sentence was begun here and the Greek relative article ὃς/*hos* (“who”) was translated **It was He that**.

⁹⁵ Some (including Bruce, p. 190 and O’Brien, p. 28) have suggested that in Paul’s writings the **Kingdom** of God is a future **kingdom**, while the **Kingdom** of Christ or the **Kingdom** of His **Son** is a present **kingdom**. This seems to be based upon their interpretation of 1 Cor. 15:20-27, especially vs. 24, which reads “Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.” However, it seems better to take the “end” spoken of in 1 Cor. 15:24 to refer to the end of the Millennium. In any case, among the very few verses that speak of a **Kingdom** of Christ, Eph. 5:5 and 2 Tim. 4:1 do seem to say that Christ’s **Kingdom** is yet future. Whether the **Kingdom** of God or the **Kingdom** of Christ is the designation, there are aspects of that **Kingdom** that are already present now, and there are aspects that are yet future.

⁹⁶ Literally, this is “the kingdom of the Son the beloved of His.” Ps. 2:7; Ps. 89 (note especially vv. 27 and 36); and 2 Sam. 7 are part of the OT background to this verse, in which God refers to the coming King of Israel as His Son. In its ancient near eastern culture this relationship concerns appointment as king rather than biological sonship.

⁹⁷ This verb, ῥύομαι/*ruomai*, is used 141 times in the Greek OT. In Ex. 5:23; 6:6; 14:30; 12:27; and Is. 51:10 it is used to describe how the LORD **delivered** the people out of Egypt (Barth, p. 188).

out of the authority of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of the Son He loves. Both being **delivered out of** and being **transferred into** are essential to our well being.⁹⁸

In the New Testament this exact expression, **the authority of darkness**, only appears here and in Luke 22:53, “but this is your hour, and the authority of darkness.”⁹⁹ It was in that hour that the Lord Jesus won that victory over **the authority of darkness** so that He could deliver us from that **authority**.

We have already been **delivered** from the **authority** of all evil spirits,¹⁰⁰ and in some sense we have already been **transferred** into the future **kingdom** which we await. Here Paul expresses what some have called “The Presence of the Future” or “Realized Eschatology.”¹⁰¹

The idea of being **transferred into** another **kingdom** has Old Testament parallels. In fact throughout history powerful kings have **transferred** peoples from one area to another, as for instance the Babylonians and Assyrians removed Judeans and Israelites to other lands.

The prince of **darkness** has many schemes. In cultures where people are perfectly aware of the spiritual dimensions of life, apparently his main scheme is to convince people that by performing the right rituals they can manipulate the spirits around them. In secular cultures, where people are far less aware of the spiritual dimensions of life, he is just as active. However, he uses other schemes such as greed, gluttony, and hedonism to oppress people under his **authority**.

In this verse, our attention shifts from the Father to the **Son**, where it remains through the first half of 1:22.

1:14-21 ***That work was through the Son, so Paul goes on to tell about the Son and what He has done for us.***

Later in 1:28 Paul will tell us that his life purpose is to “proclaim Him, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we might present everyone mature in Christ Jesus.” Here in these verses he proclaims Christ in earnest.

⁹⁸ Barth, p. 190.

⁹⁹ This expression, ἡ ἐξουσία τοῦ σκοτους/*hē exousia tou skotous*, is translated “when darkness reigns” in the NIV.

¹⁰⁰ We are subject to their lies which we can reject and their temptations which we can refuse, but believers are not subject to their **authority**. Unconfessed sin can somehow put us back under their power, but with confession and repentance in Jesus’ name we can be free again.

¹⁰¹ Bruce, p. 189. This concept is more frequently and clearly expressed in the Gospel of John. See for instance Jn. 4:23 and 11:23-26.

1:14 **in whom we have redemption,¹⁰² the forgiveness of sins.**

Paul has mentioned the gospel, and he has mentioned that we are “made fit” for participation in the “inheritance of the holy ones in light,” but here he is much more specific about our salvation. Our salvation is **in** Christ, it is our **redemption**, and it includes **the forgiveness of sins**.

Captivity and slavery due to war or a raid were all too common experiences in the memory of the original readers of this letter, although by the time this letter was written Roman power had reduced the number of wars and raids within the Empire. The word **redemption**¹⁰³ here described the experience of slaves or war captives whose freedom was purchased for them.

Non-Jewish readers would be reading this as a picture of someone enslaved to sin, whose freedom was purchased by Christ. Jewish readers might also recall that through the exodus God redeemed their fathers out of slavery in Egypt.¹⁰⁴ So here again is an echo of the exodus. However, when we read the expression **the forgiveness of sins** we leave the exodus connection, because **forgiveness** was not a strong theme of the exodus.¹⁰⁵

Whole volumes have been written about the expression Paul uses so often, “in Christ.” Paul uses this or closely related expressions in Colossians 1:28; 2:3, 6, 7, 10, 11; 3:18; 4:7, and 17. This expression speaks of our incorporation with Him, our unity with Him. All aspects of our being should be connected with the fact that the Father has drawn us into a profoundly deep relationship with Christ Jesus.¹⁰⁶

This salvation is also called our **redemption**. Looking back at the previous verse, we might conclude this **redemption** was a payment to Satan to deliver us out of the authority of darkness, but in this sentence itself our **redemption** is

¹⁰² In Eph. 1:7 Paul wrote, “In Whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of trespasses, according to the riches of His grace.” Several later manuscripts of Colossians add the words “by His blood,” clearly because at least one scribe was thinking about the more detailed Eph. 1:7 text while copying Col. 1:14. The many similarities between these two letters gave rise to this and other textual problems.

¹⁰³ This term, ἀπολύτρωσις/*apolutrōsis*, is used of our salvation ten times in the NT, sometimes referring to the salvation we now possess (as in this text) and sometimes of the salvation we will possess at the end of the age (as in Eph. 1:14 and 4:30). Outside the NT it refers to the freeing of slaves or captives, usually for a price.

¹⁰⁴ The simple verb λυτρόω/*lutroō* was used of the exodus in the LXX of Dt. 7:8; 9:26; 13:5; 15:15; 21:8; and 24:18.

¹⁰⁵ Some scholars (for instance Barth, pp. 192-93) mention that **forgiveness** is a theme of the return from the Babylonian Captivity, but at some point one begins to wonder if we are not pressing too hard to find OT themes, when we do not really even know if there were any Jews among the original readers. Paul was simply emphasizing the connection between our **redemption** and the forgiveness of our **sins**.

¹⁰⁶ O'Brien, *Philippians*, p. 46

clearly **the forgiveness of sins**. Our salvation has many elements in it, but clearly **the forgiveness of sins** is a core element. Whether at various times people have admitted their need for **forgiveness** or not, it is an overwhelming need, and the gospel addresses that need perfectly.

Some scholars¹⁰⁷ used to say that in 1:12-14 Paul was countering the teachers of “Incipient Gnosticism” with their own terms, but since there are such clear parallels between this passage and Paul’s calling as recorded in Acts 26:17-18, it is much more likely that Paul is recalling that event rather than countering any false teaching. Note all the parallels between this passage and Acts 26:17-18, “...the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so they turn from *darkness to light*, and from the *authority* of Satan to God, so that they may receive *forgiveness of sins* and *a share among those who are made holy* by faith in Me.”¹⁰⁸

Back in verse 12 one of the hoped for results of Paul’s prayer for them was thanksgiving to the Father, but here in verse 15 that has shifted to an exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ. If readers in Colossae and any other readers can begin to grasp the things that are said about the Lord Jesus here in these verses, they have all they need to know in order to reject and refute any cult that has arisen or will arise anywhere in the world. It may be true in the field of medicine that there is no panacea, no universal cure, but this epistle and in particular this passage is the universal treatment to prevent the spread of false teaching.

It may be that most or all the teachings concerning Christ here are also found in other New Testament passages, but perhaps nowhere else are they given in such a tightly compacted presentation, which almost leaves the careful reader breathless by the time he gets through verse 20.

As was discussed above in the discussion about 1:12, verses 15-20 make up the second of three reasons for the joyous thanksgiving of 1:10-12a. The first reason for that joyous thanksgiving is given in 1:12b-14, and the third reason is given in 1:21-23. These three passages are meant to inspire thankfulness.

This passage is written in a formal and exalted style, in accord with the high praise it brings to the Lord. Scholars have studied it at great length, observing its structure and style. Sometimes they speculate about whether Paul (or someone else) composed it or adapted it from some existing composition. They have asserted a wide variety of answers concerning its structure and its origin. While avoiding such speculation, it may be helpful to note some of what they have

¹⁰⁷ See for instance Martin, p. 35.

¹⁰⁸ Moule, p. 56.

observed about the structure and style of this passage, to help us read it more closely.

Here are a few basic observations about the structure of this passage:

1. The words “Who is” are in verses 15 and 18.
2. The word “Firstborn” is in verses 15 and 18.
3. The expressions “in Him,” “through Him,” and “to Him” are in verse 16 and in verses 19-20.
4. The words “and He” are in verses 17 and 18.

Verses 15-17 stress Christ’s role in creation, while verses 18-20 stress Christ in our salvation. The Christ of creation is the Christ of redemption. This is quite similar to the Old Testament idea that the Creator God and the covenant making LORD are one, as in Deuteronomy 6:4 “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” If we remember the subtle reference to the exodus redemption of Israel out of Egypt that we observed in the previous section, and that that redemption was accomplished by the LORD, this connection between the Creator God and the covenant making LORD becomes all the more significant.

This passage has some poetic elements to it, such as the repeated elements mentioned above and the initial “Who is,” so that many scholars say it was a “hymn.”¹⁰⁹ However, there is no consensus about the actual structure of that hymn or about whether Paul composed this passage entirely on his own or is quoting from some now unknown poem or hymn.¹¹⁰ It may be that there in Rome under house arrest Paul wrote every word of this passage afresh without quoting from any existing text, it may be that he borrowed some expressions that were common in Christian worship as he wrote this passage, or it may be that he took an existing “hymn” and modified it for his purposes. The Holy Spirit could have used any of those processes as He superintended the writing of this passage in God’s Word.

¹⁰⁹ When scholars use the word “hymn” in cases like these they are referring to texts that might or might not have ever been sung, but that were used in confession, in liturgy, in debate, or in praise. When they see a passage beginning with a “who is” (*ὅς/ὅσ*), with especially careful composition, parallelism, an *ab b’ a’* structure (called “chiasm” after the Greek letter χ) and unusual vocabulary, they will say that is it a “hymn” (O’Brien, pp. 32-33). However, none of those elements can tell us whether Paul wrote something himself in “hymnic” style, modified an existing hymn, or quoted an existing hymn word for word. In our translations these passages are often indented like poetry. Other possible NT “hymns” include Eph. 5:14; Phil. 2:6-11; 1 Tim. 3:16; and 2 Tim. 2:11-13.

¹¹⁰ Jeffrey S. Lamp, “Wisdom in Col 1:15-20: Contribution and Significance,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, March 1998, and O’Brien, pp. 33-36.

Some¹¹¹ say there was an original gnostic hymn, which Paul modified so that it glorifies Christ rather than a gnostic savior. It would be better to say that any second century Christian reader who was in danger of being misled into gnostic teachings might feel that Colossians 1:15-20 was written especially to steer him back from such teachings into solid truth.

Others¹¹² say that Paul was writing to counter the claims of Rabbinic Judaism concerning the supremacy of the Law which the rabbis extracted from Genesis 1:1 and Proverbs 8:22.

Still others¹¹³ say that Paul wrote this section (or adapted an existing hymn) to counter the influence of the Hellenistic Judaism of men like Philo.¹¹⁴ During the first century, Hellenistic Judaism produced a great deal of literature that elaborated upon what Proverbs teaches about wisdom,¹¹⁵ and there are parallels between that literature and this passage in Colossians.¹¹⁶

So, this is another example of how Paul deals with teachings that can draw believers away from finding their life, hope, and joy in the Lord Jesus: Christ is greater than the wisdom which the Wisdom literature might offer you.

As those who are aware of that Wisdom literature read this passage, they would see that it is not some amorphous Wisdom that has all these attributes, but a personal Savior, the One they can come to believe in, love, and obey. This is an invitation to celebrate the greatness of our Savior. Likewise when he uses “key words” of other false teachings, those that are attracted to those false teachings, or those that are in spiritual bondage because of those false teachings, will realize

¹¹¹ E. Käsemann was a major proponent of this view. See his article, “A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy,” *Essays on New Testament Themes*, ET 1964, pp. 149-168.

¹¹² W. D. Davies was a major proponent of this view. See his book *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 1955, pp. 150-152.

¹¹³ E. Schweizer wrote on this view. See his book, *The Church as the Body of Christ*, 1964, pp. 64-73.

¹¹⁴ These three views are surveyed by Martin, pp. 40-49.

¹¹⁵ Prov. 8:22 reads, “The LORD created me [wisdom] as the first of his works, before His deeds of long ago...” Prov. 8:27-30 reads, “I [wisdom] was there... when He inscribed the foundations of the earth... I [wisdom] was at his side as a craftsman. I was His delight day by day, playing before Him all the time.” In Prov. 8 wisdom seems to be the agent of creation, just as in Colossians Christ is the agent of creation. However, comparing passages in Proverbs like “when there were no watery depths, I was born” (8:24) and “before the mountains sank into place... I was born” (8:25) with Colossians we see that what Paul wrote about the Lord Jesus in Colossians clearly goes far beyond what is said about wisdom in Prov. 8.

¹¹⁶ Compare for instance Col. 1:15 “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation” with Wis. 7:26 “For she [wisdom] is the brightness of the everlasting light, the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of his goodness,” Sir. 1:4 “Wisdom hath been created before all things, and the understanding of prudence from everlasting,” and Sir. 24:9 “He created me [wisdom] from the beginning before the world, and I shall never fail.” (Wis. is the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon, and Sir. is the apocryphal “Wisdom of Jesus, the son of Sirach,” also known as Ecclesiasticus or Ben Sirach.)

with delight that it is not some amorphous *gnosis* – or the Law, or Wisdom – that has all these attributes; it is rather the Lord Jesus, my Savior, who possesses all this. There is never any need to go back to that emptiness and deception!

These parallels with Rabbinic Judaism and Hellenistic Judaism are real and probably intentional. However, there is no reason to choose between them to understand what Paul is doing in this passage. As was discussed in the Introduction, Paul draws upon various types of religious and philosophical views, and shows the reader that worshipping Christ and living in joyous thankfulness is not only the only appropriate response to the truth, it is also the path to Christian maturity.

Although it would take about 320 years for the Christian thinkers of the Council of Constantinople to formally approve the extra-biblical but sound Trinitarian theological expression of “One Essence in Three Persons,” the careful reader will see that Paul’s inspired words here are in harmony with that later expression.

1:15 He is the image of the invisible¹¹⁷ God, the firstborn over¹¹⁸ all creation,

Most obviously and immediately the Colossian Christians would read this as a rebuke of idolatry. In their world there were many gods, and those gods were visibly represented by physical idols. The Colossian people knew what Zeus and his daughter Aphrodite looked like; they were said to live far away on top of Mount Olympus, but their images were not hard to find in the real world. However, the Christian congregation in Colossae worshiped Jesus Christ, **the image of the invisible God**. This was not something a craftsman or artist made out of stone, wood, or metal, but a living **image**. The incarnation is here in this passage: **the invisible God** has been revealed and is knowable.

However, there is more to this verse than a rebuke of idol worship and a celebration of the incarnation. The Lord Jesus reveals the **God** of the Old Testament. The statement **He is the image of the invisible God** means the Lord is the perfect expression of **God**.

¹¹⁷ The word translated **invisible** here (*ἀόρατος/aoratos*) is difficult to translate in English. It might better be translated “unseen.” The word **invisible** suggests that if you looked at Him you would not see Him, but the OT teaches that seeing Him is dangerous because of the brilliance of His glory. As Ex. 33:20 says, “you cannot see My face, for no one may see Me and live.” See Gen. 32:30; Ex. 19:21, 24; 33:18-23; Lev. 16:2; Num. 4:20; Judg. 6:22-23; and 13:22 (Barth, p. 196).

¹¹⁸ Literally Christ is “the firstborn of all creation,” the genitive case being used here (*πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως/prōtotokos pasēs ktiseōs*). However, the genitive allows the translation **over**. The same is true in English: when we say, “The master of the house” we might also say “The master over the house.”

There is even more to this verse. As **the image of God**, Christ is not only the perfect expression of **God**, He is also the perfect man. Adam was created as an **image of God**,¹¹⁹ and tasked with subduing and ruling the earth, but he failed. Christ, the second man or last Adam,¹²⁰ has come as **the image of God**, and He will subdue and rule the earth. In fact, we are invited to become more like Him, and at the end of the age to be crowned, sit on thrones, and rule with Him.

If being **the image of the invisible God** is so closely tied to Adam as failed **image**, and with ruling the earth, then the same idea is carried further as the verse tells us that Christ is also **the firstborn over all creation**. The use of the term **firstborn**¹²¹ in the Greek Old Testament indicates that it can mean “first in importance” rather than “first in birth order.” In this passage it clearly means “first in importance” or “preeminent.”

Man was created and given preeminence over all the earth, but by sinning that preeminence was lost. The Lord Jesus is the New Adam, and as the perfect man, He has preeminence over the whole earth, and in fact **over all creation**. He is man as man was meant to be.

Paul teaches here at length about Christ, and how exalted He is in His very being, and how great His work for us is, for at least two reasons. The first reason is that hearing the proclamation of Christ and then knowing and loving Him is the path to Christian maturity. The second reason seems to be that any cult’s primary

¹¹⁹ We often say that Adam was created “in the image of God.” That is an overly literal translation of the preposition *ἐν*/*be*, which is often translated “in,” but in Gen. 1:26 and 27 it would be better translated “as”: Adam was created *as* God’s **image**. He was an **image** of God. This is in accord with *BDB*’s explanation of *ἐν*/*be*, which includes the idea that *ἐν*/*be* can introduce “the *predicate*, denoting it as that *in* which the subj. consists, or in which it shows itself.” It is also in accord with NT statements like 1 Cor. 11:7, “A man ought not to cover his head, since he *is* the image and glory of God...” The original statement is made in Gen. 1:26, and then repeated in 1:27. In Gen. 9:6, in the dreadful context of murder, we see that after the Fall Adam’s descendants are still images of God. The NT develops this theme even further, in that according to Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:18; and Col. 3:10 in the process of Christian growth, believers become conformed to **the image of God**. This means that in Christ we can become more and more like what Adam and Eve were originally created to be: the Creator’s representatives on earth.

¹²⁰ The theme of Christ as the Last Adam will come up again in passages concerning how we have put off the Old Man, as in Col. 3:9.

¹²¹ This term, *πρωτότοκος*/*prōtotokos*, literally means **firstborn** but that literal meaning does not work here or in verse 18, where He is *πρωτότοκος*/*prōtotokos* from the dead. Almost the same expression is in Rev. 1:5. Normally this word has its simple and literal meaning of being the *chronologically* first one born in a family, but its use in the LXX in 2 Sam. 19:44 (verse 43 in our Bibles) shows that it can mean “first in importance” instead of “the one born first.” Likewise in Ps. 88:28 (Ps. 89:27 in our Bibles), we read “I will also appoint him as my firstborn, the most exalted of the earth’s kings.” In the LXX of that verse *πρωτότοκος*/*prōtotokos* is used. The normal meaning of this word, being the one born first, just *chronologically* does not make sense in these passages, or makes it sound like the Lord Jesus was a created being. However, the use of this term in these two OT passages solves this interpretive problem: the term can mean “preeminent” or “superior,” and that is its meaning here in Col. 1:15, as is obvious from the following verse.

error will likely be to deny something of Christ's nature and His work for us. These few verses of this letter have been an effective bulwark against many false teachings in many lands in many eras, including the Lycus valley in the second half of the first century.

1:16 because by¹²² Him all things¹²³ were created, in the heavens and on the earth, the seen and the unseen,¹²⁴ whether thrones,¹²⁵ whether lordships,¹²⁶ whether rulers, whether authorities, all things were created through¹²⁷ Him and for Him,

The **because** in this verse indicates that the reason He is “firstborn” (or preeminent) “over all creation” is that He is the Creator of **all things**. Rather than being a part of what God created, the “firstborn over all creation” was the agent of the creation of **all things**. This same idea is given in John 1:1-3 and Hebrews 1:1-2.

The terms **thrones, lordships, rulers, and authorities** seem to refer to both human political leaders and to supernatural beings.¹²⁸ Readers that had an interest in politics might think more readily about earthly human leaders; readers with an interest in metaphysics might think more readily about supernatural powers, but in this context Paul seems to include them **all**.

¹²² Translated here **by**, this word is ἐν/en. It often means “in,” but here it means that Christ was the Father’s *agent* of creation. The idea of Christ as the Father’s agent in creation is even more clear near the end of the verse, where we see that **all things were created through Him** (δι’ αὐτοῦ/di autou).

¹²³ In the entire first half of the verse the article appears before each of the items listed: “the all, the in the heavens and the on the earth, the unseen, the seen.” There is a strong emphasis upon totality here. (Because of the reading of three very old manuscripts, the Critical Text is missing the article before **in the heavens** and before **on the earth**, but the Majority Text, supported by three manuscripts that are also quite old, has those articles.)

¹²⁴ Although Barth (p. 200) disagrees, O’Brien (p. 46) suggests that **in heaven and on earth, the seen and the unseen** is a “chiasm” (see the note under 1:14), because **in heaven** pairs well with **the unseen**, and **on earth** pairs well with **the seen**:

in heaven	on earth
	X
the seen	the unseen

¹²⁵ This must refer to the beings (whether human or supernatural) that sit upon those **thrones**.

¹²⁶ *BDAG* suggests that here and in Eph. 1:21 this term, κυριότης/*kuriotēs*, refers to “a special class of angelic powers.”

¹²⁷ Translated here **through**, this is the word δι’/di (for διά/dia).

¹²⁸ In the NT the terms ἐξουσία/*exousia* and ἀρχή/*archē*, here translated **authorities** and **rulers**, clearly refer to *supernatural* beings in Eph. 3:10; 6:12; and Col. 2:15. However, in Tit. 3:1 the same two terms clearly refer to *human rulers*. Barth (p. 201) cites Aeschylus, Eum 229, and Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus* 425 where “throne” can refer to human or supernatural powers.

Here again Paul draws from a vast variety of human teachings on philosophy and spirituality to expose any and all sorts of teaching that would captivate the Colossians or subsequent readers. He is telling them that even all those **thrones, lordships, rulers, and authorities** which they may have heard about or will hear about **were created by Him, through Him, and for Him**. This does not mean that there was a heresy *within* the congregation in Colossae. It does not mean that they believed any teachings about such “complex metaphysical systems.” It simply means that Paul, there under house arrest 900 miles (1400 kilometers) away in Rome, reminds them that there was no point in getting carried away by any such metaphysical teachers that might prey upon them whenever they might find their way to Colossae. Any such **thrones, lordships, rulers, and authorities** which existed, **all**, without exception, **were created by Him, through Him, and for Him**, who loves you and who has given you such wonderful gifts of grace that you should worship Him and love Him.

Some would say that **thrones, lordships, rulers, and authorities** are supernatural powers listed in the order of their well-organized ranks.¹²⁹ However, Ephesians 1:21 lists almost exactly the same terms in a very different order, so at least one of these two lists is not recorded according to rank.

Because Daniel 10:13 and 20 mention the Prince of Persia, the kings¹³⁰ of Persia, and the Prince of Greece, there is speculation that supernatural **thrones, lordships, rulers, and authorities** have authority over their respective human **thrones, lordships, rulers, and authorities**. However, those two verses in Daniel only suggest this idea, and bring up many questions, like “What is the relationship between the ‘Prince of the Kingdom of Persia’ mentioned in the beginning of Daniel 10:13 and ‘kings of Persia?’ mentioned at the end of verse 13?” Daniel 10:13 and 20 are a rather weak basis upon which to speculate about the relationship between human and supernatural **thrones, lordships, rulers, and authorities**.

Coming from a very different perspective on the supernatural, Marcus Barth¹³¹ interprets this text as “an outdated expression for what modern man calls the structures, laws, institutions, and constants of nature, evolution, history, society, the psyche, the mind.” There is no doubt that in some parts of the world

¹²⁹ O’Brien (p. 47) says Paul is not concerned about listing them in any particular order or distinguishing between them. Concern about the ranking of **thrones, lordships, rulers, and authorities** would in fact *distract* from Paul’s actual point, which is that Christ is supreme over them all.

¹³⁰ The word “kings” is plural in Daniel 10:13, despite the NIV translation. See the KJV, the ASV, the NET, and the HCSB.

¹³¹ P. 202.

“modern man” rejects the existence of anything supernatural. Readers that accept the Scriptures as the Word of God will disagree with Barth on this.¹³²

1:17 and He is before¹³³ all things, and by Him all things hold together,¹³⁴
Before moving on, Paul restates verses 15 and 16. As Creator, Christ is supreme. Then he goes a step further: Christ is not only the Creator, He is the Sustainer of **all things**.

The verb here translated **hold together** literally means “stand together” or “remain together.” Some ancient writers gave various ideas about how creation is sustained.¹³⁵ That issue is brought up in this verse. If someone in the congregation was tempted by the ideas of Philo, or the Wisdom literature, or a variety of others that have touched on this theme, Paul helps that reader to see that Jesus Christ is holding **all things together** and is, again, worthy of all our adoration – there is no point in drifting off into anyone’s empty philosophy. Likewise the modern Christian reader, told over and over again that the Laws of Physics generated the universe and continue to sustain it, can now understand that it is his Savior that created **all things**, and it is his Savior that sustains **all things**.

¹³² Readers that accept only selected parts of the Scriptures as the Word of God, rejecting other parts as human additions, should ask themselves how God’s Scriptures might ever rebuke them, since they have given themselves the right to reject Scriptures which they find objectionable.

¹³³ This preposition, *πρὸ/pro*, seems to mean “more important” or “higher in rank” in this verse, but that meaning is rare in the NT. Jms. 5:12 and 1 Pet. 4:8 are possible NT examples of this meaning, but even there it could mean “before you do anything else....” It usually means “before in time,” or “before in physical position,” but because the verb is (*ἔσται/estin*) is in the present tense, it is hard to interpret this verse to be about His existence prior to creation.

¹³⁴ This word (*συνίστημι/sunistēmi* from *συν/sun* and *ἵστημι/histēmi*) literally means “to stand together” or “to hold together.” It is used 16 times in the NT. Its most common meaning in and outside the NT is “to commend,” as in 2 Cor. 3:1. Apparently that meaning was derived from the literal meaning in that when you commend someone you are “standing together” with that person. However, that most common meaning does not fit in this context. The same verb is translated “formed” in 2 Peter 3:5 “long ago the heavens existed and the earth was *formed* out of water and by means of water by God’s word.” Within that verse the context pushes the meaning of this verb towards the act of creation: “to make things come together into orderly existence.” It is true that Col. 1:15-16 are about creation, but here in Col. 1:17 Paul seems to be going beyond creation to Christ’s work in *sustaining* creation.

¹³⁵ Concerning God’s power in all creation, the apocryphal Ecclesiasticus (also known as Ben Sirach) 43:26b reads “all things hold together by His word.” This passage uses a different verb, *σύγκειμαι/sugkeimai*, which literally means “to recline together.” Wisdom 1:7 says, “For the Spirit of the LORD fills the whole earth, and that which holds all things together has knowledge of the voice.” Philo said the Logos was a “band... which binds together all [the universe’s] individual parts and holds them together, and prevents them from dissolving and separating from each other” (*Fug.* 112, quoted by Barth, p. 205). Similarly in Hebrews 1:3 we read that the Son “sustains all things by His powerful word.” That verse in Hebrews uses the common verb, *φέρω/pherō*, which literally means “to bear or carry from one place to another.”

1:18 and He is the Head of the Body, the church. He is Source,¹³⁶ Firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself might be first among all things,

Here Paul shifts from Christ's supreme position as preeminent over the old creation to His supreme position over the new creation. Christ is **the Head of the Body, the church.**¹³⁷ The metaphor is that just as the **head** of a person is where that person's authority is, so Christ is the church's authority.¹³⁸ This metaphor is appropriate. Normally in the human **body** members obey the **head**. When there is paralysis or spasm so that members do not obey the **head**, it is troubling and sad. So it is when members of the **church** do not obey its **Head**.

When Paul writes of **the church** here, he does not refer only to the local **church**, but also to the entire universal **church**.¹³⁹ Any particular local **church** is a representation of the universal **church**. Everyone that has placed his faith in Jesus Christ as his personal Savior is a part of the universal **church**, and certainly should be a part of a local **church**.

Earlier, Paul had written that the **church** is like a **body** (1 Corinthians 12:12-27 and Romans 12:4-8) and that "the head of every man is Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:3), but Ephesians 4:15; 5:23 and Colossians 1:18 are the first record we have of

¹³⁶ This word, ἀρχή/*archē*, basically means "origin" or "beginning," either of a particular process or of all existence, but it came to be used as a title for people that have the authority to make things begin. It is the singular of the word translated "rulers" in Col. 1:16 and 2:15. Since English does not have a word like that, it is translated **Source** here.

¹³⁷ In Col. 2:19 this same idea is further developed concerning false teachers, who are not "holding fast to the Head, from Whom the whole body, supported and knit together through the joints and ligaments, grows with growth from God."

¹³⁸ In non-personal usages, like the "head of the Nile River" or "the head of the column," the idea of authority will of course be lacking. The head of a column can have no authority over the column, nor can the source of a river have authority over the river. However, whenever the term κεφαλή/*kephalē* (**head**) is used of a person, that person has authority. This has important applications for us as we understand and apply Eph. 5:23 which reads "For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, His body, of which He is the Savior," and 1 Cor. 11:3 which reads "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God."

¹³⁹ Most commentators agree. See, for instance, Moule, p. 69. However, O'Brien (pp. 57-61) suggests that because up to this point in time, outside the New Testament, the Greek word for **church** refers to a group of people only when they are assembled, the idea of the "universal church" should be rejected in favor of the "heavenly church." In other words, whenever the word **church** does not refer to a local assembly, it refers to the **church** assembled in the heavenlies. O'Brien claims that passages like Gal. 4:25-27; Phil. 3:19-20; Eph. 1:3; 2:5-6; and Col. 1:12-14 support the idea that believers are present and assembled in the heavenlies with Christ at the same time that we are here on earth. If that were the case, then each local **church** would be a manifestation of that heavenly **church**. The idea of a heavenly **church** rather than a universal **church** does have the advantage of keeping a consistent meaning for the word **church**: a presently gathered assembly. However, O'Brien's proposal is very unlikely for several reasons. Firstly, the Pauline passages mentioned above are weak support for this concept. Secondly, the **Body** metaphor in 2:19 tells us that the **Body** is growing in quality, but that would be hard to say about a heavenly **church** – would it not already be perfect? Thirdly, it presupposes that deceased believers are conscious in heaven prior to the resurrection, which may not be the case. See the discussion on this issue in the endnote on Phil. 1:23 in this author's commentary on Philipians.

the idea that Christ is the **Head of the Body** of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12:21 the **head** is simply another member along with the eye, the hand, and the feet, which does not fit with the idea that Christ is the **Head of the Body**. This might seem to indicate a progression in the revelation Paul was receiving from God, but the purposes of this text and 1 Corinthians 12 are quite different, and so call for different metaphors: here Paul is writing about the relationship between the **church** and its Lord, but in 1 Corinthians 12 he was writing about relationships between **church** members.¹⁴⁰ Because of the different purposes in those texts, it is speculative to say that there was progression in Paul's thinking, or even in the revelation God gave to him.

There is a great deal of speculation about where Paul got the idea that **the church** is **the Body** of Christ, as if it could not simply be by revelation. Indeed, when Christ first spoke to Paul in Acts 9 He said, "Why do you persecute Me?" That question strongly implies the connection between Christ and His church.

Christ is also **Firstborn from the dead**. Here the term **Firstborn** indicates both priority in rank and in time.¹⁴¹ Although others had been resurrected from the **dead**, He was the first to experience permanent resurrection. That made Him **first among all things**. It is difficult to understate the importance of the resurrection! His status as **first among all things** is complete and unassailable because of what He accomplished through His death and resurrection. Since He became **Firstborn from the dead**, one result is that **He Himself** is **first among all things**. The next two verses explain in more detail that He has this preeminent status both because of who He is and because of what He accomplished – His Person and His Work.

1:19 **because in Him all the fullness**¹⁴² **was pleased to dwell**,¹⁴³

This is such a powerful and intriguing expression. Unhappily, it is difficult to translate it.¹⁴⁴ In Colossians 2:9 the same expressions **all the fullness** and **dwell** are found, and **the fullness** is explained to be **the fullness** "of deity." Further,

¹⁴⁰ Barth (p. 207) and Bruce (p. 202).

¹⁴¹ See the endnote on verse 15 concerning the term *πρωτότοκος/prōtotokos*.

¹⁴² *πλήρωμα/plērōma*

¹⁴³ This verb, **to dwell**, is almost always used in expressions like "dwell in Jerusalem," "dwell in Ephesus," or "dwell in Asia," so that we might translate it "inhabit." In contrast with the word *παροικέω/paroikeō*, this word, *κατοικέω/katoikeō*, suggests permanent inhabiting.

¹⁴⁴ It is best to take **all the fullness** as the subject of the sentence. It is grammatically possible that **all the fullness** is the object of **was pleased** and the subject, "God," is understood but not expressed. In that case the verse would be translated, "because in Him God was pleased to have all the fullness dwell."

the usage of the ideas **fullness**¹⁴⁵ and **pleased to dwell**¹⁴⁶ in the Old Testament suggest that this verse is saying that **all the fullness** of God, or even God Himself, abided easily in Christ. Moule¹⁴⁷ suggests that it means “God in all His fullness.” Macphail¹⁴⁸ says this refers to an eternal residence of the divine **fullness**. Christ is the “place” where God in all His **fullness** was **pleased to dwell**.

It would be astounding to say that divinity dwells happily in anyone except the members of the Trinity,¹⁴⁹ but very fitting to say that **all the fullness** of true divinity dwells easily in our Savior and so through Him all things could be reconciled to God.

Although the term **fullness** is used 17 times in the New Testament, only in Ephesians 1:23; 3:19; 4:13; and Colossians 2:9 is it used the way it is used here.

This verse became one of the arguments for the idea that in Colossians Paul was combating “Incipient Gnosticism,”¹⁵⁰ an interpretation that is completely unsupported by first century historical documents but not entirely impossible. If that approach were correct, then for us in the twenty-first century we are simply being told that those Gnostics – who all passed from the scene long ago – were wrong, and the answer is in Christ.

If however the Old Testament connections to the glory of the LORD filling the temple and the LORD being pleased to dwell in Zion are the background for this

¹⁴⁵ In 1 Kgs. 8:10-11; 2 Chr. 5:13-14; and 7:1-2 the glory of the LORD filled the temple. In Jer. 23:24 and Ps. 72:19 God or His glory fills every place.

¹⁴⁶ In speaking of the sanctuary in Jerusalem, the LXX of Ps. 68:16 refers to “the mountain where God was pleased to dwell,” using the same two Greek words that this verse uses, εὐδοκέω/*eudokeō* and κατοικέω/*katoikeō*. In the LXX this is Ps. 67:17. Similarly, in two Aramaic translations of OT passages, it was well pleasing for God to have His shekinah glory **dwell** on Mt. Sinai (Targ. Ps. 68:17) and among men (Targ. 1 Kgs. 8:27).

¹⁴⁷ P. 70.

¹⁴⁸ Referred to in the *EBC Notes* on this verse.

¹⁴⁹ The idea of **all the fullness** of the godhead coming upon someone so as to deify him might appear in pagan myths, but it is purely mythological!

¹⁵⁰ Because in the next century the Gnostics used the word πλήρωμα/*plērōma* (**fullness**) as a technical term with a very specific meaning in their false teachings about levels of supernatural beings arrayed between the holy and spiritual God and the sinful and physical world, some interpreters have come to the conclusion that Paul is saying, “Dear Colossians, those that are bringing this false teaching to you are telling you all about these πληρώματα/*plērōmata* that supposedly fill the huge gap between God and man. However, all the πλήρωμα/*plērōma* is there in Christ, who fills the gap between God and man!” This is indeed a striking connection of ideas, so striking that these interpreters, in trying to deal with the fact that at this time there were no known Gnostics, propose that the heresy that made its way into the congregation was “Incipient Gnosticism,” meaning “emerging Gnosticism.”

verse, then we are being reminded of the wonder of the incarnation as a prelude to the glory of the cross.

In verse 18 we learn that because of the resurrection the Lord is “first in all things.” Verse 19 supports that by affirming that all the **fullness** of divinity dwells at ease in Him. Then verse 20 further supports His preeminence by saying that through Him all things are reconciled to God. He is first because of His resurrection, His divinity, and His victory on the cross.

1:20 and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself,¹⁵¹ making peace through the blood of His cross – through Him¹⁵² – whether the things on earth or the things in the heavens.

Not only was all the fullness of God pleased to dwell in Christ, God was also pleased **to reconcile all things to Himself**. It was not done this way just because there was no other way to accomplish the task than **through the blood of His cross**, so the Lord was “forced” to agree to the Cross. God was *pleased* to accomplish it this way in order to show the perfection of His love. Paul’s emphasis is on Christ: just as **all** creation was created **through Him**, so **all** creation is reconciled **through Him**.

As magnificent as our personal salvation in Christ is, this passage reminds us that Jesus Christ accomplished much more when He died on the **cross**. Somehow all creation, the whole cosmos, was **reconciled** to God, and **peace** was created. There are those that through faith willingly enjoy that **peace**, and there are those that will never draw near to Him. Some of those are human, some are rebellious angels. The latter are pacified,¹⁵³ as is further explained in Colossians 2:15, which reads, “Disarming the rulers and authorities, He publicly shamed them, displaying them in a triumphal procession, by the cross.” Neither Colossians 1:20 nor Philippians 2:10-11 (“so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”) speak of a reconciliation in which any rebellious angel, or any man without faith in Christ, will be in harmony with God.

¹⁵¹ The Greek here is literally “to Him,” but is here translated **to Himself** because it seems to refer to God. Barth (pp. 214-215) says you would have to change the accentuation to be reflexive to reference it back to God, and does not accept that, but Moule (p. 70), and Bruce (p. 74) do. In Rom. 5:10 and 2 Cor. 5:18-20 the reconciliation is with God rather than with Christ, so it would be strange here if the “to Him” here referred to Christ.

¹⁵² The phrase **through Him** (δι’ αὐτοῦ/*di’ autou*) is repeated here in most manuscripts, including p^{46} , (written about AD 200,) \aleph , A, and C.

¹⁵³ Although moving from **peace** to pacification seems inappropriate in English, the Hebrew word שָׁלוֹם /*šālōm* is used for pacification or victory in passages like Dt. 20:10-11; Judg. 8:9; 11:31; and 1 Kings 22:27.

Romans 5:10 and 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 are the two other passages that mention this reconciliation. In both of those passages it is God that does the reconciling, and man is reconciled to Him.

This reconciliation is explained with the expression **making peace**. In the New and Old Testaments, **peace** is more than the absence of war. It could be translated “well-being.” In the Old Testament it is sometimes about personal well-being (in Exodus 18:7 the words translated “they each asked about the other’s welfare” in the NET are literally “they asked, a man to his friend, concerning peace”), sometimes about interpersonal well-being (in Genesis 37:4 Joseph’s brothers “hated him and were not able to speak to him in peace”), and sometimes about well-being between ethnic groups (in Joshua 9:15 Joshua “made peace with them”).

Paul tells us that this **peace** has been obtained **through the blood of the cross**. This expression, **the blood of the cross**, occurs only here in the Bible. Expressions like “the blood of the covenant” in Hebrews 9:20 and 10:29 and “blood of sprinkling” in Hebrews 12:24 are similar,¹⁵⁴ and remind us that Jesus Christ’s death on **the cross** was a substitutionary sacrifice made to God, because of which God can justly forgive us our sins. By the Lord Jesus’ death on **the cross** reconciliation has been accomplished. There is no other ground, no other way to bring reconciliation between God and man.

Although it is not yet visible to us, the chaos and strife that sin brought into the world have already been dealt with. Somehow, although Paul also wrote that “All creation groans and suffers until now,” **all** creation has also already been **reconciled to Him**. Perhaps that “already” and “not yet” is why it groans!

Besides this “already” and “not yet,” there is another mystery in this passage: although **through Him all things were reconciled to Him**, we also know that some will never have their sins forgiven, and will experience an eternity in punishment without Him. At **the cross** the complete work of reconciliation, which includes an entire new creation, is assured but not yet completely put into place. Romans 8:18-22 tells us that somehow all of creation is linked to the fallen state of man, and will be linked to man’s full experience of restoration. Paul is emphasizing the universal scope of this reconciliation, not some automatic reconciliation without faith in Christ.

¹⁵⁴ Barth, p. 217.

Here the “hymn” closes. As O’Brien¹⁵⁵ points out, Paul’s prayer led into the hymn, and the passages that immediately follow apply it to the readers.

1:21 And you formerly were estranged¹⁵⁶ and hostile¹⁵⁷ in your minds¹⁵⁸ as you showed by¹⁵⁹ your evil deeds,

Paul now gives the third of three reasons for joyous thanksgiving, the first being in verses 12-14, and the second being in verses 15-20. As noted under the discussion on 1:12, these three passages should draw us to thankfulness.

In 1:15-20 we read that through Christ’s *death* God has *reconciled all things* to Himself – in 1:22 we read that the Colossians have been *reconciled*, and that that reconciliation happened “by the body of His flesh through His *death*,” and in 1:23 we see that the universal reach of that reconciliation is paralleled by the fact that the gospel “is preached in *all creation* under heaven.” Thus we see that the high and universal sweep of 1:15-20 is now brought to bear upon the congregation in Colossae and Paul’s ministry.¹⁶⁰

They **formerly** very much needed reconciliation, and God accomplished that. Although Paul can certainly rebuke believers when their behavior calls for it, as in the case of the Galatians and the Corinthians, he does not say that believers are now *essentially estranged and hostile in their minds*. That was **formerly** their

¹⁵⁵ P. 62.

¹⁵⁶ Several commentators (including Moule, p. 71; O’Brien, p. 66; and Barth, p. 219) say that this estrangement is between Gentile and Jew, because of how the same word, ἀπαλλοτριώω/*apallotriōō*, is used in Eph. 2:12. However, that is importing too much of Ephesians into Colossians. While it is true that Gentiles were **estranged** from citizenship in Israel, it is also true that without faith in Christ, both Jew and Gentile are **estranged** from God. The context here in Colossians is about reconciliation with God, not about the divide between Jew and Gentile.

¹⁵⁷ The word translated **hostile** (ἐχθρός/*echthros*) can refer either to a hated person or a hating person.

¹⁵⁸ The word here translated **minds** (διάνοια/*dianoia*) can also be translated “understanding,” “intelligence,” “thought,” “plan,” “purpose,” “imagination,” or “impulse” (*BDAG*). Some (for instance O’Brien, p. 66) have suggested that it is closer to the English word “heart,” perhaps because of how Jer. 31:33 is translated in Heb. 8:10 and 10:16. However, Heb. 8:10 and 10:16 really just demonstrate that our hearts and our **minds** are closely interrelated. Further, verses like Lk. 1:51 and 1 Jn. 5:20 suggest that this word is closer to “mind” than “heart.” The word διάνοια/*dianoia* is used in the LXX chiefly to translate לֵב/*leb*, but that fact seems to tell us more about the breadth of the idea of לֵב/*leb* than the meaning of διάνοια/*dianoia*.

¹⁵⁹ The preposition ἐν/*en*, which occurs right before **your evil deeds** usually means “in,” but *BDAG* says it can mark how something is recognized, so here it is translated **as you showed by**.

¹⁶⁰ Barth, p. 65.

essential nature,¹⁶¹ but a multifaceted change has transformed us, so that kind of constitutional or essential rebuke is never made about believers. Rather, we are said to be “a new creation” in 2 Corinthians 5:17. In fact, when Paul shifts to their present status (in verse 22) he must begin with “but now,” because the former status of being **estranged and hostile in your minds** is now only history, a history that should be gratefully left behind.

This former hostility of **mind**, which manifested itself in **evil deeds**, contrasts sharply with the knowledge of the truth which brings right behavior, a major theme in this letter. The **mind**, and what we do with ours, should be a concern not only for an intellectual minority, but for all Christians. Just as “the understanding of His will in all wisdom and spiritual insight” can enable us to “walk worthily of the Lord, pleasing to Him in all things” (1:9-10), so on the other hand **hostile minds** show themselves in **evil deeds**. Our **minds** and our thoughts are significant; Romans 12:2 teaches us to be transformed by the renewing of our **minds**.

1:22-23 *His work climaxes in us being reconciled to God and also, if we are faithful, us being presented to the Father.*

1:22 but now He has reconciled you¹⁶² by the body of His flesh¹⁶³ through His death to present¹⁶⁴ you holy and unblemished and blameless before Him,

¹⁶¹ The reader of the 1984 version of the NIV will object because that translation refers to the “sinful nature” of believers 23 times. However, none of those passages uses the Greek word for “nature,” φύσις/*phusis*. They all use the word “flesh,” σάρξ/*sarx*. The only passage that uses the actual word for our nature to speak of a sinful nature is Eph. 2:3 “Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.” That passage clearly speaks of people before they were born again and became sharers in the divine nature, the θεϊα φύσεως/*theias phuseōs*, as described in 2 Pet. 1:4. Happily, in the 2010 version of the NIV σάρξ/*sarx* is translated literally as “flesh,” except in Rom. 7:18 and 25 where it is still translated “sinful nature.”

¹⁶² The pronoun **you** is supplied in the English translation, but only implied in the original.

¹⁶³ The seemingly cumbersome expression **the body of His flesh** supports the claims of some that this letter was targeting Docetism or Incipient Gnosticism, which would reject the incarnation (Bruce, p. 212; Martin, p. 57; and O’Brien, p. 68). However, the same expression is found in Hebrew in the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QpHab 9:2) to speak of the physical **body** of a wicked priest (O’Brien, p. 68; and Martin, p. 57), so even though the expression seems cumbersome in English it seems to have been a normal expression in the Hebrew mind.

¹⁶⁴ This verb, to **present** (παρίστημι/*paristēmi*), suggests the idea of being presented to a legal court (as in Acts 27:24; Rom. 14:10; and 2 Cor. 4:14), and that is the background that is relevant here. Christ wants the Colossians to be presented **before Him** at the Bema Seat Judgment when He will award various rewards to faithful believers at the beginning of the Thousand Year Kingdom. Likewise when the same verb is used again in 1:28 we see that Paul labors to be able to **present** the people he has ministered to before Christ at the end of the age. This verb, παρίστημι/*paristēmi* is also used in 2 Cor. 4:14; 11:2; and Eph. 5:27 concerning the presentation of believers before Christ upon His return. O’Brien, p. 68, holds this view, as do Lohse, Masson, and Dibelius-Greeven, according to Martin, p. 58.

Their former condition of estrangement and hostility is sharply contrasted with their present condition. The time frame, the means, and the purpose of the reconciliation they now enjoy are set forth for us. The *time frame* is **now**, we have entered into and presently enjoy this **reconciled** status. The *means* was that His body, which was real human **flesh**, though not **flesh** contaminated with sins like our **flesh**, was crucified. He was put to **death** on the cross. The *purpose* is so that at the end of the age He can give us to His Father, as part of the **holy and unblemished and blameless** fruit of His work on earth. Thus in one verse Paul has highlighted Good Friday and the Second Coming!

The reader may wonder about this presentation at the end of the age. Of course we do not know many of the details, but we may have already participated in some “dress rehearsals” of such a presentation. In our world today there are graduation ceremonies, ceremonies for athletic and military honors, retirement ceremonies, and other sorts of ceremonies and banquets in which we honor men and women for their achievements. All of those are precursors to the ultimate “awards banquet,” when those that have been faithful are rewarded for their faithfulness.

The grammatical form of the verb **to present**¹⁶⁵ has its usual idea of purpose. He is describing the *purpose* of our reconciliation, rather than the assured *result* of our reconciliation. Christ had a purpose in reconciling us. He looks forward to that great Day when He will be able to stand before His Father and **present** some people **holy and unblemished and blameless**. “Father, these are the men, women, and children that have taken Our words seriously. They have loved Us. They have lived and served well. They are holy, unblemished, and blameless.” Elements of that great Day are also described in Romans 14:10; 1 Corinthians 3:12-15; 9:17, 24-27; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Colossians 3:24; 2 Timothy 2:3-6, 11-13; and 4:7-8.

As strange as it may seem, this passage does not assert that *all* reconciled people will be presented in this condition. According to His perfect wisdom, He has allowed all reconciled people the opportunity to join with Him and accomplish this purpose, or to reject this aspect of His purpose for them. Those that would reject this aspect of His purpose for them have in effect decided not to meet the condition described in the next verse. This does not mean they will end up in eternal judgment, but they will lose their rewards, like the man in 1 Corinthians 3:15 of whom it is written “he will sustain a hard loss, but he himself will be saved, but as through fire.”

¹⁶⁵ The verb **to present** is a Greek infinitive, as was the verb “to walk” in 1:10. Infinitives can express result, which would mean that the presentation as **holy** will be a result of reconciliation, but Greek infinitives normally express purpose, which means that one of the purposes of our reconciliation is so that we will be presented **holy** before God.

It is true that these words, **holy and unblemished and blameless**, might refer to our perfect and unshakable status in Christ. The word **holy** certainly does mean that in 1:2. In that sense all believers in Christ have become **holy and unblemished and blameless**, but that is not the sense of these words here.

If that were what Paul was referring to, then this verse could mean “the result of this reconciliation that He accomplished by His bodily death is that He will certainly present you all holy and unblemished and blameless before Him.” However, that interpretation stretches the grammar and is not required by the words **holy and unblemished and blameless**. The word **holy** can and here does refer to the holiness that we attain by our diligent separation from sin, as in 1 Peter 1:15-16, which says “but, just as the One who called you is holy, so be holy yourself in all your behavior, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy.’” See also Romans 12:1; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 2 Timothy 1:9; and 2 Peter 3:11.

Likewise the word **unblemished** can and here does refer to a status we attain to by living rightly, as in Philippians 2:14-15, which says, “Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you might be blameless and pure, children of God unblemished in the midst of a crooked and perverted generation, among whom you shine like stars in the sky.”

The word **blameless** is only used five times in the New Testament, *always* referring to a status to which believers can obtain by righteousness living, not the status ascribed to us because we are in Christ. This is most clear in the three texts in which this same word is used as a qualification for church office: 1 Timothy 3:10; Titus 1:6, and 7. Clearly, not all believers are **blameless** in this sense. Nevertheless it is Christ’s purpose **to present us holy and unblemished and blameless before Him**. If this is our Savior’s purpose, we all should look diligently to discover the conditions by which His purpose will be accomplished.

The purpose of the reconciliation that God has worked out which is discussed here is **to present you holy and unblemished and blameless before Him**. It is not a coincidence that the purpose of Paul’s prayer for them, given in 1:10-12, is so similar. Paul’s prayers paralleled God’s purpose! Likewise in 1:28 as Paul describes the purpose of his ministry, he uses the same verb, **to present**, when he explains how he labors to “*present* all men mature in Christ Jesus.” Paul’s labors paralleled God’s purpose. What a wonderful thing, to find that one’s prayers and one’s life purpose parallel God’s purpose!

1:23 **if indeed you remain¹⁶⁶ in the faith, established,¹⁶⁷ steadfast, and not moved from the hope of the gospel which you have heard, which is preached¹⁶⁸ in all creation under heaven, of which I, Paul, have become a servant.**

In order to be presented before the Father “holy and unblemished and blameless” there is a condition to be fulfilled. The condition is simply that we **remain in the faith**.¹⁶⁹ The condition is that believers not apostatize, but instead be **steadfast**.

Paul is not doubting their salvation or the validity of their personal **faith**. In 1:5 he wrote that their **faith** “is on account of the hope laid up for you in the heavens, which you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel.” It would be illogical to say on the one hand their **faith** was on account of the hope laid up for them in the heavens, and on the other hand here to mean that they would have to wait and see if they persevered in good works to know whether their **faith** was the right kind of **faith** to gain them eternal salvation.

This is not a promise that all born again and saved individuals will fulfill this condition, it is simply a statement of the condition required in order to gain that wonderful praise from our Lord. This is also not a condition for eternal salvation. The most straightforward way to read these two verses is that they mean that Christ has reconciled us to God, in order to make a special presentation of us to God, and all we have to do to be included in that special presentation is to **remain in the faith**. This text does *not* say that if we do not **remain in the faith** we somehow become unreconciled to God or lose our salvation, and we should not force that idea into this text. It also does *not* say that we will all

¹⁶⁶ This verb, ἐπιμένω/*epimenō*, means to **remain**, “to abide,” “to stay on,” or “to persist.” In Acts 10:48; 21:4, 10; 28:12, 14; 1 Cor. 16:7, 8; and Gal. 1:18 it has its common meaning of “remaining in a particular location for a certain amount of time.” In Rom. 11:22 and 23 it has a metaphorical sense, as it does in this verse.

¹⁶⁷ This verb, θεμελιόω/*themelioō*, means “to give a foundation,” a θεμέλιος/*themelios*. Here in this form it would mean “founded,” or “established upon a foundation.” Just as a literal building should be constructed upon a literal foundation so that it can endure, so our lives should, figuratively speaking, be built upon Christ and His grace, so that we can continue **in the faith**. In Eph. 3:17 this word has a very similar meaning.

¹⁶⁸ This term, κηρυχθέντος/*kēruchthentos*, is an aorist passive participle from κηρύσσω/*kērussō*, which means “to preach.” It is translated “has been proclaimed” in the NIV, and “was preached” in the KJV. However, any element of “pastness” which the aorist tense might bring to this verb is certainly lost when it is a participle. So Paul is really not saying that this preaching has already been accomplished all over the world.

¹⁶⁹ In Greek the expression **the faith** can refer to the body of truths which we believe (1 Tim. 3:9 “the mystery of the faith”), but it can also refer to our personal belief (Rom. 10:17 in literal translation is “Therefore the faith out of hearing, and the hearing through the word of God.”) In English the expression **the faith** cannot have that second meaning (we can say “his faith is strong” but we cannot say “the faith of him is strong”), but it is common enough in the NT. However, here the meaning is probably “the body of truths which we believe” (O’Brien, p. 69). Even so, some including *EBC* hold that it refers to their personal faith. The overall meaning of the verse remains the same with either understanding: those that do not continue to believe in the Lord and His Word will not be presented in that heavenly awards banquet.

automatically **remain in the faith** just because we are really born again, and we should not force that idea into this text. Put simply, Paul is saying, “You that have believed in Christ, and thus have certainly gained eternal salvation, don’t drift away, or you will miss out on that wonderful event when the Lord will present faithful believers to the Father as those that have by faith and obedience glorified His name.” What a shame it would be to miss out on that event.¹⁷⁰

The meaning of to **remain in the faith** is explained with three expressions: **established, steadfast, and not moved from the hope of the gospel**. To be **established** could also be translated “to be set upon a foundation.” The word **steadfast** means “to be solidly in place.” Likewise the third expression, that is, **not moved from the hope of the gospel which you have heard**, also emphasizes being *stationary*. It is possible to “move on” to some other source of hope, but if they do that they will not fulfill the condition for being involved in that wonderful presentation.

That third expression is an echo of what Paul wrote in Philippians 3. Let the **gospel** continue to be our **hope**. When we are troubled and our heart aches, we must not think, “Oh, I hope I can get better transportation (or a better place to live, or a better spouse), because life would be so much easier if I just had a better this or a better that...” The person that thinks that sort of thing has – at least for that moment – **moved from the hope of the gospel**. He or she thinks there are workable solutions for life’s heartaches outside **the hope of the gospel**. No earthly relationship, possession, or success can really solve the deep problems of our hearts’ aches. These earthly things are all deceptive imitations of the real solution. We should rejoice in the Lord. We should boast in the **gospel**. Any other pattern will draw us away from **the faith** and – sooner or later – disqualify us from being presented “holy and unblemished and blameless” before God on that great Day.

If they will fulfill this condition, they will indeed be presented “mature in Christ Jesus,” as Paul puts it in 1:28.

In this brief reference to the **gospel**, he mentions two things about it. There are other so-called “gospels” in circulation, as is clear from Galatians, but this is **the**

¹⁷⁰ Putting this in theological vocabulary, this text is saying that being included at that presentation is not something all regenerate people obtain by virtue of being in Christ, but rather it is something only some Christians gain by virtue of ongoing healthy Christian living. On the one hand “holy, blameless, and without blemish” could perhaps refer to our “position in Christ,” but on the other hand, “if indeed you abide in the faith” is certainly a condition! Those holding to Lordship salvation and the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints would say that all true believers must and will abide in the faith, but this verse cannot really be used to defend those theological positions. Those that say that it is possible for regenerate people to lose their salvation might use these verses to say that our eternal salvation is conditional and requires us to abide in the faith. They also misread this text.

gospel which you have heard. They must not put their **hope** in any other “gospel,” even when other “gospels” are fervently offered to them. Also, as he has already made clear in 1:6, this **gospel** is not a mere local fad. It is being **preached in all creation under heaven.** They are a part of a massive movement which God is building up, which will reach every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

At the mention of **the gospel, Paul** shifts to the subject of his own role as **servant**¹⁷¹ of **the gospel.** As a **servant of the gospel,** as a “servant of the church,” **Paul** is serving them via this letter.

Paul’s thanksgiving and prayer end here, and as is appropriate in Greek letters, he has brought to the front all the major themes he will develop in his letter.

1:24–3:4 *The Gospel and Christian Growth*

In this extended section Paul warns and teaches the Colossians so that when the Day comes he can present them mature in Christ.

1:24–2:5 *As a servant of that gospel, Paul works to present everyone mature in Christ.*

The gospel that Paul has written of is perfect. However, at the same time it “lacks” something: a distribution process. That is where Paul makes up what is “lacking” in Christ’s sufferings for the church. God made him a servant of the church, with the task of fulfilling the long-hidden but newly revealed mystery.

1:24 **Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you and in my flesh I fulfill what is lacking in the affliction of Christ for His body, which is the church,**

This verse contains two strange truths. Paul says **I rejoice in my sufferings for you,** and he tells us there is something **lacking in the affliction of Christ for His body.** Paul’s **sufferings** were not just for the sake of suffering. It brought Paul joy to suffer because it was a part of participating on the on-going work of Christ. He saw his **sufferings** as a part of the **affliction of Christ.**

¹⁷¹ This is the word *διάκονος/diakonos*, which we sometimes see written as “deacon.” Here Paul is a *διάκονος/diakonos* of **the gospel**, in 1:7 Epaphras is a *διάκονος/diakonos* of Christ, and in 4:7 Tychicus is a faithful *διάκονος/diakonos*. Three times in the NT this term refers to men that hold a particular office in the church (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8 and 12). Sometimes, as here, it is used more broadly, to refer to servants of God, servants of Christ, or servants of **the gospel** (1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 6:4; 11:23; Eph. 3:7; 6:21; Col. 1:7, 23, 25; and 4:7). It simply refers to people that serve. They might serve a king (Mt. 22:13), they might serve at a wedding (Jn. 2:5 and 9), or in a household. This word speaks of a person’s role, unlike the more common word *δοῦλος/doulos* (“slave”), which speaks of his or her legal status. The word *διάκονος/diakonos* is used 29 times in the NT, while the word *δοῦλος/doulos* is used 126 times. In Colossians, *διάκονος/diakonos* is found in 1:7, 23, 25; and 4:7, and the term *δοῦλος/doulos* is used in 3:11, 22; 4:1 and 12.

In Philippians 1:12-18 Paul encourages his friends and supporters in Philippi not to be discouraged about his **sufferings** in Rome, because the Lord is using his chains to further the gospel, so in fact their partnership in gospel ministry is enhanced by his **sufferings**. Paul did not have the same kind of partnership with the Colossian congregation, but he did encourage them about the unseen reality behind his **sufferings**. The purpose and importance of suffering is a well-developed theme in the New Testament.¹⁷²

The way he expresses that encouragement is striking for three reasons: firstly, that any man would **rejoice** in any **sufferings**, secondly that the apostle would be so bold as to say that there is anything **lacking in the affliction of Christ for His body**, and thirdly that he would be so bold as to claim that in his **sufferings** for them he fulfills that lack!

Taking a closer look at the first of these three surprises, that Paul would write, **I rejoice in my sufferings for you**, it should be noted that Paul was no hypocrite when wrote in Philippians 2:1-4 that the congregation should put the interests of others ahead of their own interests. His life has become a model of this, and he is speaking from his heart. In his house arrest in Rome he modeled putting the interests of others ahead of his own interests, and it was a joy for him (Philippians 1:12-26). In Philippians 2:17 he put a very similar idea in a beautiful metaphor, “But if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and I rejoice together with you all.” In Philippians 3:10 he expresses eagerness to participate in the sufferings of Christ, “I want to know Him and the power of His resurrection and the participation in His sufferings, becoming conformed to His death...” That longing of his heart was met as he suffered in his ministry for the churches, and it was a joy for him. In our hearts we must decide whether it is impossibly “spiritual” to do this (so Paul was either some other sort of humanity or perhaps he “adjusted the truth” for his own reasons), or it has been possible for others in more challenging situations to take this attitude, and it is now possible for us as well. Do we really believe that the Word of God is a reliable guide for our inner heart life?

It is true that there is some suffering in the everyday life of the follower of Christ even in societies that are not overtly hostile to Christ, suffering in the snubs and polite mockery of the sophisticated that feel faith in Christ is mere superstition. However, we should not let the existence of such mild suffering divert our thinking from the deep and varied suffering that the Apostle Paul was rejoicing in, particularly since so many Christians work so hard at making their lives free of discomfort and suffering in any form. Paul was not merely missing out on a

¹⁷² Note especially Acts 9:16; Rom. 5:3-4; 8:17; 2 Cor. 1:3-5; 4:7-12; 12:7-10; Eph. 3:13; Phil. 1:12-18, 29-30; 3:10-11; and 2 Tim. 2:8-10.

promotion because of disguised prejudice against Christians, he was under house arrest in Rome facing the death penalty.

Concerning the second of these three surprises, that there was anything **lacking in the affliction of Christ**, several points should be understood. Firstly, many things happened when the Lord Jesus suffered and died on the cross. One of those things was that He provided, with absolute perfection, atonement for humanity. The greatest and purest suffering that any of His followers would endure will never add anything to that atonement. As He said, “It is finished.”¹⁷³ Secondly, the perfect and complete atoning work of the Lord Jesus on the cross still lacked what we might today call a means of cross-cultural distribution. Without the intentional participation of others that Good News lacked a means to spread effectively throughout the world. Being passed on merely as a tradition from parent to child would not be worthy of this wonderful Good News.¹⁷⁴ Thirdly, the chosen means of cross-cultural “distribution,” missions work, involves suffering.

In summary, the Evangel was perfectly and completely accomplished by the Lord, but Evangelism, according to the plan which He expressed in the Great Commission, was entrusted to His followers.

Concerning the third of these three surprises, it makes sense in this context that Paul **in his flesh** could **fulfill** that lack. Remember that he was called to missions and the suffering that comes with that role, as recorded in Acts 9:15-16, “This man is My chosen vessel to carry My name before nations and kings and the sons of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” It does not

¹⁷³ Some theologians would say that the sufferings of a dedicated Christian contribute to the *atoning aspect* of the sufferings of Christ. They would use this verse to support the idea that our own suffering contributes to our salvation. Given Paul’s many other clear and emphatic statements to the contrary (Rom. 4:4-5 for instance), it is clear that they push this bold statement of Paul’s too far. However, the misuse of this verse does not justify its underuse! We cannot ignore it just because others have used it to support unbiblical teachings. Followers of the Lord Jesus are invited, with Paul, to suffer to **fulfill what is lacking in the affliction of Christ**. Following the Lord Jesus except where it involves suffering is not following the Lord Jesus. In John 21:15-22 the Lord tutored Peter in this very matter.

¹⁷⁴ O’Brien (pp. 77-81) reviews the history of the interpretation of this passage. One common alternative to the view expressed here is that because there is a fixed amount of suffering which the **body** of Christ must endure, by taking on more suffering the Apostle is hastening the return of Christ. Proponents of this view will point to passages like 1 Enoch 47:4, “And the hearts of the holy were filled with joy; Because the number of the righteous had been offered, And the prayer of the righteous had been heard, And the blood of the righteous been required before the Lord of Spirits” (translated from the Ethiopian by R.H. Charles, 1906) and Rev. 6:11, “And they each were given a white robe, and they were told to rest a little longer, until they are completed, even their fellow servants and their brothers, even those that are about to be killed as also they” (literal translation). Likewise 2 Pet. 3:12, which says “awaiting and hastening the appearance of the day of God” might be quoted. On the other hand, we also know that the date of the return of the Lord has been set by the Father (Acts 1:7), so it is odd to think that that date can be changed by human activity. Also, even Rev. 6:11 does not actually tell us that if someone willingly suffers for the Lord’s sake, the return of the Lord will be hastened.

mean that Paul thought he himself could fill all that lack. It seems to mean that he would take his turn at fulfilling that lack, and others would have their turn.¹⁷⁵

Paul cannot be too specific about his ministry without returning to the subject of **His body, which is the church**. In verse 18 he mentioned that Christ is “the Head of the Body, the church,” and he repeats some of that here, perhaps because he wants to make a transition to speaking about his ministries related to the church.

1:25 of which I myself have become a servant, as God has arranged¹⁷⁶ it, having given to me, for you, to fulfill the Word of God,

In 1:23 Paul described himself as a **servant** of the gospel. Here with the same word¹⁷⁷ he calls himself a **servant** of the church. Even with all his apostolic authority, he is a **servant** of the church. Paul was modeling what we have now come to call “servant leadership.” He served the church by leading it; he led it for its own benefit, not to increase his status, wealth, or prestige.

Paul did not appoint himself a **servant** of the church. **God arranged** that, He gave that to him. In other places he goes into more detail about the calling he received there on the Damascus Road, but here he simply says that in the divine plan for the redemption of the nations it was **given** to him to be a **servant** of the church.¹⁷⁸

Bruce¹⁷⁹ says Paul was **given** “a unique stewardship,” and of course it is unique in its particular details. However, Paul did not consider himself alone in the work of gospel ministry to the Gentiles. In fact, his letter to the Philippians is a

¹⁷⁵ The Greek word here translated **fulfill**, ἀνταναπληρώω/*antanaplēroō*, with its ἀντ/*ant* prefix, might mean “take one’s turn in filling up something,” or “take someone’s place in filling up something.” *BDAG* says that Lightfoot held the second view, but that seems to stretch the idea of the Body of Christ too far. On the Damascus Road, Saul was asked, “Why do you persecute Me?” He was not asked, “Why do you persecute some people that are taking My place?” Hendriksen (p. 97) gives some explanation of the ἀντ/*ant* prefix and why it indicates substitution. He also has a good list of NT verses about suffering for or with the Lord Jesus.

¹⁷⁶ This phrase would literally be translated, “according to the administration of God.” The word οἰκονομία/*oikonomia* originally referred specifically to the work of the οἰκονόμος/*oikonomos*, the “estate manager” of a Greek household, and is frequently translated “stewardship.” Later the usage broadened to include the ideas of “administration,” “management,” “arrangement,” “appointment,” and “plan” (*BDAG*). It is here translated as a verb, **arranged**, to make a better English sentence. It might also be translated “dispensed” or even “planned.” Eph. 3:2-3 uses this word as well, and is closely related to this passage.

¹⁷⁷ δίακονος/*diakonos*

¹⁷⁸ Although it does not use the term οἰκονομία/*oikonomia*, Eph. 3:8-9 is a closely parallel passage: “To me – the least of all the holy ones – this grace was given, to proclaim to the nations the fathomless riches of Christ, to enlighten all people concerning the sharing of the mystery that has been hidden for ages in God who has created all things through Jesus Christ.”

¹⁷⁹ P. 217.

celebration of the fact that they are with him in the ministry, as were Timothy and “most of the brothers in the Lord” there in Rome. The uniqueness of Paul’s calling should be balanced with the idea that God was – and is – calling people in many circumstances to fulfill the Great Commission.

In this first chapter Paul is still building his case and presenting his credentials to the Colossians, so that they will really take to heart all that he has to say. He is winning their hearts. Yes, this stewardship was **given** to him, but he tells them that it was **for you**. These verses are very warmly addressed to the Colossians; see how in verses 24, 25, and 27 Paul is saying that his ministry is *for* them and *to* them, but most importantly that Christ is *in* them.

He was quite bold to say that he wanted to complete the sufferings of Christ, and here he continues in that same bold attitude to say he has been appointed by **God** to “complete” or **fulfill the Word of God!** This is not prideful boasting, but a statement of his calling. In the previous verse he explains that the spreading of the **Word of God**, specifically the gospel, to people everywhere was “lacking.” This is just what he was called to **fulfill**. Using the same word, in Romans 15:19 Paul said “from Jerusalem around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the gospel of Christ.” Using nearly the same word in 2 Timothy 4:17 he said “so that through me the message might be fulfilled¹⁸⁰ and all the nations might hear it.” For Paul, **the Word of God**, the gospel, the mystery, was something that had to be fulfilled, just as we might say the Great Commission has to be fulfilled.

1:26 the mystery hidden away from¹⁸¹ the ages and from the generations – but now revealed to His holy ones,

The “Word of God” which Paul has been appointed to “fulfill” is further explained here. It is a previously hidden **mystery** that is now **revealed**. The term **mystery**¹⁸² in the New Testament does not mean something that is difficult to figure out, but wise people with enough good clues can get it. It speaks of untold truths that cannot be understood at all except by revelation. The word is used to speak of various previously unknowable but now revealed truths in the New Testament (see for instance Revelation 1:20 and 17:7), but Paul will tell us what this **mystery** is in the next verse.

¹⁸⁰ πληροφορέω/*plērophoreō*

¹⁸¹ Barth, pp. 262-264, discusses whether ἀποκεκρυμμένον ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν γενεῶν/*apokekrummenon apo tōn aiōnōn kai apo tōn geneōn* should be translated “hidden from the ages and from the generations” or “hidden for ages and generations.” He seems to prefer the translation “hidden for ages and generations,” but he ignores the fact that the four times ἀποκρύπτω/*apokruptō* and ἀπὸ/*apo* are used together in the LXX, the ἀπὸ/*apo* always means “from,” not “for.”

¹⁸² μυστήριον/*mustērion*

Clearly there is a sense of wonder and awe that we should be privileged to understand this hidden **mystery**. This **mystery** is not at all a continuation of what can be understood by believers of previous **ages** and previous **generations**. For them it was **hidden away**. It cannot, therefore, refer to the fact that the Gentile nations will be admitted into the family of God, for this was already revealed in passages like:

Psalm 45:17 “the peoples will praise you forever and ever.”

Psalm 72:17 “May all nations be blessed by Him and call Him blessed.”

Isaiah 56:7 “I will bring them [foreigners] to My holy mountain and give them to rejoice in My house of prayer... because My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.”

Isaiah 60:6-7 “An abundance of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midia and Ephah, and all of them from Sheba will come bearing gold and incense, and they will be proclaiming the praise of the LORD. All the sheep of Kedar will be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth will minister to you, they will go up with favor upon My altar and I will adorn My beautiful house.”

Micah 4:2 “Many nations will come, saying, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us His ways, so we may walk in His paths.’ From Zion Torah will go out, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.”

Zechariah 8:23 “In those days ten men from all the languages of the nations will grasp one Judean by the hem of his robe and say, ‘Let us go with you all, because we have heard that God is with you all.’”

Zechariah 14:16 “Then all the survivors from all the nations that came upon Jerusalem will go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of Hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths.”

So, if there is something new here, something which was **hidden away from** people of past **ages and from the** people of past **generations**, it must be more than that the non-Jewish nations of the earth will come to faith in Christ and worship God.

1:27 to whom God wanted to make known how great are¹⁸³ the riches of the glory of this mystery among the nations, which is Christ among you,¹⁸⁴ the hope of glory.

¹⁸³ In this translation the expression **how great are** simply reflects the use of the little Greek word *τι/τι*, which can simply mean “what?” or “who?” or “why?” but here exclaims **how great!** (*BDAG*).

¹⁸⁴ This could be translated “Christ in you,” but it seems better in this context to take *ἐν/εν* to mean **among**, so Paul is referring not to the indwelling Christ by the Spirit, but the amazing idea that **Christ is among** the Gentiles, those that were formerly far are now near.

How wonderful for Paul that the calling that he had received, the calling that became his life purpose, was exactly in harmony with God's desire to **make known this mystery among the nations**. Paul was to "fulfill" the Word of **God**, which is a **mystery** now revealed to the saints, a **mystery** that is rich in **glory**. It is among the non-Jews, and it is **Christ among** them. Paul, the preacher to the Gentiles, begins the fulfillment of the **mystery** as he brings non-Jews to faith in **Christ**.

God wants us to understand something: it is a **great**, rich, glorious thing that is now possible: you that are not Jews can experience **Christ among you**.

The use of the word **mystery** in Ephesians 3:1-7, and especially the explanation in 3:6, tell us that the **mystery** is "that the Gentiles are to be with-heirs and with-body and with-partakers¹⁸⁵ of His promise in Christ, through the gospel." That indicates that the newly revealed **mystery** is that although the Old Testament never spoke of such a thing, in this era there is *equality* between Jew and Gentile in the family of God. Of course in the Old Testament there is prophecy of an era at the end of the age in which Gentiles will worship God, but they are never spoken of as equals, members of one body. Now, however, in **Christ** the dividing wall of hostility is broken down, according to Ephesians 2:11-19. Bruce¹⁸⁶ writes of "the incorporation of Gentile and Jewish believers alike in the common life of the body of Christ," where "non-Jews are included as well, and included on an equal footing with Jews..." O'Brien notes that even though the Old Testament prophets foretold an era in which Gentiles could be saved, "the manner in which that purpose would come to fruition – by the incorporation of both Jews and Gentiles into the body of Christ – was not made known."¹⁸⁷

In the first century this was an amazing thing: the Jewish Messiah among the other races of man! Up until then, to know the Jewish God a non-Jew had to become a Jew, as symbolized by circumcision. He had to disown all that being a Roman or a Phrygian meant, enter a new race and culture, and then see about his status in that Jewish religion. Those were tremendous hurdles he had to overcome. He had to pay a high cost in his life. However, now there is a gloriously wonderful message: non-Jews can stay inside their own cultures (of course *any* culture has some sinful practices that should be abandoned or transformed) and by the grace of God be saved in **Christ** Jesus. Not only does he

¹⁸⁵ These are quite emphatic words: "with-heirs" translates συγκαληρονόμα/*sugklēronoma*, "with-body" translates σύσσωμα/*sussōma*, and "with-partakers" translates συμμετοχα/*summetocha*.

¹⁸⁶ Pp. 218-219.

¹⁸⁷ P. 87.

not have to pay the price of entirely abandoning his own race and culture, but because of the cross no works are required of him. We read of the revelation of this **mystery** here, in Ephesians, and in Philipians, but in the Book of Acts we can read the historical record of Paul's struggle against the party of the Circumcision to see this **mystery** realized among the nations. This may not seem important to those of us today that have already become Christians and have joined established churches, but wherever the gospel is preached in non-Christian societies this issue raises many questions and has many implications.

Back in the first century there was a very natural tendency for Jewish believers to associate their Jewishness with godliness. They had most of the Old Testament to assure them that God required circumcision and obedience to the Mosaic Law. Furthermore, the Messiah was prophesied from their own Scriptures. The very Jewishness of all this was well demonstrated in a serious spiritual discussion among some friends in a Kibbutz, a collective farm community in Israel, in about 1979. All in that discussion were Jews, except one "goy," a non-Jew. As it turns out, all but one of them were followers of Yeshua' haMashiah, Jesus the Messiah. This gradually became apparent to the one who was not one of His followers. The conversation went something like this: "So do you believe in Him?" "Yes, I do." "And you?" "Yes." "And do you?" "Yes." "And do you believe in Him?" "Yeah." Finally the one among them that did not believe in Jesus turned to the one Gentile ("goy" in Hebrew) in the room and asked, "and *you* too?" "Yes." "But you are a goy!"¹⁸⁸ That Jew's surprise that a non-Jew would believe in this very Jewish Messiah is closer to the mark than many realize. Only the revelation of this great mystery, hidden for ages from generations, makes this strange and wonderful thing possible. "Messiah among you *Gentiles!*"

In Christian societies all around the world that same natural tendency continues. Many aspects of those Christian cultures are associated with godliness, and it is assumed that people of other faiths that come to believe in our Savior should reject all of their previous culture and adopt all of the Christian culture. That tendency should be examined in light of Paul's struggle to let the non-Jews of his era join the Body of Christ as non-Jews, not requiring them to adopt Jewishness to become followers of Jesus Christ.

This verse itself defines the **mystery** as **Christ among you, the hope of glory**. This is very compact wording. **Christ among** the non-Jews is the **mystery**, and it is such a great thing because He is **the hope of glory**. The **hope** that will be realized in the Day of the Lord, in **glory**, is **Christ**, and He is **among you!** As we will see in the next few verses, Paul devoted his life to the proclamation of that **mystery**.

¹⁸⁸ As told by a participant in that conversation, Sitska Virsma.

1:28 **We proclaim Him,¹⁸⁹ warning¹⁹⁰ everyone¹⁹¹ and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we might present¹⁹² everyone mature¹⁹³ in Christ Jesus,¹⁹⁴**

From verse 14 to this verse Paul has been proclaiming **Christ** with supreme eloquence. Here in this and the next verse we see that proclaiming Him is Paul's fundamental task towards **everyone**. This is his personal vision statement, and is a good statement of the purpose of this letter. He focuses his ministry to produce the transformation of Gentile peoples in as wide a geographic area as he could imagine, by proclaiming **Christ**. We should let this be a reminder to us: when we find ourselves proclaiming a theological system, a church, or a ministry program, we should let Paul's simple words, **we proclaim Him**, be a corrective that redirects our hearts and our ministries to **Christ**.

The proclamation is always about **Christ**.¹⁹⁵ On the one hand that proclamation may be negative, so he admonishes or warns people. Sometimes he admonishes

¹⁸⁹ Literally, "whom we proclaim...." In this English translation verse 28 is a new sentence because Paul's Greek sentence, which goes from verse 24 to verse 29, would be too long an English sentence.

¹⁹⁰ This word, *νουθετέω/noutheteō*, is used eight times in the NT. In four of those verses we do not have enough information to know whether it has a positive or negative sense (as here and in Col. 3:16), but four of those verses are clearly negative and show us that we need translate this word something like "admonish" or "warn" (as in 2 Thes. 3:15). In the NT it is never used in a clearly positive context, like the word "encourage" might be used. Barth (p. 267) suggests that the word's usage in Acts 20:31 and Rom. 15:14 shows that the word can have a more neutral meaning like "remind," but in Acts 20:31 this is done "with tears," so Barth's support for translating *νουθετέω/noutheteō* as "remind" really rests with Rom. 15:14 alone. According to *BDAG*, this word, *νουθετέω/noutheteō*, means "to counsel about avoidance or cessation of an improper course of conduct." We rely on context to tell us whether there is actual misconduct being rebuked, or only possible misconduct to be avoided, so it can be translated "to admonish" or "to warn." In any case, it concerns very practical counseling. The words here translated **warning** and **teaching** are also used together in 3:16, where they describe the work of the congregation with one another.

¹⁹¹ This expression, *πάντα ἄνθρωπον/panta anthrōpon*, is used three times in the verse. It is here translated **everyone** because it is singular, and because the word *ἄνθρωπος/anthrōpos* can refer to humans of either gender as opposed to God, angels, or even animals, as in Mt. 12:12; 16:23; 21:25; Mk. 5:8; 1 Thes. 2:4; and 1 Tim. 2:5. The word *ἄνθρωπος/anthrōpos* can refer to humans of either gender or to humans that are specifically male as in Mt. 19:5, 10; Eph. 5:31; and 1 Cor. 7:1. Here it refers to humans of either gender.

¹⁹² This same verb is used in 1:22. Note the endnote on that verse.

¹⁹³ This word, *τέλειος/teleios*, occurs 19 times in the NT. In Rom. 12:2 the will of God is "perfect," likewise in Jms. 1:25 the law of liberty is "perfect." However in 1 Cor. 14:20 some are children in their thinking while some are "mature" in their thinking, likewise in Heb. 5:13-14 there are infants that drink milk, and there are the "mature" that eat solid food. Here and in the closely related Col. 4:12 the meaning is **mature**.

¹⁹⁴ While several very ancient manuscripts do not have the name **Jesus** here, this name was certainly already there as early as the sixth century, and the majority of manuscripts include it. It is much easier to imagine a scribe unintentionally omitting it rather than intentionally or unintentionally adding it.

¹⁹⁵ Paul uses this word, *καταγγέλλω/katangellō*, six times in his letters. Three of those times the object of that proclamation is clearly the Lord Jesus, as here. The other three times it is the testimony about God, the gospel or the Lord's death.

unbelievers that their sin and unbelief is leading them to eternal punishment, and sometimes he admonishes believers that their sin is leading them towards being absent when faithful believers are presented “holy and unblemished and blameless before Him.” Much of this letter contains such warnings; note 2:8-23 and 3:5-9. There we see Paul **warning** or admonishing.

In most of the rest of the letter we see him **teaching**. Thus on the other hand the proclamation of **Christ** is often positive, and Paul *teaches* people about the grace of God and the transformation **Christ** has accomplished for them and in them. There is an emphasis on teaching in Colossians (note 2:7 and 3:16),¹⁹⁶ just as there is an emphasis on knowledge.¹⁹⁷

Whether he is bringing good news or bad news, rebuke or instruction, he does this **with all wisdom**. This **wisdom** speaks of understanding which results in skillful living. James 3:15-17 describes a contrast between true heavenly **wisdom** and an earthly imitation. (See also 1 Corinthians 1:19 and 2 Corinthians 1:12.)

Paul is not claiming that he actually warns and teaches every single human being on earth. The use of the word translated **all**¹⁹⁸ here can mean “all kinds of,” as can be seen in the Greek of passages like Romans 1:29; and 1 Corinthians 1:5. No kind of human being is excluded (Paul was not racist, for instance), but he was not claiming to have taught every single human being.

This verse is a concise statement of Paul’s entire ministry and the underlying purpose behind that ministry. That purpose perfectly mirrors God’s purpose in our salvation, as Paul recorded it in 1:22 where we read that God’s purpose in reconciling the Colossians to Him was “to present you holy and unblemished and blameless before Him.” How wonderful it is to have one’s life activity and purpose match the purpose of God! Paul enjoyed a singleness of purpose with the living God. When our purpose in life is to obtain more recognition, status, wealth, pleasure, or comfort, we are striving for things that God already knows are of no value – what help ought we to hope for from God in those endeavors?

Just as Paul’s ministry mirrors God’s purpose, so Epaphras’ prayers mirror Paul’s ministry. We read in Colossians 4:12 that Epaphras prays so that they will “stand *mature* and complete in all the will of God.”

¹⁹⁶ Barth, p. 88.

¹⁹⁷ See the discussion above on 1:6.

¹⁹⁸ *πᾶς/pas*

The presentation that Paul looks forward to here is clearly at the end of the age when the Lord will return to set up His Kingdom. This was on his mind during his imprisonment in Rome, where he wrote in Philippians 1:10 about the congregation being “sincere and blameless into the day of Christ,” in 2:16 about “a boast for me in the Day of Christ, that I neither ran in vain nor labored in vain,” in 3:14 about how he pursued “the prize of the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus,” and in 4:17 about “the increasing profit into your account.” Similarly, in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 Paul certainly wanted the Thessalonians to be thoroughly sanctified and blameless “at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Just as was discussed above concerning verses 22 and 23, Paul’s purpose, to **present all men mature in Christ**, was not guaranteed to be successful. His success in presenting the Corinthians to Christ was in some doubt in 2 Corinthians 11:2 where he wrote, “I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.”

This means that the Colossian congregation was involved in the success or failure of this abiding purpose. We too have a crucial role in making this happen or preventing it from happening in our lives and in the lives of those we serve!

1:29 for which I toil,¹⁹⁹ struggling²⁰⁰ by the working of the One working²⁰¹ in me with power.

As Paul is explaining about the driving forces behind his life purpose of presenting “all men mature in Christ Jesus,” we see an amazing balance between Paul’s own **toil** and divine **power**. Paul labors and struggles, but all that effort is according to God’s powerful **working** in him. This seems to be a brief glimpse into the enigmatic relationship between our human effort and divine omnipotence. Not all those that **toil** in Christian ministry are working in the

199 This term, κοπιᾶω/*kopiaō*, more often means “to work or exert oneself diligently” (as in Eph. 4:28), but it can also mean “to reach exhaustion” (as in the LXX of Is. 40:31; and in Jn. 4:6; and Rev. 2:3). Clearly, in Eph. 4:28 Paul does not mean “he who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must *toil to exhaustion*, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.” This word can mean “to toil,” and it can mean “to put out effort all the way to exhaustion,” but it does not always have to mean “to toil to exhaustion.”

200 This word, ἀγωνίζομαι/*agōnizomai*, can refer to a battle (the Lord Jesus uses it in Jn. 18:36, saying “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews...”), it can refer to an athletic effort (as in 1 Cor. 9:25), and it can have a general use as well (as in Lk. 13:24) where it might be translated “struggle” or “strive.” It is also used in Col. 4:12, “always struggling for you in prayer...” This Greek word’s similarity to the modern English word “to agonize” should not be considered a clue as to the meaning Paul intended when he used it 2000 years ago, because words’ meanings often change as they are adopted into other languages.

201 In this translation the term **working** is used twice. The first time it translates the noun ἐνέργεια/*energeia*, the second time it translates the verb ἐνεργέω/*energēō*. The noun and the verb both refer to the state of being in operation, in action, or at work.

power of the flesh. We should work hard for the Lord, making sure that we are serving in accord with His purposes and **striving by the working of the One working in us with power**. This same concept is also presented in Philippians 2:12-13 and 4:13. O'Brien²⁰² says, "If one asks the question: 'Where is God powerfully at work?' then in this context the answer would be: 'Where Paul toils energetically.'"

Paul's prayers for them, as he explains in 1:9-12, have the same purpose as his ministry: that by understanding the truth they will love and serve God with joy and gratitude.

2:1 For I want you to know how great a struggle²⁰³ I have for you and those in Laodicea and as many as have not seen my face in person,²⁰⁴

Paul wants to elaborate on the toiling and struggling that he mentioned in the previous verse. Here he clarifies that it really has been serious, and that it is on their behalf. The task to which Paul has dedicated himself, to "proclaim Him, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom," has not been easy!

The means of that **struggle** are somewhat unclear to us. Most likely he was at least referring to struggling in prayer for them. Perhaps his **struggle** included writing to them. Since they had **not seen his face in person**, the **struggle** mentioned here was not a **struggle** in teaching or preaching **in person**, but it might have also been a theological **struggle** for the pure gospel, against those that would add to – and therefore ruin – the gospel. However, theological struggles do not happen in isolation. Perhaps the hardships of missionary life, such as dangerous travel, physical persecution, and lack of normal comforts, are included here. Paul goes into some detail in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29 concerning **how great a struggle** he had for the Corinthian believers, and perhaps here he is thinking of similar things.

The city of **Laodicea** was only 19 miles (30 kilometers) away from Colossae. Since it is mentioned here and three times in chapter 4, it does seem like there was considerable interaction between the two Christian communities. The next generation of believers in **Laodicea** received a letter of strong rebuke from the Lord in Revelation 3. In the New Testament **Laodicea** is only mentioned in Colossians and the early chapters of Revelation.

²⁰² P. 91.

²⁰³ The word translated **struggle** here is the noun ἀγών/*agōn*, which is closely related to the verb ἀγωνίζομαι/*agōnizomai* used in 1:29. In Phil. 1:30 Paul says that the Philippian congregation had the same ἀγών/*agōn* that he had, in their **struggle** against opposition.

²⁰⁴ Literally this would be translated "seen my face in flesh."

2:2 **so that their hearts might be encouraged, being drawn together²⁰⁵ in love and into all the riches of the certainty of insight, into understanding of the mystery of God, even the Father and the Christ,** This is what Paul struggled for. As he tells us in 1:28 he labors “so that we might present all men mature in Christ Jesus.” Here he is saying the same thing in more detail. This is a view of what believers will look like when they are “mature.” There is great unity, **certainty**, and **understanding**. The unity is not a “lowest-common-denominator unity” in which everyone rejects any area where they might have disagreements, and are in agreement about anything left over. Neither is this organizational unity. It is a unity **in love**. The **certainty** here is rich, and it is based upon **insight** or knowledge. A mature believer has no place in his heart for wavering faith, instead there is **certainty**.

The maturity that Paul would have them attain is not the mere **understanding** of the solitary scholar, and the **love** that Paul would have them attain is likewise not blind attraction. Real Christian maturity includes unity, **love**, and **understanding**.

The **understanding** is about the **mystery of God**. This **mystery** does not seem to be the same as the **mystery** of 1:26-27. It is **the mystery of God, even the Father and the Christ**. It is not a **mystery** about His plan, it is simply the **mystery** of the person of **God**, who is **the Father and the Christ**.

Unfortunately the manuscript evidence for the last several words of this verse is weaker than normal,²⁰⁶ but assuming the reading above is correct, this would be a strong statement affirming the divinity of **Christ; the Father and the Christ are the one God**.

In any case, this verse gives us another view of what believers that will be

²⁰⁵ Although $\sigma\upsilon\mu\beta\iota\beta\acute{\alpha}\zeta\omega$ /*sumbibazō* can also mean “prove,” “conclude,” “teach,” or “advise,” here as in Eph. 4:16 and Col. 2:19 it means “unite” or “draw together.” O’Brien (p. 93) says that the majority of scholars prefer “being knit together,” even though he himself prefers the meaning “taught.” Both meanings are common in the NT and in ancient Greek.

²⁰⁶ There is a great deal of textual variation in the ancient Greek manuscripts after the words **of the mystery of God**. Following that expression, the standard critical text only shows $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\upsilon$ /*Christou* (“of Christ”), but among all the Greek manuscripts, only p^{46} and B read that way, so it seems like that would be placing too much weight on those two manuscripts, however old they may be. *All* of the other Greek manuscripts include the word $\pi\alpha\tau\epsilon\rho\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ /*patros*, (“of Father”) so it would seem hard to deny that it is original. The majority of the Greek manuscripts read $\kappa\alpha\iota\ \pi\alpha\tau\epsilon\rho\acute{\alpha}\varsigma\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\upsilon$ /*kai patros kai tou Christou* (“even of Father and of the Christ”), and many other Greek manuscripts read the same, except that the second $\kappa\alpha\iota$ /*kai* (“and”) is missing. Because of the weight of manuscript evidence, and because it seems more likely that an early scribe unintentionally omitted some of the text rather than added words to the Scriptures, the longer reading seems to be the original. Unintentional omissions are more likely than intentional additions.

presented “mature in Christ Jesus” look like in this age: they will be **encouraged**, they will have unity, **love**, **insight**, and **understanding of the mystery of God**.

2:3 **in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden.**

Wanting to tell us more about Christ, and perhaps more about the mystery, Paul tells us that *in Him* **all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden**. It would be easy to get diverted from Paul’s intent here, which is that we should seek Christ, that we should set our hearts and minds upon Him, even in the realm of **wisdom and knowledge**, and concentrate instead on the literary background of this expression **all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge**. Is this in response to the supposed incipient Gnosticism? Is it a response to teaching based upon the figure of Wisdom in Proverbs 2? Is it a response to teaching based upon the importance of the Law in the Old Testament? Is it a response to the teachings of some supposed Jewish mystical ascetics?²⁰⁷ All of those ideas about the supposed source of the expression **all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge** are a *diversion* from the fact that whatever era we find ourselves in, and whatever false teachings assail us, we should turn to Christ.

There has been so much in this letter about **wisdom and knowledge**, and here they are called **treasures**. This figure of speech, that **wisdom and knowledge** are **treasures**, teaches us that they are to be valued, and being **hidden** we learn that they are must be diligently sought after. Above all, we learn here where it is we can seek this treasure: in Christ. What a beautiful image we have here! Of course through the ages for various reasons people have buried rich **treasures**, hoping to recover them perhaps when danger has passed. Others have hoped to find **hidden treasures**. There are stories of people that spent their lives searching the countryside for **hidden treasures**. Some even have stumbled upon such treasure. Here we are given a wonderful clue in the most important search: **all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden** in Christ.

At this time they are not displayed in Christ, they are **hidden** there, to be sought after. This is the seed of a thought that will be developed later in chapter 3, where we will read “For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” Here it may be enough to say that these are **all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge**, and there is no point in looking for other **treasures of wisdom and knowledge** that might seem to be more enjoyable or attractive. Indeed, an abundant variety of false teachers will offer their own **wisdom and knowledge**, but true **wisdom and knowledge** are **all hidden** in Christ!

We need to look to Christ and to His cross for our answers in life. If we seek our

²⁰⁷ O’Brien (pp. 95-97) surveys the opinions of authors that propose all four of these ideas.

answers there, we will find rich **treasures of wisdom and knowledge** that are **hidden** there.

2:4 Now I am saying this²⁰⁸ lest anyone deceive²⁰⁹ you by persuasive words.

This is the first of about five warnings in this chapter. There is a danger of being deceived **by persuasive words**, in stark contrast with the idea of seeking “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” which are hidden in Christ. There were many different varieties of **persuasive words** in the ancient world, and there seem to be even more varieties in the world today. It simply is not necessary to restrict Paul’s concern here to a particular set of false teachings, be that “Incipient Gnosticism” or teachings from some synagogues. As we understand this passage, the important and uncomfortable question to ask is “Am I being deceived and lured away from devotion to Christ and Christ alone?” rather than “What particular heresy was threatening the Colossian congregation in AD 62?”

At the same time, this is not a call to abandon clear thinking just because deception can look similar to clear thinking! We are invited to read, to think, and to understand this letter, then stand firm against **persuasive words** that would lead us away from the rich relationship with Christ to which this letter invites us.

2:5 For if I am absent in the flesh, I am, however, with you in spirit,²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ Moule (p. 88) suggests that the word τοῦτο/*touto* refers *forward* to what he is about to say, rather than backwards to what he has already said, and that the ἑνάλβινα shows a *command* rather than a purpose, so that the translation would be, “What I mean is, nobody is to talk you into error....” O’Brien (p. 97) argues well against Moule’s view, and accepts the more common interpretation, as given in this commentary.

²⁰⁹ A deceiver’s words will usually not run far from the truth. His words must run alongside the truth, close enough to seem true, but far enough off to accomplish the deceiver’s purpose. This word, παραλογίζομαι/*paralogizomai*, literally means “to think alongside.” Whether the Greek users of this word noticed this literal meaning or not is no longer clear, but indeed, deception is not true, but it is alongside the truth.

²¹⁰ The expression here, literally “in the flesh absent, but in the spirit with you,” seems to simply speak of the unity in heart that Paul felt with them. Similarly, he wrote of the partnership in gospel ministry that he had with the Philippians, “both in my chains and also in the defense and confirmation of the gospel you all are my partners in this grace” (Phil. 1:7). Likewise, he wrote to the Thessalonian congregation “but, brothers, when we were separated from you for a short time *in face, not in heart*, all the more we made great effort in our longing to see your faces” (1 Thes. 2:17, translated literally). However, in the context of a member of the Corinthian congregation that needed to be removed from the fellowship, Paul wrote, “For on the one hand as *absent in the body*, but on the other hand *present in the spirit*, already I have judged as *present* the one who did this. Once you (*and me in spirit*) are gathered together in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ...” (1 Cor. 5:3-4, literal translation of the majority of manuscripts). The seriousness of that context and the solemnity of those words almost make it seem that Paul is claiming some sort of mystical personal presence among them. However, in all four of these passages Paul saying he is with them in spirit or in heart probably just speaks of his strong emotional connection with them and the unity of purpose they have together, as we would say “my heart is with my sons, but I have to be away from them right now.”

rejoicing and seeing your orderliness and the strength²¹¹ of your faith in Christ.

In his concern lest they be deceived, Paul is keenly aware of the fact that he is physically **absent**, but his heart is **with** them. He cares a great deal that they stay on track with the Lord and grow to maturity in Christ. He wants them to remember him and his teachings, even in the face of a variety of false teachers that may try to win their hearts.

Nevertheless his absence does not cause him fear or dismay but rather joy, because he has been hearing from Epaphras all about their **orderliness and the strength of their faith in Christ**. This is in accord with all his other comments about their spiritual condition, which are found in 1:2, 4, 6, and 8.

The joy he experiences hearing about their discipline and steadfastness clearly flows from the fact that his life purpose, as expressed earlier in 1:28 and 2:2, is that they and others like them become mature and steadfast.

This is a crucial verse in understanding whether or not there is a “Colossian Heresy” that has actually found its way into the congregation. Paul simply could not have written 1:2, 4, 6, 8 or this verse to a congregation with heretical elements. The Colossian congregation had sound faith and doctrine, but was in the midst of a society with a wide variety of false teachings any one of which could have easily destroy an unprepared congregation.

At this point Paul is finished referring to himself. Since they had never met, he needed to win a hearing with them. He will not refer to himself again until his closing remarks in chapter four.

2:6-7 ***The Colossians should live in Christ as they have received Him.***
Here again we learn more about being “mature in Christ Jesus.”

²¹¹ Because these two nouns, **orderliness** and **strength** (τάξις/*taxis* and στερέωμα/*stereōma*) are often used together in military contexts, some authors like Moule (p. 89) and Martin (p. 70) say Paul is using a military metaphor here. They say Paul is comparing the congregation to an array of soldiers lined up in battle formation (τάξις/*taxis* is used that way in Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 1.2.18 and 2 Macc. 8:22) and that they are like a fortress (στερέωμα/*stereōma* may be used that way in 1 Macc. 9:14). This military metaphor goes well with the idea that the congregation was “besieged” by false doctrines. However, as O’Brien (p. 99) notes, these two words are common enough in non-military settings so it is better to say they only have a military meaning in a military context. Since this context is non-military, these words alone do not bring in a military metaphor. In the NT, τάξις/*taxis* is used ten times, never in a military context. (Eight of those ten occurrences concern priestly orders, like the order of Melchizedek.) The word στερέωμα/*stereōma* is only used this once in the NT. In the LXX translation it is often used of the “firmament” or the “expanse” of heaven, as in Gen. 1:6. In the LXX translation of Ps. 18:2 and 71:3 it is used to describe God as the psalmist’s rock of refuge. So, here in Col. 2:5 τάξις/*taxis* means “orderliness” and στερέωμα/*stereōma* means “strength” or “solidness.”

2:6 **Therefore as you have received**²¹² **Christ Jesus the Lord,**²¹³ **so walk**²¹⁴ **in Him,**

This command, the first of about 35 commands in this letter, logically flows from what Paul has just told them about his ministry and their response to the gospel. If Paul's (and in fact God's) purpose is that they should be mature and steadfast, **therefore** Paul can urge them forward in that same direction.

In whatever way they accepted **Christ Jesus**, so in that same way they should live their lives **in Him**. When they received Him, there was probably a great deal of thankfulness and joy in their hearts, and they certainly **received** Him by faith, in the Spirit's guidance and power; so all of that should continue as they **walk in Him**. It is an encouraging thing for a congregation to keep growing numerically, partly because as we see others receive **Christ Jesus, the Lord**, we are reminded to be continuing on in that same spirit of faith and thankfulness.

The phrase **in Him**, or "in Christ," is used extensively by Paul. It seems to be his way of referring to the abiding in the vine of John 15. To **walk in Him** is a very broad and sweeping command, but in the next verse Paul brings some clearer focus to the idea. This is not so much a call to obey all the laws of the New Testament as it is a command to some sort of organic or spiritual connection to and dependence upon Him. In other words, "In the same way you received the Lord Jesus Christ into your lives, now live out this new and real life that you have there in Him." Putting it another way, "If Christ meant *Life* to you when you

²¹² Paul uses this word, παραλαμβάνω/*paralambanō*, twelve times, almost always referring to the willing reception of the doctrines and practices which are the valid traditions of the faith. See for instance 1 Cor. 11:23; 15:1, 3; Gal. 1:9, 12; Phil. 4:9; 1 Thes. 2:13; and 2 Thes. 3:6. Paul's use of this term is in accord with the Jewish use of this term. In *Pirqe Aboth* 1,1 the corresponding Hebrew term (קבל/qlbl) is used: "Moses *received* the Torah from Sinai, and he delivered it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets delivered it to the men of the Great Synagogue." The startling thing about Col. 2:6 is that it is not a doctrine or a ritual that is **received**, but **Christ Jesus the Lord**.

²¹³ Because both χριστὸν/*christon* and κύριον/*kurion* have the article, the expression should be translated **Christ Jesus the Lord**. The NIV translates this as "you received Christ Jesus as Lord..." giving the idea that the Colossians accepted Him as the **Lord** of their life, and now they need to continue to make Him **Lord** of their life. Barth (p. 302) rightly rejects that interpretation, which forces a common modern Christian expression, "to make Him Lord of your life," into the text. This is the only verse in the NT where the verb "receive" (παραλαμβάνω/*paralambanō*) takes the object **Lord** (the related verb λαμβάνω/*lambanō* never has κύριος/*kurios* as its object in the NT). So, while it is very common in modern English to speak of "receiving Jesus Christ as Lord," meaning "to make Him Lord of my life" or "personally accepting His lordship in my life," this is not a NT expression and it is foreign to this passage. In this passage Paul is saying that they have accepted **Christ Jesus**, who is **the Lord**, the God proclaimed in the OT, not that they have "received Christ Jesus as personal Lord or sovereign of their lives." Even though the NIV's interpretation of this verse makes it seem like coming to faith in **Christ Jesus** and making a commitment to obey Him in every aspect of one's life are the same thing, they are not. Coming to faith in **Christ Jesus** is the beginning of an everlasting personal relationship with the Savior. That brings the gift of salvation. Our obedience to His will is not relevant to whether or not we receive that gift. Deciding to obey Him in everything is an expression of discipleship.

²¹⁴ See the endnote under 1:10 concerning the word **walk**.

became a believer, let Him mean *Life* to you each day now.”

This first command is the essential command, with all the others falling in after it. Now that the undergirding grace of God has been taught, he can carefully begin to give commands. However, in Colossians Paul does not simply present and explain the grace of God once, and then move on to application. Instead, he continually undergirds the commands he gives with the supporting theological truths of grace which empower and drive the commands.

Until 3:12 these are basically *individual character* commands, but at 3:12 there is a shift to predominantly *community* or *relational* commands.

2:7 rooted²¹⁵ and built up in Him and established²¹⁶ in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in it²¹⁷ with thanksgiving.²¹⁸

The grammar²¹⁹ of these three expressions, **rooted... built up... and established** makes it is possible for them to be understood as commands,²²⁰ but more likely they are descriptions of what God has done.²²¹ In other words, this is the enabling work of God in our lives; since we are enabled by that grace, we should walk in Him.

²¹⁵ The word translated **rooted** here is in the perfect tense, while the words translated **built up** and **established** are in the present tense, so this might possibly be translated “having been rooted and being built up in Him and being established in the faith....” However, since these are all participles, it is more likely that the time element of the tense is absent, so it is better translated **rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith**. The very same term which is here translated **rooted** is also found in Eph. 3:17, where it is paired with another participle which means “having a foundation.”

²¹⁶ In Mk. 16:20 and 1 Cor. 1:6 this word, βεβαίωσις/*bebaioō*, has its basic legal meaning of “to confirm testimony,” or “to establish that some testimony is true.” In Rom. 15:8 it is used of confirming promises or showing them to be true. The four other times Paul uses it people, not testimony or promises, are the verb’s objects. The Colossians are “shown to be true in the faith,” or more briefly, **established in the faith**.

²¹⁷ Because the Greek pronoun behind the English is feminine, it certainly refers back to **the faith**. Also, there is a textual problem here, in that some early manuscripts omit the words ἐν αὐτῇ/*en autē* (“in it”), but those words’ presence in B and the third or fourth century Coptic translation indicate that this problem arose very early in the transmission of the text, almost certainly prior to the copying of any existing manuscript. Since the majority of manuscripts support the longer reading, with ἐν αὐτῇ/*en autē* (“in it”), and since it is easy to understand how it could have been accidentally omitted by a scribe, that seems to be the better reading.

²¹⁸ This Greek word, εὐχαριστία/*eucharistia*, can mean **thanksgiving** or it can mean “thankfulness.” Since the attitude of thankfulness should find expression in **thanksgiving**, it is difficult to tell whether one, the other, or both ideas are intended.

²¹⁹ They are all participles in the middle or passive voice.

²²⁰ That is Barth’s view (p. 303).

²²¹ O’Brien (p. 107) writes “each of these participles is in the passive voice probably pointing to the divine activity. Whatever responsibilities to Christ the reader had, and these were many, they were not to lose sight of the fact that God had been at work in their midst. It was he who had rooted them in Christ and was presently building them up in him, thereby consolidating them in the faith.” The notes of the NET agree.

Paul uses those three terms, one from farming, one from building construction, and one from the law courts, to metaphorically describe the work that Christ has done to enable us to walk in Him. As a tree has roots that hold it up and bring it nutrients, so we have been **rooted in** Christ. As a building is **built up** upon a foundation, so we have been **built up** upon Christ. As a reliable witness's words are **established** as true and reliable in a law court, so we have been **established in the faith**.

Even though **rooted... built up... and established** are descriptions of what God has done, with the expression **abounding in the faith** Paul shifts back into the arena of our responsibility. We should be **abounding in the faith**. There is no call to moderate conviction. We are to abound in this.

The expression **in the faith** could refer to their own experience of believing, but since this is followed right away with **just as you were taught**, it more likely refers to the body of truths²²² that Epaphras **taught** them.²²³

If indeed Paul is referring to the teachings of Epaphras, then here, as in 1:7-8, Paul endorses Epaphras' ministry with them. This is a gentle reminder to them that they have been **taught** well, and should not deviate from those teachings.

Furthermore, all of this is **with thanksgiving**, an essential note which Paul modeled in 1:3 and repeated in 3:15, 17; and 4:2. A congregation that is truly **rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith** has abundant reason to be full of **thanksgiving**.

2:8-23 *They are warned about false teachings, none of which admit who Christ is and what He has done for us.*

In this letter Paul is proclaiming Christ, warning and teaching the readers so that they might be presented mature in Christ Jesus. Here in this section those warnings are emphatic.

²²² See the endnote concerning **the faith** under the discussion of 1:23.

²²³ O'Brien (p. 108) agrees.

2:8 **Watch out**²²⁴ **lest anyone**²²⁵ **take you captive**²²⁶ **through a philosophy,**
an empty deception²²⁷ **according to human tradition,**²²⁸ **according to the**
fundamental principles²²⁹ **of the world, and not according to Christ,**

In Colossae and cities like it there were too many terrifying stories of people that were led away as captives by enemies that defeated and looted their city. Unless freed by force of arms or ransom, such captives would live as slaves the rest of their lives. Although by this time the *Pax Romana* had basically put an end to that sort of thing, the stories continued, and the imagery remained vivid in their minds. Paul uses the terrifying and tragic experience of captivity as a metaphor to warn them of what false teachers would do to them if they are not repulsed. Just as your city's enemies would loot your city, take you away as a **captive**, and enslave you in a foreign land, so accepting false teachings would mean spiritual

²²⁴ This verb, βλέπω/*blepō* literally means “see” or “look.” When it is not used literally, it often has the meaning “watch out.” Since in this verse it is followed by μή/*mē*, here translated **lest**, it clearly has the figurative meaning **watch out**. See the endnote under 4:17 concerning this word.

²²⁵ Although Martin (p. 74) says that the word τις/*tis* here should be translated “a certain individual,” and that Paul has a specific person in mind, whom he does not precisely name, this Greek term can very easily mean **anyone**. The use of τις/*tis* here in no way demonstrates that Paul has a specific false teacher in mind.

²²⁶ The literal translation of this phrase would be “Watch out lest someone be your captor...” The verb here, συλαγωγέω/*sulagōgēō*, is closely related to the verb συλλάω/*sulāō* which means “to raid,” “to sack,” or “to take booty.” This verb here refers to leading away captives after defeating and sacking their city.

²²⁷ This word, ἀπάτη/*apatē*, is used seven times in the NT. We see there that wealth, desires, sin, and here **philosophy** have power to deceive. The grammar here (**philosophy** has an article, and is followed by a καί/*kai*, but **empty deception** has no article) indicates that **philosophy** and **deception** are closely connected (Bruce, p. 231; Barth, p. 310; and NET Notes).

²²⁸ In the four gospels this word, παράδοσις/*paradosis*, refers to the traditions of Judaism that were in conflict with the Scriptures, as in Mt. 15:2-6. Paul also uses this word. In Gal. 1:14 it has that same meaning. In 1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thes. 2:15 and 3:6 Paul uses it concerning the teachings that he himself has handed down to the readers. In this verse it refers to any teachings that were handed down from mere men.

²²⁹ This difficult word, στοιχεῖον/*stoicheion*, is found only seven times in the NT, always in the plural. It comes from the word στοιχός/*stoichos*, which originally was a military word, and refers to a “row.” So our word has the basic idea of “an item in a row or series.” Like hewn stones set in a row to be the foundation of a wall, the word here seems to refer to the basic building blocks people have used to make sense of life outside the Kingdom of God. Outside the NT this term was also used of the alphabet, which is made up of the basic building blocks of words. It was also used of the celestial bodies, from which constellations are built. More often it was used of the basic elements of creation, which some ancient philosophers identified as fire, water, air, and earth. Sometimes the celestial bodies were worshiped, and sometimes the basic elements of creation, fire, water, air, and earth, were worshiped. In later years this word sometimes referred to spirits as well. In philosophical discussions the word was used of the **fundamental principles** from which all thought was built. That meaning seems to fit the context here, although many commentators (Martin, p. 75; Bruce, p. 231; and O'Brien, p. 110) prefer the meaning “elemental spirits.” Their main support for this idea is that in Gal. 4:3 and 9 the word seems to refer to some sort of a personal being, because the Galatians might become enslaved again to the στοιχεῖα/*stoicheia*. However, it is easy enough to take the usage in Gal. 4 as a figure of speech. One can be enslaved to other things besides people and evil spirits. Furthermore, στοιχεῖα/*stoicheia* meaning “elemental spirits” cannot be found in Greek literature until a later period, but the meaning **fundamental principles** is well established in earlier Greek (Moule, p. 91). Therefore, it seems better to say that the term στοιχεῖα/*stoicheia* here refers to **fundamental principles** rather than “elemental spirits.”

slavery. Just as one should make sure one's city is well defended, so one should **watch out** against false teachers.

This command to **watch out** is the first of four warnings (2:8, 16, 18, and 20). These warnings are all very similar; they concern the need of every congregation to guard against false teachings that would lead us away from simple devotion to Christ, and replace that simple devotion with various false paths to Christian maturity. As should be expected from Paul's summary statement in 1:28, these warnings are mixed with teachings, and their purpose is so that they can be presented mature in Christ Jesus.

In this letter and in Galatians, more than in his others, Paul expresses concern for this danger. There is nothing here that suggests that any members of the congregation have already been taken **captive**. Note that Paul says, **watch out lest anyone take you captive**, rather than "free yourselves from the captivity that you are in." Furthermore, the high praise that he gave them in 1:4 and 8 indicates that so far they have not been taken **captive**.²³⁰ Nevertheless this is still a serious concern for Paul.

The effort to determine the exact nature of the false doctrines that threaten the congregation can become an unfortunate distraction from the actual fact that it is all too easy to slip from vitally loving Christ to feeling pretty good about our religious lives because we have gotten used to obeying a written or unwritten set of standards.

Unhappily, the following sorts of thoughts, all well in accord with **the fundamental principles of the world**, too often circulate: "if the Bible says we should not be drunk, I will never touch a drop of an alcoholic drink. Perhaps God will be a little more pleased with me. Never mind that I am a bit less in love with Jesus today."

"If the Bible says we should not forsake assembling together, I will attend Sunday morning services every single Sunday. Perhaps God will be more pleased with me. Never mind that I get more and more frustrated with many of those people I see in church every Sunday, and that frustration dulls my heart during the worship service."

"If the Bible encourages us to pray, I will pray through my lists every morning. I will have my daily personal Bible reading times. I will give at least fifteen percent of my income to the Lord." Lists like these do not all have the same items in them, but they are all based upon **the fundamental principles of the world**.

²³⁰ See the discussion in the Introduction under the heading "Spiritual Characteristics of the Congregation."

In all this, where is simply seeking the Lord Jesus and the things above? Where is thankfulness? “But I give thanks to God before every meal.” Yet we can become bitter and thankless people. Martha might have fallen into this pattern, but Mary would slip away to a quiet place to hear from her Savior.

In Colossians Paul does not go into specific details about **the fundamental principles of the world**, but in 1 Corinthians 1:17 – 3:23 he makes an extended comparison between the wisdom of the **world** and the wisdom of God. It would seem most likely that **the fundamental principles of the world** are closely related to the wisdom of the **world** described in 1 Corinthians 1:17 – 3:23.

As Paul writes of **a philosophy, an empty deception**, he gives the first description we have of the sort of false teachings that he was concerned about. As discussed in the Introduction, many efforts have been made to establish the exact nature of the particular false teachings that Paul had in mind as he wrote this letter. He may have had some particular false teachings in mind, teachings that he had come across in his wide ministries, but he wrote out broad warnings against all sorts of false teachings that might lead any congregation into focusing upon religious observation instead of our personal relationship with our living Lord. The particular errors Paul specifies in this letter serve as examples to help the Colossian congregation, without blunting the point of these exhortations to other congregations.

In the short term it might have been easier on the Colossians if Paul had made a list of the names of all the false teachers circulating in the area, and told the congregation to stay away from each one of them. However, he chose to use an approach that would better serve them in the long term, and serve later generations as well. He gave these broad warnings to educate them and ensuing generations of believers all over the world, balanced with a few specifics of the local threats. The Colossians and those later generations would need to understand the principles Paul presents in this letter, and then apply them in their particular circumstances to protect themselves from the ruination that false teachers bring.

Paul uses the term **philosophy** to begin his broad description of ruinous false teachings. The term²³¹ literally means “love of wisdom,” and it certainly could refer to what we now call “Classical Greek Philosophy,” but Philo of Alexandria

²³¹ This word, φιλοσοφία/*philosophia*, is only used here in the NT. In 4 Macc. 5:11 Antiochus Epiphanes insults the Jewish faith by calling it a “gossipy φιλοσοφία/*philosophia*.” Just because the English word **philosophy** is a transliteration of the Greek word, the reader should not assume that the Koine Greek word and the modern English word have exactly the same meaning. Clearly the English word normally has a narrower meaning, because it usually does not include religion.

and Josephus use this term to refer to the Jewish religion,²³² so it clearly had a broader meaning than our word **philosophy**, which is used in this translation because of the lack of a better term in English.

Certainly we should pursue true wisdom, but here we are taught that under the guise of a “love of wisdom” people have developed various collections of teachings that are destructive. Although they may appear profound, and may be presented in a very impressive or appealing fashion, they are actually just **empty deceptions**. This is in sharp contrast to what Christ brings; according to 2:3 “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden” in Him. If all wisdom is in Him, then all teachings that are **not according to Christ** are simply **empty deceptions**.²³³

They really do not offer us any helpful substance. Although they may claim a revelatory origin, they are really just based upon **human** teachings that have been handed down, thus gaining the impression of authority.

They may appear to be based upon some heavenly **principles**, but in fact they are really just based upon **the fundamental principles of the world** rather than upon **Christ**. Now that we are in **Christ**, we are so different from others that we are not even subject to the basic mental and spiritual building blocks of their existence, and we should not live by a **philosophy** that is built with those building blocks.

In fact whether the teachings find their origins in **human tradition** or in **the fundamental principles of the world**, or both, these are not acceptable foundations for us because they are removed from **Christ**.

It is the responsibility of every believer to understand and apply these principle-based warnings in their lives, but it is certainly more particularly the serious responsibility of the leadership of every congregation to apply these principles to every wind of doctrine that their congregation is exposed to. This is a part of the task of Christian leadership, and when it is ignored there is no shortage of doctrinal wolves who will enter in and bring ruination.

²³² Philo refers to “philosophy according to Moses,” and calls the Law of Moses “the commands... of holy philosophy.” Josephus says the Essenes, the Sadducees, and the Pharisees teachings are “three philosophies which have existed since oldest times” (Barth, p. 309).

²³³ Barth, p. 310.

2:9 **because in Him dwells**²³⁴ **all the fullness of deity**²³⁵ **bodily,**

The expression in 1:19, “in Him all the fullness was pleased to dwell,” is repeated with slight modification. This both draws the reader back into that passage reminding the reader of who Christ really is, and elaborates upon that passage with the terms **deity** and **bodily**. Further, it applies that passage to the problem of letting oneself be taken captive. If indeed **all the fullness of deity dwells bodily in Him**, what need have we of any of the teachings of men? Why, invited into personal friendship with the Living God who has become human, should we be satisfied with anything less?

This is a glorious declaration of the divinity and incarnation of Christ. It reminds us that the only true God has taken on **bodily** form. This statement disallows any idea that He might be partially divine, even if a pagan Greek author could write “from humans into heroes and from heroes into demigods the better souls undergo their transition; and from demigods, a few, after a long period of purification, share totally in divinity.”²³⁶ Christ has **all the fullness of the divinity in Him**, so there is no reason for us to look elsewhere.

Although there is no evidence of Gnosticism this early in history, it is possible that there were false teachers in the area that tried to entice the congregation with ideas about spiritual beings called “fullnesses.”²³⁷ Although their existence at this point in time is pure speculation, if such teachings existed and if Paul knew about them then he was refuting them. However, it is much more likely he is simply using an appropriate term to describe something of the wonder of our Lord. In either case, we should not lose sight of the simple fact that this sweeping declaration of Christ’s divinity and incarnation is given as support of the warning not to be taken captive by any philosophy based on human tradition, or on the fundamental principles of the world, and not based on Christ. Because He is fully God and fully man and because of our relationship with Him described in the next verse, we have no need of such teachings!

²³⁴ This word, κατοικέω/*katoikeō*, is the normal way to refer to the place where someone resides, as in Acts 2:5, which reads, “Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven residing in Jerusalem.” This word and the word πλήρωμα/*plērōma* (here translated **fullness**) also occur together in 1:19.

²³⁵ Only used this once in the NT, *BDAG* says this word, θεότης/*theotēs*, is “used as abstract noun for θεός,” and means “the state of being god, divine character/nature, deity, divinity.” In some English speakers’ minds “divinity” may be somehow less than “deity,” but that is a discussion of two modern English words, not the meaning of this Greek text. In this text Christ has **all the fullness of** θεότης/*theotēs*, so He is not somehow less divine than the Father!

²³⁶ Plutarch *Moralia* 415bc, quoted in *BDAG*’s discussion on θεότης/*theotēs*.

²³⁷ Gnosticism, which is not documented in the first century, would come to use the word here translated **fullness** (πλήρωμα/*plērōma*) to describe a supposed series of intermediate beings that filled the gap between the holy and transcendent God and this evil physical world.

2:10 **and in Him you have been filled,**²³⁸ **in Him**²³⁹ **who is the head**²⁴⁰ **over every ruler and authority.**

Further developing the idea that all the fullness of deity dwells bodily in Christ, Paul shifts over to the Colossians, and tells them that they have become full **in Him**. By virtue of the believer's relationship with the One who has all the fullness of God, the believer also is **filled**. Paul almost seems to say that His fullness overflows to the congregation so they also are **filled**. As Barth²⁴¹ puts it, believers "are participants in the presence of God in the Messiah...." This participation, this being **in Him**, also brings us into the death and resurrection of the Messiah, as Paul will explain in the next few verses.

Paul does not explain what it is we have been **filled** with, but whether it is life, or Christ Himself, the fullness that we have in Him suggests that we are not lacking anything, and so have no need to drift over to any sort of teachings that are not based upon Christ. Can a prince hope to gain anything from a pickpocket? Neither can the Colossians gain anything from teachings not based upon Christ.

Our true fulness is in Christ! We are **in Him**, we are **filled in Him – in Him** in whom all the fullness of the divine nature dwells bodily. We must not be distracted by obscure historical speculation as to the supposed tie with "incipient Gnosticism's" teachings about fullnesses. Instead we should learn to celebrate our real and fundamental connection with the Full One, and the Fullness which is our condition because of that connection. These things are not visible, they are hidden and must be sought. Nevertheless they are vastly more valuable than all the visible things on the face of the earth.

Paul goes on to say that Christ is the **head over every ruler and authority**. He continues to support the command to watch out for empty philosophy by helping us see even more clearly that we should immediately reject all false teaching because it is not based on Him whose fullness overflows to us, and whose dominion is over **every ruler and authority**. How great is the One in whom we are **filled**!

For many of us, being a Christian means we go to church on Sunday and

²³⁸ The Greek perfect tense is used here, indicating that our becoming **filled** happened in the past, with results that continue into the present.

²³⁹ The words **in Him** are repeated to make a better English sentence, but are only used once in the Greek sentence.

²⁴⁰ The word κεφαλή/*kephalē* either has the literal meaning of **head**, or, as here, a figurative meaning. Note the explanation of this term in the footnote under 1:18.

²⁴¹ P. 315.

sometimes for other activities, have most of our social connections among other Christians, wear certain kinds of clothing, and do certain other activities (Bible study, prayer, ministry in an area of gifting) and we abstain from certain other activities (using certain words, smoking, drinking in excess or drinking any alcohol, being unkind to people). This is a tragic misunderstanding of the life that the Lord Jesus Christ would have for us. Worse still, we easily decide that others having a different list of activities to do and a different list of activities to not do, are inferior Christians, and thus we reenforce our pride.²⁴² In this letter Paul describes the life that the Lord would have for us, but it is so far removed from the “fundamental principles of the world” that it is not easy to describe in human language.

2:II In Him²⁴³ also you were circumcised with a circumcision accomplished without hands,²⁴⁴ by the disarming²⁴⁵ of the sinful²⁴⁶ body

²⁴² If this seems like an unreasonable assertion, it is easy to test. Imagine for a moment someone dressing and wearing his or her hair in a way that is very different from you. If your hair is its natural color, imagine his or hers is multicolored (or visa versa), and if your clothing is pastel, imagine his or hers is all black or all white. Now imagine that person handing out Bible portions at a street intersection, or speaking in a loud voice about Jesus Christ in a park. If you would have no suspicions about that person’s motives or qualifications, then indeed the assertion is unreasonable. However, if you would be suspicious of that person’s motives or qualifications, then indeed the assertion has proven true.

²⁴³ The Greek here is literally “In whom also...” but it is translated **In Him also** because of the requirements of English sentence structure.

²⁴⁴ This word, ἀχειροποίητος/*acheiropoiētos*, literally means “not handmade,” but of course the contrast is not the modern industrial age’s contrast between handmade and machine made, but between made by human **hands** and made by divine power. This word is also used of the temple that the Lord Jesus said He would build in three days (Mk. 14:58) and our resurrection bodies, figuratively described as “a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (2 Cor. 5:1).

²⁴⁵ This word, ἀπέκδυσις/*apekduōsis*, is only used here in the NT, and except for references to Paul, it does not reappear until the 11th century. However, the very closely related verb ἀπεκδύομαι/*apekduomai* means “to strip off weaponry” or “to disarm” in Col. 2:15. Both words speak of someone being stripped of weapons or clothing. In Rom. 6:19 we read, “I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh,” so we know that **the flesh** is not removed like an old shirt and thrown away, so the common English translation of “removal” is inappropriate here. **The flesh** is not removed, it is stripped of its power. It is disarmed.

²⁴⁶ Although present in the majority of manuscripts, five early manuscripts do not include the words τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν/*tōn hamartiōn*, “of the sins,” here translated **sinful**.

– **the flesh,**²⁴⁷ **the circumcision that Christ accomplishes,**²⁴⁸

As Paul continues to exalt Christ and protect the Colossian congregation (and congregations through the ages since then) from a bewildering variety of false teachings, he shifts over to the very Jewish idea of **circumcision**. If the Judaizers that Paul dealt with in Galatians had not already come to Colossae, they might arrive at any time and proclaim to the Gentile believers there that they needed to be **circumcised** to please God. So, further explaining the wonderful completeness that we enjoy **in Him**, and further proving that we have no need for teachings not founded on **Christ**, Paul writes of **the circumcision that Christ accomplishes**. He tells the Colossians how much better their **circumcision** is than a mere physical **circumcision**. Besides the essential fact that we have this because we are **in Him**, three things are brought up about this **circumcision**. Firstly, it was done **without** human **hands**. Secondly, rather than a merely symbolic removal of the foreskin, it actually renders powerless the **sinful body**, that is, **the flesh**. Thirdly, it was done by **Christ**. In Philippians 3:3 Paul expresses a similar idea: “For we, we are the Circumcision, we are the ones serving in the Spirit of God and boasting in Christ Jesus, putting no confidence in the flesh.”

Physical **circumcision** was a ritual that reminded the nation of Israel that they had a covenant with God that required them to separate from sin. The foreskin seems to have symbolized the **flesh** and its power to control the body. Cutting it off was a symbol of a promise to be a holy people. That promise was broken time and time again as the nation failed to obey the Law of Moses. They thus demonstrated that a deeper work, a spiritual **circumcision**, was also required, as Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; and 9:25-26 make clear.

This deeper **circumcision** is explained as **the disarming of the sinful body – the flesh**. Martin²⁴⁹ says that **the body of flesh** “is virtually the same as ‘body of this death’ (Romans 7:24) or ‘body of sin’ (Romans 6:6).” Although **the flesh** utterly controlled us when we were not yet in **Christ**, now it has been stripped of its power like a defeated soldier is stripped of his weapons. It is not obliterated

²⁴⁷ The words **the flesh** in this passage are a genitive of apposition. It is as if Paul were saying, “When I say ‘the sinful body,’ I mean the flesh.” This word, *σάρξ/sarx*, basically means **flesh**, but it takes on a broader set of meanings, some as figures of speech, some because of spiritual insight. By way of figures of speech, the word can refer to the whole human body (Acts 2:26) or humanity (as in Lk. 3:6). In Jn. 1:14 we read that the Word became **flesh**, so in one sense **flesh** is not inherently sinful. However, as the word is used in this passage it always drives unregenerate people to sin, and would drive regenerate people to sin if allowed to. This word is used in the Greek text of 2 Pet. 2:10; 2:18; and 1 Jn. 2:16 where it speaks of the evil that is inherent in **the flesh**.

²⁴⁸ The text says, “by the circumcision of the Christ,” and it is best to take that genitive as a subjective genitive, meaning that **Christ** did this **circumcision**. It could, however, also be translated “by Christ’s circumcision.” In that case it would either refer to His **circumcision** when He was eight days old, or it would be a unique but powerful figure of speech referring to His death.

²⁴⁹ P. 77.

– it might still tempt, it might still deceive – but like a weaponless defeated soldier, it can no longer force its will upon us. Although in fact some believers do submit to it, we do not need to. At the new birth we were fundamentally changed. We are no longer “children by nature of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3).²⁵⁰ We have a new nature. Romans 6:4-7 teaches quite plainly that the unity we have with Christ includes a participation in His death, such that our old nature died with Christ on the cross, and because of that **the flesh** and sin have lost their ability to enslave us.

Perhaps this verse contains a word play, because this verb can mean “disarm” or “strip off.” On the one hand the imagery is about **circumcision**, in which the foreskin is stripped off, but on the other hand the actual point of the discussion is that **Christ** has stripped **the flesh** of the power by which it enslaved us. He has disarmed it. Just like **circumcision** strips off (disarms) the foreskin, so **the flesh** has been disarmed (stripped off).²⁵¹

What a great thing **Christ** has done for us! We do not have a mere physical **circumcision**, a sign that reminds its bearers of the obligation to submit to the Law of Moses, we have a **circumcision that Christ accomplishes** by which we are actually freed from slavery to **flesh** and sin! Now with the power of the Spirit we no longer need to be under the dominion of our **flesh** – but of course until the resurrection it still exists, and still tries to convince us to surrender to its urgent invitation to a variety of sins. Like a general with a very inferior army, all it can do is strut, boast, and deceive; it cannot overpower the work of the Spirit in us by direct attack.

2:12 being buried with Him in baptism, in whom²⁵² also you were raised

²⁵⁰ Refer to the endnote under 1:21 concerning the translation of σάρξ/sarx (**flesh**) and the supposed “sin nature” of born again people. It is nevertheless true that unbelievers are completely under the control of **the flesh**, and believers may submit to **the flesh**. The wonderful truth of this verse is that **the flesh** has been stripped of its power to dominate those that are **in Him**.

²⁵¹ O’Brien (pp. 116-117) explains that scholars have taken two different views on this passage. One is basically the view given above; the second view, which O’Brien prefers, is that the “putting off of the body of flesh” refers to Christ’s death, as does the expression “the circumcision of Christ.” That second view is not possible if the majority of Greek manuscripts are accepted as accurate, because they read **the disarming of the sinful** (τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν/tōn hamartiōn) **body – the flesh**, but Christ’s **body** was not **sinful**.

²⁵² This could also be translated “in which,” meaning in **baptism** they **were also raised from the dead**. Beasley-Murray, Abbott, and Scott take that view (according to O’Brien, p. 118). However, O’Brien himself and Barth (p. 321) think the expression refers to Christ rather than to **baptism**. Because there are so many references to being “in Him” in the near context, the translation **in whom** may be better, but because this “in whom/which” *directly* follows **baptism**, it is also quite possible that “in which” is the better translation, meaning that **in our baptism** we are **also raised from the dead**.

through faith²⁵³ in the power²⁵⁴ of the God that raised Him from the dead,

Paul has told them of the fullness which they have in Christ, then of the “circumcision” they have from Him, and now he tells them of the **baptism** they have through Him, a **baptism** that speaks of being **buried with Him** and **raised from the dead** with Him. Romans 6:3-4 likewise teaches that through our **baptism** we participate in the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord.

The New Testament speaks of various baptisms. The term is used of Jewish ritual washings (Mark 7:4), of severe trials (Mark 10:38), of Christ’s water baptism (Luke 3:21), of John’s baptism (Matthew 3:6), of Spirit baptism (Luke 3:16), and of Christian water baptism (Acts 2:38-41).

It may be that the entire congregation had experienced water **baptism**, but the text seems to be referring to **baptism** that happens when we first believe in Him, that **baptism** that also joins us to the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13, see also Galatians 3:27). Water **baptism** is a physical event that ought to reflect the spiritual events that occurred when we believed in Christ.

Despite the fact that he tells us we were **buried with Him**, he does not crowd in the fact that at the point of turning to Christ, believers experience a death in Christ, perhaps because he wants to reserve the idea of death to describe the deadness that we all had before we believed in Him, saying in the next verse “and you being dead in your transgressions....”

Nevertheless at the point of turning to Christ, we did experience a death with Him, as Romans 6:1-6 develops more thoroughly. There we read that:

1. We died to sin.
2. We were baptized into His death.
3. We were buried with Him through baptism.
4. The purpose of this death or crucifixion with Him was that the body of sin would be done away with.
5. The body of sin being done away with is explained to mean we no longer need to be slaves to sin.

²⁵³ Barth (pp. 323-324) says that **faith** here should be translated “faithfulness.” He dislikes the idea that a person’s **faith** is a condition for participation in the resurrection. It is true that outside the Bible *πίστις/pistis* can often mean “faithfulness.” Within the NT it does seem to mean that in Rom. 3:3, and it could mean that in other passages like Mt. 23:23; Lk. 18:8; and Rom. 1:8. However, this author has no problem with personal **faith** as a condition for participation in the resurrection, and *πίστις/pistis* as “faithfulness” is very uncommon in the NT, so the best translation does seem to be **through faith in the power of the God that raised Him from the dead**.

²⁵⁴ This word, *ἐνέργεια/energeia*, is translated “working” in Col. 1:29.

Here in Colossians 2:11-12 points 3, 4, and 5 are given, with quite similar terminology. Both passages encourage us that the power of sin and the power of our flesh has been removed, so that we can live a life that is pleasing to Him.

In one sense we have *already* been **raised** with Christ, but in another sense, as mentioned in Romans 6:5-8, we have *not yet* come to the time when we will be united with Him in His resurrection. This is a clear example of “the presence of the future,” or “realized eschatology,” in Paul’s writings. As the Lord Himself taught Mary at the resurrection of Lazarus, the resurrection is both a present reality and something that we await at Christ’s return.

In the Bible our salvation and our life in Christ are described with various expressions like “new birth,” “death, burial, and resurrection,” “a circumcision made without hands,” and “baptism.” Some might say these are figures of speech that describe the transformations that God brings about when people become believers. Others would say they are expressions that speak of actual spiritual events so that visible human events like birth, death, burial, resurrection, circumcision, and baptism are just pale reflections of spiritual realities.

Aware of all this, who would be even slightly attracted to those destructive false teachings that Paul is trying to keep the Colossians away from? What can any such teachers possibly offer that believers do not already have in abundance?

Paul seems to have a great deal of freedom in describing the **faith** through which people receive eternal life. Here it is **faith in the power of the God that raised Him from the dead**. This expression emphasizes God’s **power** to resurrect rather than our **faith**.

Because Paul brings up **faith in God** here, the reader cannot mistakenly conclude that by **baptism** he receives this death, burial, and resurrection. It is **faith**, not the work of **baptism**, that is required of the unsaved.²⁵⁵

2:13 and even though you were dead²⁵⁶ in your²⁵⁷ transgressions and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you²⁵⁸ alive with Him,

²⁵⁵ Martin, p. 87.

²⁵⁶ This is literally “and you being dead,” but it is translated **and even though you were dead** to make a better English sentence.

²⁵⁷ This is literally “the transgressions,” but the word “the” is translated as **your** to make a better English sentence.

²⁵⁸ B and p⁴⁶ read ἡμᾶς/*hēmas* (“us”) instead of ὑμᾶς/*humas* (**you**), but the reading ὑμᾶς/*humas* (**you**) is clearly superior, with strong early support and the majority of the Greek manuscripts.

forgiving²⁵⁹ us²⁶⁰ all our²⁶¹ transgressions.

Besides shifting back in time to the point when the congregation had not yet come to Christ, the **and** which begins verse 13 marks a subtle shift in the metaphors that Paul is using. The death that is implied in Colossians 2:12 is a death *with* Christ; it is our wonderful participation in His death on the cross, in which our old self died by crucifixion. However, the state of **being dead** that is described here in Colossians 2:13 was utterly *without* Christ. We were certainly not with Christ when we were **dead in our transgressions!** Realizing this shift in word pictures will help us follow what Paul is describing here. This is a brief view into the state of utter helplessness and complete need that we were all in before we put our faith in Christ.

At that point in our lives, not yet having trusted “in the power of the God that raised Him from the dead” we were in a very real sense **dead**. We were all **dead in our transgressions**, as were Adam and Eve after they ate the fruit in the Garden.

We were also **dead in the uncircumcision of our flesh**. At first glance this expression sounds like we were **dead** because we were physically uncircumcised,²⁶² but the word **flesh** here most likely has the same meaning that it had in verse 11, that aspect of an unregenerate person that is in utter control, driving that person to sin. The **flesh**, prior to faith in the power of the God that raised Christ from the dead, was not yet disarmed. It was not yet stripped of its power to demand **transgressions**.

As is sometimes the case in other unseen spiritual realities (for instance baptism and new birth), the physical reflects the greater spiritual reality. Physical death is a reflection of the greater spiritual death. We can learn about the spiritual by

²⁵⁹ This verb (χαρίζομαι/*charizomai*), comes from the noun χάρις/*charis*, meaning “grace.” In the NT it generally means “give.” God *gave* Christ the name that is above every name (Phil. 2:9), and the Jewish leaders disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be *given* to them (Acts 3:14). However, Paul, and only Paul in the NT, sometimes uses this word to mean “forgive.” Note 2 Cor. 2:7, 10; 12:13; Eph. 4:32; Col. 2:13 and 3:13.

²⁶⁰ The oldest existing Greek manuscript that reads ὑμῖν/*humin* (“your”) here is a seventh century correction of Sinaiticus! The reading ἡμῖν/*hēmin* (**our**) is definitely original, attested in the original of Sinaiticus and all of the seven other existing manuscripts written prior to the seventh century, as well as the majority of all the Greek manuscripts. It seems that a few of the copyists did not follow along carefully and notice that Paul, having described so many of the wonders of salvation as benefits *they* received, finally begins to include himself, writing **forgiving us all our transgressions**.

²⁶¹ Again this is literally “the transgressions.”

²⁶² Hendriksen, p. 117, takes that view, emphasizing the Gentile ethnicity of the congregation, which is clear enough from Col. 1:27, and is supported by Eph. 2:12. However, since physical circumcision did not bring life, mentioning physical **uncircumcision** here does not further the point Paul is making. If Paul were referring to physical **uncircumcision** here, then a Jew in the community might think that since he was not uncircumcised perhaps he was less **dead** in his **transgressions!**

considering the physical. We can learn about spiritual death by considering physical death. In that state of death we were characterized by our **transgressions** and **the uncircumcision of our flesh**.

It is supremely important to understand that God did not leave us **dead**. **He made us alive**. Could there have been any greater transformation? Death in human experience is degrading and permanent – but God **made us alive**.

That idea of being **made alive** is explained in three phrases:

1. **forgiving us all our transgressions**
2. erasing the record of debts against us
3. disarming the rulers and authorities

He did not leave the burden of our guilt upon us, instead He forgave **us all our transgressions**. Forgiveness of sins comes up several times in Colossians (1:14; 2:13; and 3:13). One wonders whether this emphasis, vital in all our lives, was not spurred to the forefront of Paul's thoughts by the specific need of Philemon to forgive Onesimus.²⁶³

2:14 **He erased²⁶⁴ the record of debts against us, with its decrees, which was hostile to us, and He lifted it up out of our²⁶⁵ midst, nailing it to the cross.**

The expression **record of debts** here is literally “handwritten document,” but it refers to a certificate of indebtedness, like a formal “IOU.”²⁶⁶

This **record of debts** which was **against us** would seem to be the Law of Moses. Certainly we know that the Law of Moses would bring life if it were ever fully obeyed, but since it is never fully obeyed (except by the Son of Man), it always brings condemnation and death; it was **against us**, and it was even **hostile to us**.

The problem with saying that **the record of debts** and the Law of Moses are

²⁶³ Hendriksen, pp. 118-119.

²⁶⁴ This word, ἐξάλειψω/*exaleiphō*, basically means “to remove by wiping away,” and so would mean “erase” in the context of letters, words, or writings, as in this case. It would be translated “to wipe away” in the context of tears (as in Rev. 7:17 and 21:4). It also took on the more general or figurative meaning of “to wipe out,” as in Acts 3:19. *BDAG* quotes an ancient text in which this term means both “erase” and “wipe out”: “let the one who obliterates these letters be assured that his posterity will be obliterated.” The verb is also used in the LXX of Is. 43:25, which tells us that God Himself wipes away or erases Israel's transgressions.

²⁶⁵ A more literal translation would read, “out of the midst,” but it is clear that it was **out of our midst**.

²⁶⁶ The word is χειρόγραφον/*cheirographon*. The reader should remember that after the invention of the printing press, “handwriting” came to mean “written by hand, not printed by machine.” However, that was certainly not the intent prior to the invention of the printing press!

one and the same is that the congregation in Colossae was mostly or entirely non-Jewish,²⁶⁷ and the Law of Moses was specifically for the Jews. O'Brien's²⁶⁸ suggestion that the term refers to “the signed acknowledgment of our indebtedness before God” seems most reasonable. In the case of the Jews, that “acknowledgment of our indebtedness” takes the form of the Law of Moses. In the case of the Gentiles, that “acknowledgment of our indebtedness” is in the form of “the requirements of the Law written on their hearts,” as Romans 2:14-15 make clear. Perhaps Paul made this slightly obscure so that a Jewish believer would read it and immediately think of the Law of Moses, but a Gentile believer that knew nothing of the Law would just think of the sense of condemnation that his conscience brought to him before he was forgiven in Christ.

This document was **erased, lifted up**, and **nailed to the cross**. What a bold and powerful way to tell us about something that was accomplished when Jesus Christ was crucified. When He was **lifted up**, taken away from the **midst** of the disciples, and nailed **to the cross** our debt was also **lifted up**, taken away from **our midst**, and nailed **to the cross**!

Because of **the cross**, this **record of debts** was **erased** or “wiped out.” With it, **its decrees** were also **erased**. Not only is our debt paid, but the **decrees** we violated thus bringing ourselves into debt have been **erased** as well. Jew or Gentile, we are not a community that lives according to any lists of rules. This is strongly emphasized in 2:16–3:4, whose first word, “therefore,” points out that because of what Christ has done, outlined in this passage, we *therefore* are not subject to the fundamental principles of the world. In fact, verse 20, “If you died with Christ to the fundamental principles of the world, why, as if living in the world, submit to its decrees,” uses the same root word, **decrees**.²⁶⁹ It is no longer our business to live our lives obeying these **decrees**. They are **erased**, and we are fundamentally different. Much of this letter is about this very issue.

In verse 13 the forgiveness of our transgressions is mentioned, and here in verse 14 three expressions elaborate on that forgiveness. The **record** of our sins is not merely **erased**, so that we have a fresh start with a clean slate, as if any more sins from that point in time would still be recorded. No, that slate is **lifted up out of our midst** and nailed **to the cross**. The forgiveness that we have was *needed* because that **record** was **against us** and **hostile to us**, it is *complete and emphatic* because the **record** is **erased, lifted up** and nailed **to the cross**, and it is *just and well founded*, not at all arbitrary, because **the record of debts** is nailed **to the**

²⁶⁷ See Col. 1:27.

²⁶⁸ P. 125.

²⁶⁹ In verse 14 the noun (δόγμασιν/*dogmasin*) is used, and in verse 20 the verb (δογματίζω/*dogmatizō*) is used.

cross. It is right and just for God to forgive us, because the debt of our sin has not been ignored, it was paid in full at the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

2:15 Disarming²⁷⁰ the rulers and authorities, He publicly shamed them, displaying them in a triumphal procession,²⁷¹ by the cross.²⁷²

As Paul works to give reason after reason why his readers should take no interest in empty philosophy, he has used word pictures concerning fullness, circumcision, baptism, burial, resurrection, and indebtedness to describe the transformation Christ has accomplished in believers. Here he brings in another powerful picture to describe what Christ has accomplished concerning our spiritual enemies.

If the Law or our conscience was a “record of debts against us” and “hostile to us,” and if Christ has “lifted it up out of our midst, nailing it to the cross,” then that impersonal accuser has been removed. However, there are also personal accusers. Satan is the arch-accuser,²⁷³ and his demons follow him.

In Romans 8:1-4 we learn that the Law’s requirement was fulfilled by the work of the Lord Jesus, and in 8:33-34 we learn that no one can bring an accusation against us. The argument here may be similar. The impersonal accuser is lifted up out of our midst and nailed to the **cross**, and our personal accusers are disarmed, **publicly shamed**, and displayed **in a triumphal procession**.²⁷⁴ What great things Christ has done for us!

²⁷⁰ This verb, ἀπεκδύομαι/*apekduomai*, means “to strip off,” usually of clothing or weaponry. Because this is a military metaphor of a **triumphal procession** it seems to mean “to strip off arms” or “to disarm,” but the historical accounts of **triumphal procession** are not detailed enough for us to know whether the defeated soldiers that were paraded in a **triumphal procession** were allowed the dignity of clothing. They, and **the rulers and authorities** in this **triumphal procession**, may have been stripped of clothing *and* weaponry. This verb is also used in Col. 3:9 of “taking off the old man.” The closely related noun ἀπέκδυσις/*apekduosis* is used in Col. 2:11. Some commentators note that this verb is in the middle voice, suggesting that Christ disarmed or divested Himself of something, which very much complicates the interpretation of the passage. It is much simpler to suggest that this verb is a deponent verb, that is, it uses the form of the middle voice but can have active meaning, so that in this verse Christ stripped off or disarmed the **the rulers and authorities** (O’Brien, p. 127, refers to Blass, Debrunner, and Funk, paragraph 316).

²⁷¹ The Greek verb which Paul uses here is θριαμβεύω/*thriambeuō*, from which we get the English word “triumph.” However, the Greek word does not mean “to win a victory,” like the English word “triumph.” This Greek verb might be translated “to display in a formal triumphal procession.” It refers to the great and joyous **triumphal procession** that Romans generals might be privileged to lead through Rome, in which they and their soldiers would be honored, vast and valuable booty would be displayed, and the captive generals and soldiers (having been stripped of their weapons) would be publicly shamed.

²⁷² Literally this reads “triumphing over them by it” or “by him.” Assuming that by 2:15 the subject has become Christ, the text should be read “by it,” meaning **by the cross**.

²⁷³ That very name, שָׂטָן/*śātān*, means “accuser.”

²⁷⁴ Hendriksen, pp. 122-123, develops this well. He also notes with insight the relevance of Job 1:9-11; Zech. 3:1-5; Rev. 12:10; Eph. 6:12; Col. 1:13; Mt. 4:1-11; 12:29; Lk. 10:18; 22:3, 53; Eph. 1:20-23; 4:8; and 2 Cor. 2:14.

In that age, when a victorious Roman army returned home and the government wanted to honor the victorious general, the army would be granted a **triumphal** parade through their city. In fact, “to triumph” was not to win a war, it was to be honored with a **triumphal procession** in Rome. A good “triumph” like that would greatly enhance the stature of the victorious general. During the days of the Roman Republic, the triumphing general might be declared a demigod like Hercules. Jesus Christ has been thus honored, not in the streets of Rome, but in some heavenly avenue. Our Lord is a conquering Lord. He has won, **by the cross**, a victory both on a cosmic and on a personal scale. The enemies are utterly defeated. All of this has been proclaimed and displayed publicly in realms as yet invisible to us. We are on His side, and can cheer and honor Him. Why then would any of us have the slightest interest in some empty philosophy that would distract us from Him?

Judging by the amount of magical scrolls that were destroyed in Ephesus,²⁷⁵ there may also have been a great deal of occult activity in Colossae. Since occult activity invites bondage to evil spirits, it is also quite likely that for the congregation in Colossae the defeat of those ruinous spirits was no mere academic or theological point. They almost certainly knew of the despair of demonic bondage and the joy of deliverance **by the cross**.

At the death of Christ on **the cross**, the demonic forces against which we struggle lost their ability to dominate humanity. They were stripped of their “weapons.” However, they were not somehow made nonexistent, and they were not imprisoned. They still exist, and still want to accuse and deceive individuals and societies. They would have us forget the complete forgiveness that we enjoy according to verses 13 and 14. Demons do successfully accuse and deceive some believers, but those demons do it with lies, because the truth is that we have been perfectly forgiven by the living God, on the basis of **the cross**. In 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 we learn that even that kind of demonic activity will end when the Lord returns, but as Ephesians 6:12 teaches, now we do struggle against the **rulers**, against the **authorities**, against the world powers of this dark age, against the evil spirits in the heavens.²⁷⁶

2:16 Therefore do not let anyone judge you concerning eating or

²⁷⁵ Acts 19:19 gives us some idea of the importance of magic in Ephesus: “bringing together their scrolls, many of the practitioners of magic burned them in front of everybody, and they counted their value, which came to be 50,000 silver coins.” Since a “silver coin,” or a drachma, was a day’s wage for a laborer, it is clear that a great deal of expensive magical scrolls were burned that day. Such magic must have been extremely important to at least some of the people of Ephesus!

²⁷⁶ Both Col. 2:15 and Eph. 6:12 use the terms ἀρχή/*archē* (**ruler**) and ἐξουσία/*exousia* (**authority**).

drinking²⁷⁷ or in the matter of a holy day or a new moon festival²⁷⁸ or Sabbaths,

This **therefore** shows us that the commands that follow it are undergirded, they are supported, by what we have just read about the great benefits we have received because of the cross. Paul's exhortations are not arbitrary. They are built upon the strong foundation of the grace of God.

Having warned the congregation not to take any interest in empty philosophies, and then given them a wide range of reasons illustrated with all those word pictures and images, Paul has shifted over to warn them concerning another danger: we should not listen to anybody that would want to criticize us based on their religious standards. We should not let them **judge** us, that is we should not believe them when they tell us our spiritual life is defective because we are not **eating or drinking** correctly, or because we are not following their calendar correctly.

The Judaizers that Paul opposed in Acts and Galatians would, of course, want to persuade them to follow the Law of Moses as they interpreted it. Eloquent and deceptive local religious teachers might also try to persuade them to follow some "Christianized" pagan regulations. Scholars are divided about whether this verse concerns Old Testament regulations.²⁷⁹ Since he uses the term **Sabbaths**, Paul was probably referring to Jewish regulations, but by way of application whether the set of rules you are told to follow in order to draw nearer to God is of Jewish, Greek, Phrygian, or some exotic origin, **do not let anyone judge you** with them. Certainly, there can be a real temptation to return to observance of a good set of rules – and where better to get a good set of rules than from the Law of Moses? This issue is most directly dealt with in Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia. There they had certainly succumbed to this temptation. In Colossae they simply needed to be warned concerning this danger which had been so devastating in Galatia. Romans 14:2, 5; 1 Timothy 4:3; Titus 1:13-16; Hebrews 9:10; and 13:9 all show that there were various kinds of teaching like this in the context of the New Testament church.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁷ This could also be translated "concerning food or drink," but the terms βρώσις/*brōsis* and πόσις/*posis* more often refer to the activities **eating** and **drinking**.

²⁷⁸ This term, νεομηνία/*neomēnia*, literally means **new moon** but also commonly refers to celebrations that take place at the **new moon**.

²⁷⁹ Barth (p. 338) says that is "very likely" that OT regulations are referred to here, O'Brien (p. 138) says "Paul is probably not referring directly to the OT foods laws..." and Hendriksen (p. 123) says it is "evident" that more than Jewish influence is involved here. It is more likely that this is a reference to Jewish law, which by that time was broader than the Law of Moses, as is obvious in Mk. 7:1-15. As noted above, the reference seems to be to Jewish laws, especially because verse 17 calls these things "a shadow of the things to come." It would be difficult to see how pagan dietary regulations could be "a shadow of the things to come."

²⁸⁰ Martin, p. 89.

The danger continues today. It is very easy to drift into the thinking that the Christian life is about obeying rules: “if I can be in church most every Sunday morning, and if I can refrain from alcohol and tobacco, and if I can be sure to have my daily Bible reading and prayer time, and if I can listen to Christian music only, and if I can give ten percent of my income to the church, then I am doing well as a believer.” Church leaders often find this sort of congregation very easy to get along with, and may even encourage this thinking. The dangers of course are many. When we live in this sort of Christianity, we either become proud of our ability to follow the rules, or we become frustrated and hopeless at our inability to be “good Christians.” That frustration eventually leads either to increased diligence or a break with all that hypocrisy, a break into bitterness, apathy or license. Emphasizing its rules and standards, a discipline-centered church will develop a mixture of self-righteousness, apathetic, and self-indulgent people.

So Paul is saying that these outward religious codes of behavior are of no use to us now in drawing nearer to Christ. If someone judges us because we do not follow their rules in this sort of thing, we are commanded to disregard their words. These are not moral issues; our relationship with the Lord is simply *not* improved by keeping any sort of **Sabbaths** or **holy days**, even if in the past such things were required of the nation of Israel. Although we can learn many things from studying the Old Testament regulations in these areas, we are not actually asked to follow those rules, and trying to obey them will not help us grow more mature in Christ.

Speaking of the Day of Atonement in particular and the Old Testament Law in general, Hebrews 9:9-10 puts it very clearly: “This is a symbol for the present time, when gifts and sacrifices are offered which are unable to perfect the worshiper’s conscience. They only concern eating and drinking and various cleansings and regulations of flesh, imposed until the time of the new order.”

Paul is not encouraging license here, suggesting that we can eat gluttonously and drink alcoholic beverages until we get drunk. What he is saying is that following religious rules in order to get closer to God is useless. However, knowing we have been filled, circumcised, resurrected, forgiven, and brought over to the victorious side, let’s worship our God. In doing so, we grow spiritually.

Furthermore, Paul is not contradicting what he wrote in Romans 14:1–15:3 and 1 Corinthians 8-10. There he wrote that if someone is weak in faith, and thinks that keeping some old rule is the spiritual thing to do, you that have greater faith and understanding may need to voluntarily follow that old rule, simply so that the

weaker brother is not offended. That voluntary compliance would be motivated out of love and patience for a weaker brother, not out of a desire to supposedly draw nearer to God. What Paul wrote in Romans 14:13-18 is in perfect harmony with our text: “Therefore, let us no longer judge one another.... For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit....”

Anyone serving in a cross-cultural ministry may find that following the religious sensitivities of those he would reach with the gospel makes his ministry more effective. That may explain Paul’s interest in reaching Jerusalem by the Day of Pentecost (Acts 20:16). Here in Colossians Paul is not forbidding the use of religious regulations for missiological purposes, he is rejecting such religious regulations as aides to spiritual growth.

2:17 which were²⁸¹ a shadow of the things to come,²⁸² but the substance²⁸³ is of Christ.

If the nature of those issues in the previous verse were unclear there, here they are identified as Old Testament regulations – it is very difficult to imagine how Paul could say this about the false teachings of a pagan religious teacher.

All those Old Testament regulations point to **the things to come**, as surely as a **shadow** tells us there is something or someone casting that **shadow**. This is very much in harmony with what we learn in other passages, perhaps most clearly in the Epistle to the Hebrews. In fact Hebrews 8:5 says that the Temple is “a sanctuary that is a copy and *shadow* of what is in heaven,” and 10:1 says “The Law is only a *shadow of the good things to come* – not the realities themselves.”²⁸⁴ See also Hebrews 9:9-10, and 23.

Sometimes when a man is walking towards you, you might first notice his **shadow**. You will learn some things from the **shadow**, but when you see the man himself you do not bother to look at the **shadow** any more. So it is with the Old Testament regulations. We have Christ!

²⁸¹ In this translation the past tense is used here because when the OT regulations were given, they *were* a **shadow of the things** that were still **to come**. Now **the things to come** are already present, and the **shadow** is of no further use. As O’Brien (p. 140) points out, the expression **the things to come** here does not point to the Second Coming of Christ, because if it did, then the OT regulations rejected in verse 16 would still have value.

²⁸² The Greek here translated **the things to come** (τῶν μελλόντων/*tōn mellontōn*) is plural, as the translation suggests. It is not as impersonal as the word **things** suggests, but neither does it say “the people that are coming.”

²⁸³ The word translated **substance** here is σῶμα/*sōma*, which is usually translated “body.”

²⁸⁴ The wording in Heb. 10:1 is very similar (τῶν μελλόντων ἀγαθῶν/*tōn mellontōn agathōn*) to the wording here (τῶν μελλόντων/*tōn mellontōn*).

2:18 **Let no one rule against you,²⁸⁵ taking pleasure in humility of mind²⁸⁶ and the worship of angels,²⁸⁷ going into things he has not²⁸⁸ seen, puffed up²⁸⁹ in vain by his fleshly mind.**

The general intent of this verse, though it is packed with difficult and debated

285 The verb that is translated **rule against you** (καταβραβεύω/*katabrabeuō*) originally referred to a judge in an athletic contest that would give the prize (the βραβεῖον/*brabeion*, as in 1 Cor. 9:24) to the winning athlete. The word then took on the figurative sense that Paul is using here. The verb can be used with or without the prefix κατα/*kata*. Its use, as here, gives the idea that it is a ruling **against** someone. He is saying that nobody should be allowed to falsely declare that they have lost the contest, like a bad judge, robbing them of the prize they possess in Christ. In Col. 3:15 we are invited to let the peace of God **rule** (βραβεύω/*brabeuō*) in our hearts.

286 This word, ταπεινοφροσύνη/*tapeinophrosunē*, is used seven times in the NT. Three of those passages are in Colossians. Once in Colossians and always in the other four passages it is a positive concept, but here and in Col. 2:23 it is a negative concept. In Christian and Jewish literature **humility of mind** commonly refers to fasting and other ascetic practices. Although Barth (p. 344) is not convinced, O'Brien (p. 142) suggests that here in this context this word refers to fasting and other ascetic practices. In the Jewish sources these ascetic practices were required to prepare oneself to receive heavenly visions, so this understanding of the term fits well with the previous two verses and the expression **things he has not seen** in this verse.

287 This expression (θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων/*thrēskeia tōn angelōn*) is literally “worship of the angels.” It could refer to men worshipping **angels**, or the **worship** that **angels** do, and there are strong arguments for both interpretations. Hendriksen (p. 126) argues that this refers to men worshipping **angels**, because:

- a) Paul has strongly argued that Christ is superior to all creation, which would include **angels**, though he only uses that word here in Colossians. Perhaps Paul wrote that because men were worshipping **angels**.
- b) There is some biblical evidence that men worshipped **angels**. In Rev. 19:10 and 22:8-9 John is rebuked for worshipping an **angel**. Perhaps John wrote that because men were worshipping **angels**.
- c) There is historical evidence that men worshipped angels:
 - The Essenes were required to “carefully guard... the names of the angels.” Perhaps because that was because they worshiped them.
 - The Synod of Laodicea (19 mi., 30 km. from Colossae) in AD 363 produced a statement that included the words “It is not right for Christians to abandon the church of God and go away to invoke angels.” Perhaps Christians were doing that 300 years earlier too.
 - 100 years after that synod, Theodoret’s comment on Col. 2:18 was that “The disease which St. Paul denounces continued for a long time in Phrygia and Pisidia.”
 - In *Against Heresies*, in about AD 185, Irenaeus wrote that the church does not “perform anything by means of angelic invocations, or by incantations or by any other wicked curious art; but directing her prayers to the Lord who made all things... and calling on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, she has been accustomed to work miracles for the advantage of mankind, and not to lead men into error.”
 - The archangel Michael was worshiped in Asia Minor for a long time. In AD 739 the site of a victory over the Saracens was dedicated to him

However, the expression **the worship of angels** could also refer to the **worship** that **angels** themselves perform. O'Brien (p. 143) notes there was considerable interest among ancient Jewish authors concerning how **angels worship**. *The Ascension of Isaiah* 7:13-9:33; *The Testament of Levi* 3:4-8; and *The Testament of Job* 48-50 would be examples of that interest. Likewise members of the Qumran community felt that they were offering sacrifices to God in communion with the **angels**, according to IQSb 4:25, 26 and IQH 3:20-22, so this meaning is also possible.

288 The most ancient manuscripts lack the word **not** here, but the majority of Greek manuscripts do have the word **not**. The church fathers are divided, sometimes using it, sometimes not. As early as Origen (about 254 AD) there was confusion on this point, because Origen himself sometimes quoted the text with the **not**, and sometimes without it! If, with the oldest manuscripts it should be omitted, then the sense may be “going into things he has *supposedly* seen,” if they actually saw no visions. It may also be that they actually did see demonically inspired visions.

289 This word, φυσιώω/*phusioō*, is originally from the word for “bellows” and means to get **puffed up**. Here it has taken on a figurative meaning, “to become conceited.”

questions, is fairly clear. This command is very similar to the command in verse 16, that we should not let anyone judge us concerning eating or drinking or other religious issues. That judging is like making a ruling against us, and it is dangerous to our spiritual lives. It robs us of a prize.²⁹⁰

In this verse Paul describes some of the people that might try to **rule against** them. The **humility** of people like this who delight in **humility of mind** is not a true **humility**. If such people are overly interested in how **angels worship** (or worse, if they **worship angels**), they are spiritually dangerous.²⁹¹ We are warned that they will try to cheat us of what is rightly ours. All of that will be based upon things they will pretend to have **seen**, but in fact they are simply empty people that are all **puffed up** by their **fleshly** minds. Put simply, do not be impressed with them, they do not know what they are talking about.

In Romans 12:2 we are urged to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” The **mind** that is not renewed is a **fleshly mind**. It is uninfluenced by the Lord. That sort of a **mind** can puff up a person so that he has an exaggerated impression of himself. Although he may take **pleasure in humility of mind**, he is not humble at all. He is a dangerous enemy of your soul. Those kinds of people were quite successful in Galatia, do not let them be successful in your heart or in your congregation!

These false teachers were **going into**²⁹² great detail about **things** they had **not seen**. In their false **humility**, they delighted in making up visions and doctrines that would appeal to their converts.

²⁹⁰ The verb Paul uses is related to the noun βραβεῖον/*brabeion*, which refers to a prize given to a winner in an athletic contest, as in 1 Cor. 9:24.

²⁹¹ The connection between **humility of mind** and **the worship of angels** is simply no longer clear. There are various speculations about the characteristics of “the Colossian heresy,” as many authors put it. However, as discussed in the Introduction, the great diversity of opinions in this area demonstrates the speculative nature of those opinions.

²⁹² The verb ἐμβάτεω/*embateuō* literally means “to go into.” It can literally and simply be used for **going into** a room, and it could be used when people gain possession of wealth. They would “come into” their wealth, a figure of speech also used in English. The Greek mystery religions used this word when their seers *went into* special rooms where they would give their oracles, and they also used it when their new converts first *went into* the sanctuary of that religion. Because those were false religions – and Paul is warning about false teachers – those two meanings have a certain appeal here. However, the word often means “to go into great detail concerning,” another figurative meaning which also occurs in English. It clearly has this meaning in 2 Macc. 2:30-31, which reads “*To enter in, and go over things at large, and to be curious in particulars, belongs to the first author of the story. But to use brevity, and avoid much laboring of the work, is to be granted to him that will make an abridgment.*” Since the object of this verb in our verse is **things he has not seen** rather than rooms, it seems that Paul is referring to the false teachers’ way of **going into** great detail in their false teaching. This understanding has the advantage of not requiring the Colossian congregation to understand the way ἐμβάτεω/*embateuō* is used in the mystery religions, which after all did want to keep things like this secret.

As was discussed in the Introduction, the identity of the danger that Paul describes here is debated among Bible scholars. In any case, false **humility** and special revelations supposedly from God have been characteristic of false religious teachings through the ages, although **the worship of angels** may have been more characteristic of that epoch. Paul does not even give us enough information to know whether these false teachers are or ever were believers in Christ. Likely this means that whether or not those teachers had ever believed in Christ, their **fleshly** minds have no understanding of the magnificent grace of God that has been bestowed upon us. This can happen inside or outside the walls of the church.

In verse 16 Paul has just written, “do not let anyone judge you concerning eating or drinking...” Here in verse 18 he is amplifying that idea. The grace of God that teaches us to deny ungodliness is easily pushed aside by people that do not understand its significance in our lives. Grace is not simply something that we experienced to get saved, and then later forget about once we get serious about actually doing the good works that either keep us saved (according to some), or show ourselves and others that we really are regenerate (according to others). Paul is urging his readers to not let anyone push grace aside from its central position in our lives. That is what people are doing when they judge us concerning our failure to obey their list of religious rules. When they do that they are acting like a bad judge in an athletic contest that makes an incorrect ruling against us.

These substitutes for a vital relationship with Christ might be characterized by:

1. superficial religious rules which make them appear to be superior
2. a delight in their false humility
3. false claims of special revelation
4. great detail about things that they have not really seen
5. a fundamental pride brought on by the workings of their minds which are without Christ's help

Of course the specifics of their regulations and revelations have changed through the years, but the underlying principles of external regulations, superficial humility, revelations, and fundamental pride are unchanged. Those principles are worked out in various ways today in a wide variety of weak versions of Christianity and further, in cults. In their circles we would be drawn away from all the riches that we have so abundantly in Jesus Christ, riches that Paul has been describing for us in Colossians. In doing so they would rob us of our prize, that rich life of fellowship and growth in Jesus Christ in this age, and in the age to come a rich reward for faithful service.

2:19 **That kind of person**²⁹³ **is not holding fast**²⁹⁴ **to the Head, from Whom the whole body, supported**²⁹⁵ **and knit together through the joints and ligaments, grows with growth from God.**²⁹⁶

Verses 16 and 18 told us what these dangerous people do. Now in this verse Paul describes what they do not do. They are **not holding fast to the Head**. They may have impressive religious credentials, but they are not living with Jesus Christ as the center of their hearts and minds, they do not draw their strength, life, and joy from Him. From a negative point of view, this verse is a summary of the whole letter, because if they did hold **fast to the Head**, then they would grow **with growth from God**.

The benefits the **whole body** receives from the **Head** are a part of the grace of the Lord Jesus to all that will receive from Him. He, through the church, gives **growth**. Here the metaphor is used of the body's need to stay connected to its head. A similar truth was taught in John 15 using the metaphor of a grapevine and its branches. Paul is warning his readers to stay away from people that are not maintaining that close relationship, and encouraging them to stay tightly connected with the Lord and with their congregation – He is the source of real strength and **growth, growth from God**. He gives it through the **body**. The **Head** of the **body** gives this **growth**. It is **growth from God**, possibly meaning that it is uniquely divine **growth**,²⁹⁷ or that it is growth whose source is **God**.

He gives this divine **growth** through other members of the **body**, here figuratively referred to as **joints and ligaments**.²⁹⁸ Thus there is an elegant balance between the fact that this divine **growth** comes from Christ, but

²⁹³ Since “taking pleasure in,” “going into,” “puffed up,” and **holding fast** are all present masculine singular nominative participles in the Greek, they all clearly refer to the same false teachers. While the expression **that kind of person** is not in the Greek, it is an effort to indicate this in English. Paul is still referring to the same kind of person that they should not let **rule against** them.

²⁹⁴ This common verb, κρατέω/*krateō*, is used in Mk. 7:3 and 2 Thes. 2:15, where it refers to **holding fast to** traditions. This verb is also used in Acts 3:11, which reads “While the man was *hanging on to* Peter and John, all the people, completely astounded, ran together to them in the covered walkway called Solomon’s Portico.” We should be “hanging on to” Christ like that man who had been lame from birth. These false teachers are not doing that at all.

²⁹⁵ This verb, ἐπιχορηγέω/*epichorēgeō*, was often used in Greek in connection with donations in generous public service or personal gifts given to support another. It can also be translated “give,” “give help,” “grant,” “supply,” or “furnish” (*BDAG*).

²⁹⁶ Translated here **from God**, this is literally “of God,” interpreted as a genitive of source. If it is a genitive of source, then this **growth** has both Christ and **God** as its source. It is also possible that the expression should be translated “divine growth.”

²⁹⁷ O’Brien, p. 148.

²⁹⁸ The translation **joints and ligaments** might be too specific, if they are read from a modern medical perspective. These terms, ἀφῆ/*haphē* and σύνδεσμος/*sundesmos*, are used outside the field of anatomy to mean “points of contact” and “fasteners.” The terms Paul chose emphasize unity and interconnectedness.

through other members of the church, His **body**. We know from 1:4, 6, 27, and 28 that this congregation and Paul himself were fully aware of the importance of the *quantitative* growth of both new believers and new congregations; there is as well a strong emphasis on the *qualitative* growth of both believers and congregations. There is no good reason to restrict the idea of the **growth from God** to either qualitative **growth** or quantitative **growth**, and there is no good reason to restrict this to the **growth** of individuals or to the **growth** of congregations. **God** gives **growth** in numbers of individual members and numbers of congregations, and **God** gives **growth** in the quality of those individuals and the quality of those congregations. He uses His people, figuratively described as **joints and ligaments**, to supply or support and unite **the whole body** for that **growth**.

In this passage it is easy for us to picture the **growth of the whole body**, as represented by the local church. However, what is said here about the local church is also true about the universal church.²⁹⁹ There is no reason to limit this statement to the local church. The **joints and ligaments**, as Paul puts it, can be used by the **Head** to supply and draw together **the whole body** of Christ, thus bringing this divine **growth** to the universal church. Few people have opportunity to gain the world-wide perspective to see this big picture of **growth**, but it is happening because **God** is concerned not only with the local church, but also with His entire church, and will be praised by people of every tribe, tongue, people, and nation.

In Ephesians 4:11-16 we learn in more detail about **holding fast to the Head**, the various functions of the **joints and ligaments**, and the nature of that **growth from God**.

When we are well connected with Christ, which the false teachers are not, we are able to **grow with growth from God**. While this is primarily a description and warning against false teachers, in a secondary sense it is also an encouragement to hold fast to Jesus Christ to enjoy that **growth from God**, and to keep connected to the church. No one can grow as a Christian on his own. We need to **hold fast to the Head**, and then through the **joints and ligaments** we with the **body** can grow **with growth from God**. We can be a part of that, but we cannot just **grow** on our own!

This **holding fast**, this strong connection with Jesus Christ, is simply not attained by adherence to religious rules and practices. Such rules and practices in fact tend to become a pale substitute for this heart relationship. As the Lord spoke with the religious leaders in the four gospels, He was sometimes dealing

²⁹⁹ See the discussion of Col. 1:18 concerning the **body**, the local church, and the universal church.

with this truth. The main point of the “you have heard it said... but I say to you” passages of Matthew 5:21-48 is certainly that the will of God is much more difficult to obey than the Law of Moses.³⁰⁰ However, it is also clear in those passages that the Lord is concerned with our hearts far more than He is concerned with how we are doing in obeying the outward standards of the Law. In Matthew 15:17-20 the Lord’s teaching on food that goes into the mouth and words that come out of the mouth likewise teaches the importance of the heart, and the powerlessness of dietary regulations to improve the heart. In Matthew 22:37-40 the Lord taught that all the Law and the Prophets hang on the commands to love God and to love one’s neighbor. In Matthew 23:23 hypocritical religious leaders are rebuked for tithing their spices but neglecting “the more important matters of the Law – justice, mercy, and faithfulness.” Further, in verse 26 the Pharisees were told “first clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside will also be clean,” meaning they needed to find a way to rid their hearts of greed and self-indulgence, and then the externals will take care of themselves. In John 4:24 the Lord taught that “God is spirit, and His worshipers must worship Him in spirit and in truth,” in contrast to concern over which mountain is the correct site for worship. Paul, in Romans 14:17, echoed the same concept, writing, “For the kingdom of God does not consist of eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

2:20 **If you died with Christ to³⁰¹ the fundamental principles³⁰² of the**

³⁰⁰ Those gospel statements are a helpful prelude to what we have been reading here in Colossians about drawing nearer to God by simple devotion to Him rather than by obeying rules and following standards, even if those rules and standards are in the Law of Moses.

³⁰¹ Literally, “died with Christ from the fundamental principles...” When we came to believe in **Christ**, and **died** with Him, that death took us *away from* the realm of those **fundamental principles**. We were “delivered *from* the authority of darkness, and transferred into the Kingdom of the Son He loves.”

³⁰² See the discussion on Col. 2:8 concerning this word, *στοιχεῖον/stoicheion*.

world, why, as if living in the world,³⁰³ submit³⁰⁴ to its decrees –

Although many translations have presented this verse as a rebuke to the Colossian congregation, it is better to take it as a rhetorical question that stresses how inappropriate it would be to **submit to decrees** in an effort to grow spiritually. It is a continuation of the encouragements that Paul has been giving them.³⁰⁵ The sense seems to be “Since you died with Christ to this world, why would you or any other believers ever want to submit to its decrees, as if you had not died to it?” This pattern of reminding them of a spiritual truth (**you died with Christ to the fundamental principles of the world**) and then urging them to build upon that truth (**why... submit to its decrees**), continues the pattern already established:

1. You received Him, so live in Him, 2:6.
2. You have been given Christ and all His fullness, so do not be taken captive by empty philosophy, 2:8-11.
3. The record of debts has been cancelled, so do not let people judge you about the observance of religious regulations, 2:14-17.
4. False teachers do not have that vital connection with the Head, so do not let them rule against you, 2:18-19.

³⁰³ In Col. 3:7 we learn that we used to “walk among them” when we were “living among them.” The same idea is here presented with the expression **as if living in the world**.

³⁰⁴ This verb, *δογματιζῶ/dogmatizō*, is in the present tense. Since the present tense can have a simple present meaning (**why submit to its decrees**) or a present progressive meaning (“why are you submitting to its decrees”), the translator must rely upon the context to choose between those options. Since there is no other indication that the Colossian congregation has actually been heeding any of the various false teachings that Paul warns about, it is best to take this as a simple present tense, by which Paul brings up the hypothetical idea of believers that might, against all the arguments that he has brought forward in this letter, **submit** to the world’s **decrees**. Taking it as a present progressive would mean that here alone Paul inserts a rebuke for falling into the same sort of error the Galatian churches had accepted and were soundly rebuked for. The interpreter that says Paul is actually rebuking them here by saying “Why are you now submitting to its decrees,” needs to answer the questions, “If this is a Galatian-like congregation here, why does Paul limit his rebuke to this congregation to one sentence (a sentence not easily perceived as a rebuke because of that present tense), when his rebukes to the Galatians are so severe?” and “How can Paul commend the Colossians so generously in 1:2, 4, 6, 8; and 2:5 if in fact they have been submitting to the world’s decrees?” If the Colossians had accepted these false teachings, the Galatians would have a right to ask, “Since those Colossians and we Galatians fell into the same error, why was Paul so kind and gentle to them and so strong and harsh to us? Those Colossians received compliments and a one-sentence rebuke!” Since these questions cannot be answered, it is best to translate this sentence with the simple present meaning: **why submit to its decrees**. 1 Cor. 6:7; 10:29 and 30 would be parallel uses of *τις/tis* (**why**) followed by a simple present tense verb. Col. 2:20 is not a rebuke, but a rhetorical question about the absurdity of submitting to religious rules for spiritual growth when we have all **died with Christ**. (A rhetorical question is a question that is asked to make an effect, but not really meant to be answered. Rom. 6:1 is another example of a rhetorical question.)

³⁰⁵ Barth, p. 354, also notes how praiseworthy the congregation is in Col. 1:4, 8; and 2:5, and says this cannot be a rebuke, so the verb must be translated as a passive rather than a middle. If it is a passive verb, then the translation might be something like “why, as living in the world, have such decrees been declared for you?” False teachers are rebuked, and the faithful Colossian congregation is warned. This is another solution to the problem noted in the endnote above.

Why would anybody even consider submitting to that sort of religious regulation if they have experienced this transformation? Submitting to such decrees that will supposedly make us better Christians makes as much sense as allowing enemy raiders to storm our city and take us captive! Remember that in Colossians 2:8 Paul wrote a very similar warning, even using the very same expression **the fundamental principles of the world**: “Watch out lest anyone take you captive through a philosophy, an empty deception according to human tradition, according to the fundamental principles of the world, and not according to Christ....”

The moment we believed in the Lord Jesus far more happened than the simple forgiveness of all our past, present, and future sins. In 2:12 Paul reminded the congregation about how they were buried **with Christ** in baptism, but here we are given more insight into the death we experienced. We **died with Christ to the fundamental principles of the world**, and so we do not need to act like we were **living in the world**. In our old life, which could hardly be called life, we lived in the **world** and we had to obey its **fundamental principles**. Paul does not go into detail concerning what those **principles** are, but as our minds are renewed in our new life, we learn how upside-down our old ways of thinking were, when we used to think that only “losers” serve others, and that “there is no such thing as a free lunch.” However, all that is changed now. In our new life we have been learning so many wonderful and powerful truths that are utterly contrary to **the fundamental principles of the world**. One of the things we have learned is that God is now pleased with us, not because we are obedient, or because we are busy serving Him, or because we do not do the things that are frowned upon in Christian circles, but because we now have Jesus Christ’s righteousness as our own. The application of Christ’s righteousness to our account and our unrighteousness to His account is in utter violation of **the fundamental principles of the world**, but it is in perfect harmony with the **principles** of life in the Kingdom of the beloved Son.

Perhaps an immigrant from Korea to Peru will be somewhat dazed by the fact that the fundamental laws of his homeland do not apply to him in Peru. Certainly the physicists that developed the ideas of quantum mechanics were shocked by the fact that the laws of Newtonian physics do not apply to subatomic particles. Whether it dazes or shocks us, having moved out of that old humanity that was very much in **the world**, and having **died with Christ to the fundamental principles of the world**, we must come to believe and apply the fact that simple truths like “the severe treatment of the body will certainly help in the struggle against the gratification of the flesh” are not at all true in our new life. We **have been raised with Christ**.

Ironically, the “model Christian” who appears to behave in perfect conformity to God’s standards – doing so because He wants to get right with God – is actually completely missing the point and acting like he was **living in the world!** Let us get away from those **the fundamental principles of the world**, and serve our God out of thankfulness, rather than out of a desire to conform to someone’s lists and thus earn God’s favor.

2:21 **“Do not³⁰⁶ eat...!³⁰⁷ And do not taste...! And do not touch...!”**

While it is difficult to know with certainty the emotional tone here, Paul seems to be mocking false teachers that have various sets of rules for drawing near to God.³⁰⁸ The repeated **and** seems to suggest a mock scolding tone, and the increasing severity³⁰⁹ from not eating to not even tasting to not even touching might suggest that these rules you will encounter for getting close to God are not an easy list of a few things to stay away from. If you think you can get close to God by following rules, sooner or later those rules will get more and more demanding. Perhaps this happens because such religious rules are ineffective, so they are made more and more demanding. You will get the impression that you simply are not trying hard enough yet, when in reality if we want to draw near to God by performing well, then we need perfection. Paul would have us delight in Christ’s perfection rather than trying to generate our own!

The fact that there are no specific rules quoted here – “Do not eat pork! Do not taste pork! Do not even touch pork!” – suggests that Paul is warning against the whole idea of getting closer to God by obeying religious rules, much as he did in verse 16 above. If there were particular false teachers that Paul was warning against, he could have been very specific according to those teachers’ prohibitions, but instead he gives partial commands or “templates” for commands that have been filled in by all legalistic teachers throughout the ages. They taught, and they still teach, that spirituality is attained by conformity to their list of rules. According to them, people that want to be good and godly obey their lists of musts and must-nots, while bad and unholy people do not follow their lists. See the comments on this passage in the Introduction, in the section “False Teachers in the Colossians’ World.”

As he left the legalism of Judaism, Paul learned that it was all “rubbish.” He

³⁰⁶ The negative used here is $\mu\eta\delta\grave{\epsilon}/m\acute{e}de$. It is repeated in the next command as well.

³⁰⁷ According to *BDAG*’s entry on this verb, $\acute{\alpha}\pi\tau\omega/hapt\acute{o}$, it can mean “to light or kindle,” “to touch,” or “to eat.” In this context it seems to have that third meaning, which is common in religious cults, with their many rules.

³⁰⁸ Chrysostom wrote, “Mark how he makes sport of them, *handle not, touch not, taste not*, as though they were keeping themselves clear of some great matters” (quoted by O’Brien, p. 149).

³⁰⁹ F.F. Bruce, p. 273, refers to “a climax of prohibitions.”

wrote, apparently during the same imprisonment in Rome, about the failure of that approach to life and godliness in Philippians 3:3-11.

2:22 (which is all headed for decay³¹⁰ in being consumed) according to the commands and teachings of men?³¹¹

Here Paul adds two more reasons why such regulations cannot help us in godliness. The first reason is that the stuff those regulations concern will all decompose in use. Why would we think that these very transitory things could help us know and love the eternal God? In Matthew 15:17 the Lord emphasized the same thing when He said, “Do you not yet understand that everything that goes into the mouth goes on into the stomach and is expelled into the latrine?” In 1 Corinthians 8:8 Paul taught the same thing when he wrote, “Now food does not bring us near to God, for neither if we eat do we abound, nor if we do not eat do we lack.”

The second reason is that these sorts of regulations are **according to the commands and teachings of men**. Why would we think that any **commands and teachings of men** could help us know and love the God of glory? In using the terms **commands**, **teachings**, and **men** like this Paul may be alluding to the Lord’s rebuke of the Pharisees and scribes in Matthew 15:9 and Mark 7:7, which in turn is an allusion to Isaiah 29:13.

2:23 These sorts of things³¹² have the appearance³¹³ of wisdom in self-

³¹⁰ This word, φθορά/*phthora*, basically refers to **decay**, putrefaction, or rot. It can also refer to the total destruction of something or someone at the end of the age, as in 2 Pet. 2:12.

³¹¹ The verb ἀπόχρησις/*apochrēsis* is a very rare word. It is only used here in the NT, and not at all in the LXX. The prefix, ἀπο/*apo*, probably makes the base verb’s meaning shift from “used” to “being used up” or **consumed**. Barth (p. 256) disagrees, and notes that sometimes adding a prefix does not change the meaning of a verb. He thinks that **which are all** refers to **the commands and teachings of men**, so that those **commands** are used (not used up), but they are **all headed for decay**. The advantage of Barth’s interpretation is that it does not require the **which are all** to refer to food and drink, which are not actually even mentioned in the previous verse. The disadvantages of Barth’s view are that: **commands and teachings** are “observed,” not “used” or **consumed** even though the verb ἀπόχρησις/*apochrēsis* never seems to mean “observe”; the word **decay** is much more likely to refer to food and drink rather than regulations concerning food and drink; and the parallel with Mt. 15:17 and 1 Cor. 8:8 would be lost if this were about regulations that will **decay**. Bruce, p. 274; Hendriksen, p. 132; Moule, p. 108; and O’Brien, p. 150, all agree that it is food and drink that will **decay**.

³¹² The relative pronoun ἅτινα/*haitina* (from ὅστις/*hōstis*) is best translated “which sorts of things,” but here, in the interest of English grammar, a new sentence is begun with the words **these sorts of things**.

³¹³ The word λόγος/*logos* is used here with the more rare meaning of **appearance** (BDAG). Barth (p. 358) notes a popular world history written in the era of Caesar Augustus in which λόγος/*logos*, meaning “story,” is contrasted with ἀλήθεια/*alētheia*, truth.

imposed worship³¹⁴ and humility of mind³¹⁵ and the severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value against the gratification of the flesh.³¹⁶

Paul is giving further clarification here to what he has been saying in this passage. While the eating and drinking regulations of 2:16 would *appear* to be so wise and helpful, in reality people that use such regulations to get closer to God are wasting their time with shadows, and missing out on the reality of Christ. Likewise in 2:18 following the teachings of those that *seem* so humble and spiritual, those that go into great detail about their visions, will really just allow them to “rule against you” like a bad umpire. In the same way, in 2:20 we learn that although the fundamental principles of the world *seem* so logical and appropriate, since we no longer live in the world, those decrees are totally inappropriate for us.

Here in verse 23 he is likewise warning the congregation not to be deceived by appearances. Those sorts of rules and regulations may **have the appearance of wisdom, but they have no value against the gratification of the flesh.** This is a call to think through the realities of our relationship with Christ, and take a stand against appearances. Paul is calling the congregation, and us, to beware of teachings that seem to help us spiritually, but in reality just draw us into legalism, where there is never any real help in the struggle against **the flesh.**

³¹⁴ This word, ἐθελοθρησκία/*ethelothrēskia*, combines θρησκεία/*thrēskeia* (“religion” or **worship**) with θέλω/*thelō* (“to want, desire, will, like”), so that the term in our passage means something like **self-imposed worship**, “self-made religion,” or “home-made worship.”

³¹⁵ See the discussion of this word, ταπεινοφροσύνη/*tapeinophrosunē*, under the discussion of 2:18.

³¹⁶ This clause is very difficult to interpret with certainty, but as noted below, the two likely interpretations make the same contribution to Paul’s argument. O’Brien (pp. 151-152) and Hendriksen (p. 133) show that the clause can be understood to mean “which things lead... to the gratification of the flesh” rather than **they are of no value against the gratification of the flesh.** Their interpretation suggests that rather than restraining fleshly indulgence, these ascetic practices actually encourage a subtle form of fleshly pride. However, their reasoning seems somewhat more tenuous than what follows. Moule (p. 108) follows the interpretation put forth years ago by Lightfoot and endorsed by the RSV and the NIV, that these regulations **are of no value** (τιμὴ/*timē* usually means “honor”) concerning (πρός/*pros* may not actually mean **against**, but it can mean “concerning”) fleshly indulgence. Whether these man-made regulations simply do not help **against**, or indeed somehow contribute to, **the gratification of the flesh**, they and the teachers who might bring them to you will not help you draw near to God, and should be rejected.

3:1-4 *This section concludes with a summary of the true way to grow as a Christian.*

The religious regulations against which the reader is warned in 2:8-23 are “of no value against the gratification of the flesh.” But here in this brief section Paul gives us the only “rule” that can really help us, a “rule” which is no rule at all: “keep seeking the things above.” This command will never be adopted into the legalists’ collections of rules, but it is the only way we can really grow spiritually.

3:1 **Therefore, since you have been raised with Christ, keep seeking³¹⁷ the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.**

In marked contrast to religious teachings that are based upon “the fundamental principles of the world,” that are merely “a shadow of the things to come,” and that concern themselves with stuff that is “all headed for decay in being consumed,” Paul wants his readers to **keep seeking the things above**.³¹⁸ The theological foundation for that is simply that we **have been raised with Christ**. Having been “transferred into the Kingdom of the Son He loves,” we are invited, so to speak, to freely explore the royal dominions!

The inappropriate approaches to spirituality that Paul warns against in 2:16-23 were all appearance and no reality; here in 3:1-4 he is going to tell us the real way to grow as Christians, which is all reality and no appearance! It takes only a little worldly wisdom to accept the idea that obedience to the teachings of apparently wise and humble men is of value against the gratification of the flesh; it takes real faith in God to accept the idea that **seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God** is the way to deeply experience real life.

So because we **have been raised with Christ**, Paul is asking us to reject such apparently wise teaching, and instead simply be **seeking the things above**. We must stand upon the more elusive, yet actually more real, idea that we are to **keep seeking the things above**. We must do this, because having been **raised with Christ**, we have become a different sort of creation. We are no longer of this world, and its fundamental principles are not valid where we live.

³¹⁷ Since this verb, ζητέω/zēteō, is in the present tense, it could either be translated **keep seeking** or “seek.” Because Paul’s comments on the spiritual state of the congregation are so positive, he seems to mean that they should *continue on* as they have been, **seeking the things above**, rather than that they should *start* right now to seek **the things above**. Using Greek Paul was not required to clarify his meaning on that point, but English requires that clarification.

³¹⁸ In Mt. 6:33 the Lord says, “But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and these all will be added to you.” He uses the same word for “seek” (ζητέω/zēteō), but in that context He is addressing people that are worrying about having enough food and clothing. Paul here is addressing the idea that religious rules that focus on these physical things are missing the point: we can draw near to God through Christ, not through mere rules about perishable things. So, seeking the Kingdom, **seeking the things above**, is the right thing to do whether we have slipped into worry about material things or into man’s methods for drawing near to God!

While some are eager to help us grow spiritually by indoctrinating us into the dogma of their useless lists of Do's and Don'ts, Paul wants to engage our minds and our hearts. He begins by encouraging the readers to keep **seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God**. In this context, in this discussion of how to draw near to **God**, he gives no ritual, no formula, no light or stringent rule to follow. All of that was for the Old Covenant, which succeeded in its actual purpose of pointing out our need for our Savior, but continually fails in its apparent purpose of sanctifying God's people.

Because of what **Christ** has done for us, we are simply to seek **the things above, where Christ is**. This is in accord with what Paul wrote in Philippians 4:8, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is righteous, whatever is pure, whatever is amiable, whatever is commendable, if something is excellent and if something is praiseworthy, let your minds dwell on these things." As new creatures **raised** from the dead **with Christ**, we are now able to seek **the things above, where Christ is**, and in so doing we will accomplish far more against the gratification of the flesh than we would have accomplished had we worked at obeying all the religious rules and regulations that have ever been invented by man.

Although hints of the same idea are visible in Philippians 3:14 and 19, the idea that heaven is **above**, and this earth is fallen (note Genesis 3:17) is especially strong in this letter. Note also Colossians 1:5, 23; 3:2, 5; and 4:1.

The expression that **Christ is seated at the right hand of God** is one of about 33 New Testament allusions or quotations of Psalm 110:1 and 5.³¹⁹ This expression is a powerful image of the relationship between God the Father and the Risen Christ.

Paul's exhortation to **keep seeking the things above, where Christ is** echoes 2 Corinthians 11:3, "But I am afraid lest just as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, in the same way your minds might be spoiled from a sincere devotion to Christ."

If we refuse, and try to grow nearer to our God by setting our minds on rules and regulations that are in accord with the fundamental principles of this world, we may find ourselves resembling the people Paul described in Philippians 3:19.

³¹⁹ O'Brien, p. 162.

3:2 **Concentrate on**³²⁰ **the things**³²¹ **above, not on the things upon the earth.**³²²

Paul elaborates further on the previous verse. We are to be concerned with **the things above, not the things upon this earth**. The things of heaven, not **earth**, should occupy our attention. Despite the cliché about the man who is “so heavenly minded he is no earthly good,” we learn here that we must indeed be “heavenly minded” if we are to be any good anywhere! If we do not **concentrate on the things above**, how would we be encouraged to live out this new life with which we have been transformed? How would we be motivated by the example of Christ and the rewards He offers when He returns? How would we be strengthened to live in that essential transformation which began at our new birth, in which our life is hidden in Christ? In seeking to overcome the gratification of the flesh, how would we escape the seemingly wise rules and regulations of the legalists? Or having discovered the bankruptcy of legalism, how would we escape seeking our identity and satisfaction in ever increasing doses of the sorts of diversions the world offers? How would we ever find the rich peace that is from Him alone?

The reader may ask, “Yes, but exactly *how* should I concentrate on the things above? What are the best prayers? How long each day should I do this, and what are the particular things that I should concentrate upon?” But asking those kinds of questions only draws us back towards the rule-based religiosity that Paul has just rejected in chapter two!

The primary reason we should **concentrate on the things above** is that doing so is in accord with our very nature, the new nature – received at salvation – with which we have already been transformed. That is why verse one begins with “therefore, since you have been raised with Christ....” We received this new nature when our old one died, as Paul explains in the next verse.

This contrast between **the things above** and **the things upon the earth** is parallel to the contrast between the Spirit and the flesh in Galatians 6:8, which reads “For the one that sows into his flesh from the flesh will reap corruption; but the one that sows into the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.”

³²⁰ This verb, φρονέω/*phroneō*, is used ten times in Philippians, but only here in Colossians. It usually refers to taking an attitude of mind, a point of view, or a mindset, but it can also mean “concentrating on” or “being concerned with.”

³²¹ The word **things** is added twice in the English translation of this verse to represent the Greek plural definite article.

³²² Surprisingly, this word, γῆ/*gē*, is used in the second century AD by someone that understood that the **earth** was a heavenly body much like the moon. In this passage it refers to the **earth** as opposed to the heavens. It can also refer to **earth** as the place we inhabit, or a region. Like the English word **earth**, it can also refer to soil (*BDAG*).

Combining the wording of these two verses, we see that if we **concentrate on the things above** then we will gain richer eternal life, but if we **concentrate on the things upon the earth** we gain only decay or corruption.

3:3 **For you died, and your life is hidden³²³ with Christ in³²⁴ God.**

We already learned in 2:3 that in **Christ** “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden.” Here we see that idea, and more than that, because our very **life** is **hidden** there! If that is where our **life** is, then of course we should be diligent in pursuing any and all things there, and we should leave behind our interest in “the things of the earth.”

This striking and mysterious statement is crucial to what Paul wants to say. Even though this death that all believers have gone through was not experientially sensed, it was real. As he told us in 2:12 and 2:20, we **died with Christ**. As he hinted for us in 1:5, our real **life** is above, in **Christ**, in the heavens, **in God**. Just because we did not feel this death, and consider this teaching strange, does not mean that it is something we can ignore. The only real **life** that we are offered in this era is a **hidden** one. The best we have is **hidden** away for now, so the very best thing for us to do is to “keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.” These **hidden** things need to be sought with all diligence, unlike the offerings of the false teachers, which are easy to grasp.

This rich statement is like a signpost on the trail of sanctification, a banner over the highway we are to walk. Our real **life** is something that has been and is now **hidden** away, hard to see, but it is there for us to enjoy if we go seeking it the right way. Where is it? Above. Where? **In God**. It is a part of our “with Christ” possessions. So of course we should, by faith, be seeking the things above; that is where our real **life** is, our real “identity.”

There is an old story about a little eagle that grows up thinking it is a barnyard chicken. At some point it looks way up in the sky above its barnyard and sees eagles soaring in the heights. A believer that is acting like the people of this world needs to look up into the heavens and see the things above. Just as that barnyard eagle will realize he is made for the skies rather than the barnyard, so that believer should realize that his real **life** is there above, **hidden with Christ in God**.

³²³ The perfect tense here indicates that our **life** has been **hidden** there, and continues to be **hidden** there.

³²⁴ Barth, p. 396, mentions that it is also possible that the word *ἐν*, here taken as **in**, means “by.”

3:4 **When Christ – who is our³²⁵ life – is revealed, then you also with Him will be revealed in glory.**

As amazing as it is that **our life** is hidden in **Christ**, here the stronger statement is made that He **is our life**. The idea that Christ **is our life** is also in Philippians 1:21, in which Paul writes “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Similarly, in Galatians 2:20 he wrote “now I live, but it is no longer me living, but Christ in me living.”

If indeed **Christ is our life**, then it is entirely appropriate that when He **is revealed**, we should also **be revealed**. However, until He **is revealed**, we are asked to live as people whose real **life** is hidden. Then it shall be revelation and **glory**, but now it is hiddenness and faith.

Romans 8:17, which reads “Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory,” suggests that all believers are “heirs of God,” and that believers that “share in His sufferings” will be “co-heirs with Christ.” Here Paul is only commenting about being “heirs of God.” All believers, whether they are overcomers or not, whether they will receive crowns or not, **will be revealed with Him in glory**. Passages like Romans 8:18; Philippians 3:20-21; 1 Peter 1:13; and 1 John 3:2 confirm this.

3:5–4:6 *Living out the Truth in our Lives*

Paul has made it very clear in chapters 1-2 that he is not a legalist at all. He has taught us that compliance to the rules of the legalist will not yield spiritual growth, despite the conviction of the legalists. As we just learned in 2:23, rules and regulations are “of no value against the gratification of the flesh.”

It would be all too easy to misunderstand Paul at this point, and draw the conclusion that there is no place for any rules, regulations, or commands in the life of the follower of Christ. The following section demonstrates that that is not correct. Legalism, the idea that rules and regulations have power to transform us, is wrong. But license, the idea that no one has any right to require our submission, is also wrong. Be sure to understand that obedience to those in authority over us is not a path to spiritual growth; nevertheless it is still required.

³²⁵ While three early manuscripts (p⁴⁶, K, and C) and some of the later manuscripts read ὑμῶν/*humōn* meaning “your,” B and the majority of the manuscripts read ἡμῶν/*hēmōn*, meaning **our**. The “your life” reading puts Paul more in a teaching role, while the **our life** reading has Paul shift for a moment into a personal testimony role, then right back into a teaching role with **then you also with Him shall be revealed in glory**. The Fathers and the Versions are divided on this word.

Disobedience is a sign of spiritual immaturity. But obedience does not cause growth.

In this section we will see the holy and well-ordered life that those that are seeking the things above are empowered to live.

3:5-17 *Here is how we are to live out this truth about our new life, negatively and positively.*

3:5 Therefore put to death whatever of you is earthly: sexual immorality, filth, passion, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry;

There are four figures of speech packed into this brief verse that make it more difficult to understand. The first one is **put to death**, which is a powerful way to say that the tendency to live for ourselves and ignore our Savior needs to be obliterated, as we truly concentrate on the things above. It does not need to be set aside for occasional use, it needs to be utterly obliterated.³²⁶

The second figure of speech is that we have “members” or “parts” (here translated **whatever of you**³²⁷) which need to be **put to death**. Paul knew full well (see Romans 7) that although we have been born again, although all things have become new, although we died and our life is hidden in Christ, although we have taken off the old man and put on the new man, there yet remains something in us that drags us back to the old ways. We are transformed, but we await the resurrection for the completion of our transformation. That something is often called “the flesh.” It is not the core of our being – our core is our new nature and our new life, hidden with Christ in God – but it remains in us, and we must deal with it. Perhaps because it is not the core of our being, it is here called “members” or “parts.” It would be inappropriate for Paul to say that our “hearts” or our “nature” need to be **put to death**, but we do have something that does need to be **put to death**.

³²⁶ As Moo (p. 253) points out, vs. 5 and vs. 8 are parallel in their structure (each starts with a command, followed by five sins, and that fifth sin is briefly explained) so **put to death** here is parallel to “take off” there in verse 8.

³²⁷ Although the word μέλος/*melos* is often translated “member” or “limb,” in Mt. 5:29 the eye is called a μέλος/*melos*, so sometimes it simply means “a part.” In this verse its meaning seems to be very broad and abstract, thus instead of the translation “your members,” it is translated **whatever of you**. This broad and abstract meaning is needed because any concrete meaning like “limb” would mean that we should **put to death** or amputate any physical limbs that sin. That sort of severe treatment of the body has already been rejected in 2:16-23.

The NIV translates this phrase as “whatever belongs to your earthly nature,” but that approach is inappropriate both because the word “nature” (φύσις/*phusis*) is not in the Greek text and because anyone that has been crucified with Christ and risen with Him no longer even has that nature. He or she is fundamentally transformed by the new birth.

The word **your** is missing in the very earliest Greek manuscripts, but it existed as early as the 5th century in Greek, and was used by Irenaeus in Latin in about AD 200. It is in the majority of the Greek manuscripts. Even if it was not in the original Greek, it is implied by the sense of the sentence.

The third figure of speech is that those members or parts are “upon the earth,” here translated **earthly**.³²⁸ In a literal sense we live on the earth, but these “members” of ours that are “upon the earth” do not merely touch the earth, they are characterized by earthliness rather than heavenliness. If we are to keep seeking the things above, then these members of ours that are so characterized by earthliness cannot be tolerated, they must be **put to death**. In the discussion concerning “the old man” and “the new man” that follows under Colossians 3:9, the idea of an old humanity and a new humanity is presented. That same theme is present here as well. Our members that are “upon the earth” are somehow leftovers of the old earthly humanity, and those members need to be utterly rejected.

The fourth figure of speech is that **sexual immorality, filth, passion, evil desire, and greed** seem to be listed as our **earthly** members. In fact these sins are *produced by* our “upon the earth members.” They are the effects of our flesh. The figure of speech used here is that the effects are given rather than the cause or the source.³²⁹ The reader understands that **sexual immorality** does not need to be **put to death**, it is merely the effect. Instead we are to **put to death** that within us which would *cause* us to be sexually immoral: those members of ours that are upon the earth.³³⁰ In that way the problem of these sins is dealt with at the source.

Although it might appear to contradict the fact that we have already died (as in 3:3), this command to kill off self-centeredness within us actually complements that idea. In essence, at the core of our person (our fundamental nature), we died and have been reborn with a new nature; as Peter puts it in 2 Peter 1:4, we are “partakers of the divine nature” now. However, our sin-soaked flesh remains with us until physical death or until the resurrection. Now, united with Christ, partaking of the divine nature, and in-dwelt with the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to kill off the self-centeredness which lurks in the flesh. Although the flesh can pretend to be unstoppable, the fact is that by the power of the Spirit we can reject the demands of the flesh. This is very clear in Romans 6:11-13, “Thusly you also are to consider yourselves on the one hand dead to sin, but on the other hand alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Do not let sin reign in your mortal

³²⁸ This expression, τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς/*ta epi tēs gēs*, would be translated more literally as “those which are upon the earth.” It is also used in 3:2, where it is translated “the things upon the earth.” The literal translation of the whole expression would be “your members that are upon the earth,” or “the upon the earth parts of yours.”

³²⁹ Hendriksen, p. 145.

³³⁰ Moule, p. 115, takes a slightly different approach saying that this seems to mean **put to death** “your limbs as put to earthly purposes.”

bodies, to obey it in its desires, and do not present your members³³¹ to sin as instruments of unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as living, raised from the dead, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness.”

So we are to offer the “members” of our body to God as instruments of righteousness. The wording and concept here in Colossians are very similar to the wording and concept of Romans 8:13, which says “if by the Spirit you kill the deeds of the body, you will live”³³² and Galatians 5:24, which says “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” While the Greek words here for killing, putting to death, and crucifying are different, the concept is the same.

The English expression “the mortification of the flesh” came from a mistaken interpretation of this passage. That expression has come to refer to ascetic practices like self-inflicted pain or self-denial. However, that is certainly not what Paul is referring to here.³³³ Paul has already rejected such approaches in 2:16-23.

The religious and legalistic teachings that Paul has opposed with such vigor up to here are of no value against the gratification of the flesh, but that does not mean we must helplessly give in to the gratification of the flesh. In 3:3 we were reminded that we died, but here we see that there is some putting **to death** that we must do as well. Only in the age to come, when with Him we will be revealed in glory, will we no longer have these leftovers from the old life (which was not really life).

It is only with the awareness of our new life in Christ – now hidden in God, yet to be revealed – that we can take on, with the power of the Holy Spirit, this putting **to death** of the flesh which produces these evils. If we get things backwards, so that we are working at the removal of all these sins *in order to* experience that life, then we have fallen into the trap that Paul warned us about in chapter 2.

³³¹ The Greek word μέλη/*melē* is used twice in Rom. 6:13, and also once in Col. 3:5.

³³² It might look like “killing the deeds of the body” is a requirement for the gift of eternal life, but reading Paul’s letter to the Romans, we see that “killing the deeds of the body” brings a rich experience of what real life is all about. This is clear from Rom. 1:17, which ends with an OT quotation that should be translated, “The righteous by faith ones will live.” The second half of Romans teaches righteous by faith ones how to really live, how to enjoy the abundant life. Part of that process is that the deeds of the body (or in Col. 3:5 our “parts that are upon the earth”) need to be “killed off” or obliterated without compromise.

³³³ Moule, p. 114, and O’Brien, p. 178.

This list of five of the effects of the flesh, **sexual immorality, filth, passion, evil desire, and greed**, is simple and clear. The word translated **sexual immorality**³³⁴ is a broad term that covers all **sexual** sin. The word translated **filth**³³⁵ means “uncleanness,” and in the New Testament it almost always refers to **sexual** sin. The word translated **passion**³³⁶ does not have to be **sexual**, but the idea in this context is certainly **sexual passion**. The word translated **desire**³³⁷ is normally but not always negative, but here with the addition of the word **evil**³³⁸ it obviously becomes strongly negative.

The series of purely **sexual** sins is broken³³⁹ by the word translated **greed**³⁴⁰. It may be that modern materialistic societies downplay the evil of **greed**, but the ancient Greeks did not. One of them contrasted this term with “knowledge of the divine,” and another listed it among the three most disgraceful things.³⁴¹ In Matthew 6:24 the Lord Jesus says that we cannot serve two lords, we cannot serve God and Mammon. In 1 Thessalonians 2:5 Paul asserted that he was not driven by **greed**. He says something similar, using the related verb, in 2 Corinthians 7:2 and 12:17. In 2 Peter 2:3 and 14 false teachers were characterized by **greed**. Although it can appear to be respectable, **greed** is a real evil and a real danger. Teachers of the Word of God are at particular risk concerning this evil.³⁴²

Following the term **greed** we see the surprising explanation, **which is idolatry**. The connection between **greed** and **idolatry** was also made in Jewish

³³⁴ This word, πορνεία/*porneia*, is used 26 times in the NT.

³³⁵ This word, ἀκαθαρσία/*akatharsia*, is used 10 times in the NT. In four of those passages the word πορνεία/*porneia* also appears.

³³⁶ The other two times that Paul uses this word, πάθος/*pathos*, he clarifies it with “dishonorable” (Rom. 1:26) and “lustful” (1 Thes. 4:5). Outside the NT in Greek, as in English, there are noble “passions,” but that is not the meaning here.

³³⁷ That is, ἐπιθυμία/*epithumia*. Used 38 times in the NT. Only in 1 Thes. 2:17; Phil. 1:23; and Lk. 22:15 does it refer to a positive desire. All the other times it is used, it is clearly negative. See for instance Mt. 5:28; Mk. 4:19; 1 Cor. 10:6; and Rom. 1:24.

³³⁸ κακός/*kakos*

³³⁹ The pattern in this series of evils is broken because unlike the first four, the final evil is not particularly **sexual**, it is given the definite article, and it is given a brief elaboration.

³⁴⁰ The word πλεονεξία/*pleonexia* comes from words meaning “more” and “have.”

³⁴¹ *BDB*.

³⁴² O’Brien, pp. 182-183.

literature.³⁴³ The greedy person simply cannot be seeking the things above. He is seeking the things that are upon the earth. He has replaced Christ with his own idols. Although **greed** might not be as easy to see as the idols in a pagan home or temple, nevertheless **greed is idolatry**.

3:6 on account of which the wrath of God is coming³⁴⁴ upon the sons of disobedience.³⁴⁵

Paul has rejected the powerless rules and regulations of the legalists, but he does not embrace license. He wants to make it quite clear that the sins³⁴⁶ he listed in the previous verse are utterly unacceptable. These are the things done by **the sons of disobedience**,³⁴⁷ who will experience **the wrath of God**. We should not live like them.

Legalism is dangerous not because it has high standards, but because ignoring the power of God's Spirit and the power of God's grace, it is powerless. Likewise

³⁴³ O'Brien, p. 183, quotes from *The Testament of Judah* 19:1 which reads, "The love of money leads to idolatry; because, when led astray through money, men name as gods those who are not gods." In Mt. 6:24 the Lord Himself makes a similar connection. Moo, p. 257, also mentions that Philo (*On the Special Laws* 1:23) says that the first commandment, against "other gods," speaks against "money-lovers." Moo also mentions 1 Tim. 6:17; Heb. 13:5; and Eph. 5:5.

³⁴⁴ The expression ἡ ὀργὴ τοῦ θεοῦ/*erchetai hē orgē tou theou* might be translated **the wrath of God is coming**. That would be the **wrath of God** that is to be poured out at the end of the age, as in Rom. 2:5 which speaks of the **wrath** that sinners store up for themselves in the day of **wrath**, "when God's righteous judgment is revealed." That expression might also be translated "the wrath of God comes," referring to an ongoing and present work of **God**, as in Rom. 1:18 which speaks of **the wrath of God** which is presently being "revealed from heaven upon all godlessness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth by their unrighteousness." In that case it is a present-day experience for **the sons of disobedience**.

The words **wrath** and "come" appear together in six NT verses, but only in 1 Thes. 1:10; Rev. 6:17 and 11:18 is the meaning clear. In each of those three texts the meaning is clearly end times **wrath**. Furthermore, O'Brien (p. 184) notes that several of the NT lists of sins end with a comment about the end times **wrath** or judgment of God, so this **wrath** is probably following that same pattern, and refers to end times **wrath**. See for instance 1 Thes. 4:3-6; and 1 Cor. 5:9-13.

However, Rom. 1:18-32 clearly teaches that God's end time **wrath** is presently being poured out upon wicked men and women in this age. Perhaps Paul does not want to make a distinction between these two! The judgment these people will experience at the end of the age is discussed in 2 Pet. 2 and Jude.

³⁴⁵ The phrase **upon the sons of disobedience** is lacking in p^{46} and B, but present in several other very early manuscripts (A, \aleph and C) as well as the majority of all the manuscripts. It is left in a footnote in the NIV, rejected by the RSV, ESV, and NLT, but included in the NET, NKJV, HCSB, NRSV, NASB, and TEV. The same phrase is in Eph. 5:6, so some say that an early scribe was thinking too much of Eph. 5:6 when he was writing out Col. 3:6. However without this phrase, the beginning of the next verse (literally "among whom also you walked formerly") does not make much sense. Some might say that Paul wrote something that did not make much sense, and some early scribe tried to improve on his writing. This author prefers the idea that Paul wrote something that makes good sense, and some early scribe accidentally left some of his words out. The majority of the manuscripts would agree.

³⁴⁶ The word translated **which** in this verse is plural, so this is certainly a reference to *all* the sins of verse 5, not only idolatry.

³⁴⁷ The expression **the sons of disobedience** is a very common form of expression in Hebrew, meaning "those characterized by disobedience."

license is dangerous not because it ignores legalism's rules, but because it too ignores the intertwined power of God's Spirit and grace.

It is important to realize that this verse is not saying, "Obey, or you might experience the wrath of God." Paul is not using this future **wrath** as another motivation for holy living.³⁴⁸ Instead, he is saying that we that have died, whose life is hidden in Christ, are fundamentally different from those that have never experienced the new birth. They are **sons of disobedience** that are of course characterized by sin. We are holy ones. Just because we have our "flesh," does not mean that we should let the flesh dominate us so that we end up living like **the sons of disobedience** that are headed for **the wrath of God**. Did we not just read in verse 4, "When Christ – who is our life – is revealed, then you also with Him will be revealed in glory"? When **the sons of disobedience** experience **the wrath of God**, we will be "revealed with Him in glory"!

Some might object to the idea of a loving **God** having any **wrath** at all, but the testimony of the Bible is that the holy, righteous and wise **God** will pour out His **wrath** upon those that have rejected His will and never received His forgiveness through the work of His Christ upon the cross.

3:7 You also used to walk³⁴⁹ among them,³⁵⁰ when you were living among them.

Using the expression **when you were living among them**, which is so similar to the expression "as if living in the world" found in 2:20, Paul reminds them that they too **used to** live just like the sons of disobedience, but that was in a different life. That was in the unfruitful and shameful past. Their core being has since experienced a fundamental transformation; they have died, and risen with a

³⁴⁸ Barth, p. 405, says "The present declaration is not a second motivation... which uses fear as its means; rather, it underscores the former... and thus it determines how erroneous it would be to return 'there' of their own free will."

³⁴⁹ The phrase **used to walk** translates the aorist verb περιπατέω/*peripateō* and the adverb ποτε/*pote*, which is often translated "formerly." This verb literally means "to walk," but here has the common figurative meaning "conduct one's life." See the endnote under 1:10 concerning the word **walk**.

³⁵⁰ Moo, pp. 260-262, discusses the many options concerning the two pronouns which are here both translated **them**. The first phrase, with that first **them**, could be translated **you used to walk among them**, with that first **them** pointing back to the sons of disobedience. It could also be translated "In which (sins) you also used to walk..." Moo says that translation is in conformity with "normal Pauline style," and it is supported by Eph. 2:1 which speaks of them being "dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to walk..."

The second phrase, with that second **them**, could be translated **when you were living among them**, also pointing back to the sons of disobedience. It could be translated "when you were living in the midst of those sins." Moo admits that it is a difficult passage, but suggests the following paraphrase: "And you yourselves were committing just these sins at one time – when you were living in the world where such things are typically done." However, it seems much less convoluted to take both of those pronouns as referring to the sons of disobedience, so that the text reads **you also used to walk among them, when you were living among them**.

new kind of life. They have been born again. By the power of God's Spirit, the believer's behavior should reflect the reality of the believer's new nature. This verse is somewhat similar to Romans 6:21 which reads, "So what benefit did you then reap from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death."

3:8 But now you too must take off³⁵¹ all these things: wrath, anger,³⁵² evil, slander,³⁵³ obscene speech³⁵⁴ from your mouth.

In 3:5 we were told to "put to death whatever of you is earthly," which was elaborated upon with a list of sexual sins, plus greed. In a similar way here we are told to **take off all these things**, and that is elaborated with a list of sins that relate to **anger** and our **speech**. We are to **take off all these things**. While the image in 3:5 is about killing off things, here it is about discarding old clothes that are no longer appropriate to wear.

³⁵¹ This verb, ἀποτίθημι/*apotithēmi*, can refer to "laying aside" any sort of thing, but here there is a figurative reference to its common meaning of "taking off" clothing, as is clear from the use of ἐνδύω/*enduō*, which does refer to "putting on clothing," in verse 10. The verb ἀποτίθημι/*apotithēmi* is used with its normal literal meaning in Acts 7:58, where they took off their cloaks.

³⁵² Although some ancient Greek philosophers made a distinction between **wrath** and **anger**, such careful detail was probably not intended for the Colossians, who were not Greek philosophers!

The New Testament almost never allows for a proper human **anger**. The exception is Eph. 4:26 which says, "Be angry and do not sin; let not the sun go down on your anger."

³⁵³ This word, βλασφημία/*blasphēmia*, refers to speech that reviles, slanders, or denigrates others. These verbal attacks can be directed against people (in which case it should be translated **slander**), or supernatural beings including God (in which case it should be translated "blasphemy.") Paul is probably including both **slander** and blasphemy here.

³⁵⁴ This word, αἰσχρολογία/*aischrologia*, is only found here in the NT. According to O'Brien, p. 188, it can refer to **obscene** or abusive **speech**.

3:9 Do not lie to one another, having stripped off³⁵⁵ the old man³⁵⁶ – with its deeds –

Paul continues his exhortation with the command to **not lie to one another**. Lying is one of the **deeds of the old man**.

There are two ways to interpret the expression **the old man** here, as well as the corresponding expression “the new man” in the following verse. On the surface, it is easiest to take these expressions as referring to our old nature and our new nature having been born again by faith in Christ.³⁵⁷ However, these old and new natures are rarely mentioned in the New Testament,³⁵⁸ and there is no direct link between these two verses and those theological concepts.

The other approach, which seems preferable, is to understand the expression **the old man** as a reference to humanity³⁵⁹ as a whole in Adam, and “the new man” as a reference to the new humanity that is headed by Christ.³⁶⁰ So because we have joined this new humanity, we should no longer **lie to one another**. This would be very similar to the idea that we have been “delivered out of the authority of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of the Son He loves.” In Romans

³⁵⁵ This phrase translates an aorist middle participle. This verb, ἀπεκδύομαι/*apekduomai*, was used in Col. 2:15 with the meaning of “to disarm” or “to strip off weaponry.” Here the meaning seems to have shifted slightly, so that it is not weaponry or clothing that is stripped off, but **the old man** himself. More than simply being “disarmed” or rendered powerless, the **old man** was **stripped off**, removed, and is now no longer able to impel us to evil. (This is in accord with Rom. 6:6, where we read that “our old man was crucified with” Christ.) A participle like this could have the effect of an imperative, but that usage is rare. Moo, p. 265-266, says this participle has a causal effect: *because* you have already **stripped off the old man**. O’Brien, pp. 188-189, agrees, giving Col. 2:7 and 15 as examples of participles that Paul uses to “ground” the commands he makes. Quite similar is the idea that this participle expresses the necessary precondition for the main verb, the imperative to **not lie to one another**. Without that necessary precondition, it is in vain to ask people that still are in Adam **not to lie**. However, once the necessary precondition of the removal of **the old man** has happened, then a command to stop lying can be given.

³⁵⁶ The NIV translators rendered **the old man** and “the new man” in this passage, and in Eph. 4:22-24, as “your old self” and “the new self,” apparently because the translators took the view that **the old man** and “the new man” refer to the old nature that people have before faith in Christ and the new nature that believers have. If that interpretation were correct, then their translation would be a fine way to paraphrase the text. However, there is considerable doubt that **the old man** and “the new man” speak of our individual natures, and better evidence that these expressions speak of our relationship with the old humanity headed by Adam and the new humanity headed by Christ.

³⁵⁷ Bruce (pp. 283-284) and *EBC*’s discussion on this verse ignore the collective interpretation and hold to the individual interpretation, saying that **the old man** is our nature before faith in Christ, and the new man is our new nature as born again individuals. As noted above, the NIV translators, by translating **the old man** and the new man as “your old self” and “the new self,” clearly held to that same individual interpretation.

³⁵⁸ Refer to the endnote under 1:21 concerning the translation of σάρξ/*sarx* (flesh).

³⁵⁹ There does not seem to be a Koine Greek word for the abstract concept of “humanity” or “mankind,” so the use of the term **man** for “humanity” makes sense.

³⁶⁰ Moo, pp. 267-271; Martin, pp. 114-118; and Moule, p. 119, hold to the idea that **the old man** and the new man refer to our collective humanity, either in Adam or in Christ. Barth, p. 412, tentatively agrees with the collective position. Hendriksen, pp. 149-150, and O’Brien, pp. 198-190, seem to want to hold both interpretations.

5:12-21 Paul explains how because of Adam's one sin, sin reigns in death, and how because of Christ's gift, grace reigns through righteousness. Adam and Christ are the heads of realms, and we have been moved from Adam's realm to Christ's realm. They are the heads of two humanities. In one humanity sin is mandated and normal, but in the new humanity sin is inappropriate and foreign.

In 1 Corinthians 15:47-50 we find further evidence of the reality of these two humanities. There Paul writes of the "first man Adam" and "the last Adam" as well as "the first man" and "the second man." Adam and Christ each founded a line of humanity. The members of both these humanities are related to those humanities' founders: as 1 Corinthians 15:48 says, "Like the man made of earth, so are those who are made of earth; like the heavenly man, so are those who are heavenly." Further, in verse 50 of that passage the Kingdom of God is mentioned, thus strengthening the connection to the idea that we have been "transferred into the kingdom of the Son He loves."

In Hebrews 11:24-26 we read about how Moses refused the identity in which he was "the son of Pharaoh's daughter," and aligned himself instead with the mistreated people of God, because he was concentrating on his reward. Perhaps this is an example for us, who need to forget about our old identity as descendants of Adam, and align ourselves with the new humanity into which we have been transferred.

The expressions **the old man** and "the new man"³⁶¹ are only used together in this passage and in Ephesians 4:22-24, which reads, "you took off your previous way of life, the old man corrupted by deceitful desires; and you are being renewed in the spirit of your minds; you put on the new man, created according to God's likeness in righteousness and true holiness." Following closely upon the discussion of Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12-21, in Romans 6:6 we also read, "This knowing, that that old man of ours was crucified with Him so that the body of sin would be made powerless against us, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin." In other words, those that know the Lord Jesus have been transferred to a new realm in which the flesh need no longer dominate us. We have been set free from our enslavement to sin. Further, in Ephesians 2:15 we read of a "new man" being created from the Jews and the Gentiles, which is clearly a collective concept in that context.

³⁶¹ The wording in Col. 3:9 and the wording in Eph. 4:22 for **the old man** are identical, but for "the new man" Col. 3:10 has the brief expression τὸν νέον/*ton neon*, "the new," while Eph. 4:24 has τὸν καινὸν ἄνθρωπον/*ton kainon anthrōpon*, using a different word for "new."

Moo³⁶² writes: “It is therefore our ‘Adamic’ identification, with its servitude to sin, that we have ‘put off’ in coming to Christ; and it is our ‘Christic’ identification, with its power over sin, that we have ‘put on.’ We have been brought into a new realm of existence, a realm in which the ‘old self,’ Adam and all that he represents, no longer dictates our thinking or our behavior.” The reader should understand that this kind of “identification” is not just a way of thinking, as when someone says “being an athlete was my identity.” This “identity” is the core of our actual being now.

Moule³⁶³ says, “Thus the terms ‘the old humanity,’ ‘the new humanity’ derive their force not simply from some individual change in character, but from a corporate recreation of humanity...”

So, Paul is saying that they should no longer **lie to one another** because they left that old Adamic humanity **with its deeds**, which certainly included the destructive practice of lying. That is not to say that it is all right to **lie** to others outside the Christian community, it is simply particularly inappropriate to **lie** to a fellow citizen of the new realm.

As believers set their minds on the things above, they should be more and more aware of the characteristics of their new humanity.

3:10 and having put on the new man,³⁶⁴ who is being renewed into understanding³⁶⁵ according to the image of its Creator,

In their literal use these expressions, “stripping off” and “putting on,” refer to undressing and dressing. No doubt the people of Colossae were very aware that peoples of various cultures and kingdoms wore different sorts of clothing. So, it makes sense to picture the idea of moving from one kingdom to another with these verbs. A Macedonian that had become a Persian would have put off some old clothes and **put on** some new clothes; likewise someone who has been

³⁶² P. 268.

³⁶³ P. 119.

³⁶⁴ The word **man** is not there in the Greek, but is supplied in the translation.

³⁶⁵ See the endnote on this word, ἐπίγνωσις/*epignōsis*, under the discussion on 1:9.

delivered out of the authority of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God's Son has put off the old humanity and **put on the new** humanity.³⁶⁶

Even though we read in Galatians 3:27 that everyone that has been baptized into Christ has **put on**³⁶⁷ Christ, it is difficult to say that **the new man** here is Christ Himself, because it is hard to see how Christ could be **renewed**. However, the new humanity which He founded **is being renewed** as its members do not conform themselves to this present world, but are transformed by the renewing³⁶⁸ of their minds. Our King is perfect, but His Kingdom is still **being renewed**.

This is a transfer of identity, so putting on **the new man** is both a present reality (as here) and a command that must be obeyed (as in Romans 13:14 "Instead, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not make provision for the flesh, for its desires.") Being in the realm of Christ is our new citizenship, but we often mistakenly think of ourselves as Adamic people, so we need to **put on the new man**, and remember the reality of this great transfer. Even though we were transferred into this new realm upon faith in Christ, the old realm continues to exist and it continues to try to influence us.

In 3:1-2 we were urged to "keep seeking the things above" and to "concentrate on the things above." In these verses Paul has been telling us how to do that. As we "concentrate on the things above" we will be realizing more and more that we have left the Adamic humanity and **put on the new**. We will also be **renewed into understanding according to the image** of Christ.

So this **new man**, the new humanity we have joined, is not static or frozen. It is **being renewed into understanding according to the image of its Creator**. Here Paul again emphasizes the importance of **understanding** in the Christian life. Ephesians 4:22-25 is the closest parallel passage, and in it we are told to be **renewed** in the attitude (literally "in the spirit") of our minds. Likewise in Romans 12:2 we are told to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. The idea that such essential renewal and **understanding** should go hand

³⁶⁶ Moo, pp. 266-267, suggests that there may also be an allusion to initiation rites of the Greek mystery cults, which sometimes involved elaborate clothing rituals. However, since those rites were secret, it is hard to be dogmatic about this. Likewise in some ancient Christian baptism ceremonies there is evidence that participants took off old clothing and **put on new**, often white, clothing to symbolize their new life in Christ. Even though Gal. 3:27 connects baptism into Christ with putting on Christ, it is difficult to be dogmatic about a baptism connection here, because the earliest evidence for the clothing change in a baptism ceremony is about 90 years later than this letter.

³⁶⁷ The verb, ἐνδύω/*enduō*, is used in Col. 3:10; Gal. 3:27; and Rom. 13:14.

³⁶⁸ The noun used in Rom. 12:2, ἀνακαινώσις/*anakainōsis*, is similar to the verb used in Col. 3:10, ἀνακαινώω/*anakainōō*.

in hand should not surprise us, given the emphasis on **understanding** and wisdom in Colossians 1:5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 27, 28; 2:2, 3, 7; 3:16; and 4:5.

Although there is not enough information to be dogmatic about this, it seems best to say that Christ, the founder of this new humanity, is **its Creator**. Some³⁶⁹ would say that because the word **Creator** refers to God the Father in its other uses in the New Testament, He is probably meant here, but that does not seem to be strong enough to overcome the fact that the Son of Man is clearly the founder of this new humanity. If He is its founder, then He is **its Creator**.³⁷⁰ We are to be **renewed** in greater **understanding according to the image of the Creator** of the new humanity of which we have become a part. This understanding is in harmony with Romans 8:29 where we learn that we are predestined to be conformed to the image of God's Son. We as members of the new humanity should of course be conformed **to the image of its** founder, the Son of Man. Since according to Colossians 1:15 Christ is the **image** of the Father, there is tremendous alignment in holiness between the Father, the Son, and believers that are growing in their roles in this new humanity.

3:11 where there is not Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, foreigner,³⁷¹ Scythian,³⁷² slave,³⁷³ free, but Christ is all, and in all.

If we are setting our minds on the things above, if we realize anything about this new humanity that we have become a part of, then we will see how out of place racism and prejudice are. They are a part of the fundamental principles of the world, but they have no place in the new humanity.

Although in our day we might have other contrasting pairs of people, these were the most expressive contrasts of the day and the most extreme divisions. The division between **Greek and Jew** was not only a dramatic racial and social

³⁶⁹ Moo, p. 269; Moule, p. 120; O'Brien, p. 191; and Bruce, p. 284 take **its Creator** as a reference to the Father.

³⁷⁰ Martin, p. 116, takes **its Creator** as a reference to Christ, as did Chrysostom.

³⁷¹ This word, βάρβαρος/*barbaros*, originated from an imitation of the sounds that Greeks would hear when they listened to non-Greeks speak, as if all they could hear was "barbarbar." In Classical Greece, with its terrible conflict with Persia, this was an insulting term, but the English word "barbarian" is not appropriate because by the time of the NT it had simply become the **Greek** word for all those that did not speak **Greek**. Clearly in 1 Cor. 14:11 the idea of "non-Greek speaker" is understood, and in Acts 28:2-4 Luke intends no insult. There is no good English equivalent, so the term is here simply translated **foreigner**.

³⁷² The Parthians that lived in what is now Iran were so fierce they were able to utterly defeat the Romans in the desert in 53 BC at the Battle of Carrhae. The Scythians were sometimes able to defeat the Parthians! The Scythians were a nomadic people in the area north, northeast, and northwest of Persia. They are probably listed here as an example of a fierce and utterly barbaric people, but Paul may have listed them because some of them were used as low-class slaves. As feared or despised as they might have been, in the new humanity a **Scythian** and a **Greek** will enjoy rich Christian fellowship together.

³⁷³ A **slave** (δοῦλος/*doulos*) was not even a person in the eyes of Roman law, he was a thing, a possession.

division, it was a division created and enforced by the Law of Moses! That contrasting pair is repeated by the terms **circumcised** and **uncircumcised**. The **foreigner** could not even speak **Greek**, and it was at least imagined by many that the **Scythian**, thought of as the barbarian of barbarians, only wanted to kill Greeks and Romans! Perhaps no one in Colossae ever met a **Scythian**, but each day **slave** and **free** interacted. The people of Colossae were very familiar with the great difference between **slave** and **free** in the realm of the old humanity.

If the Jews divided humanity into **circumcised or uncircumcised**, the Greeks divided humanity into **Greek** and **foreigner**, and a **Scythian** was among the worst of the foreigners. So there may be a little bit of irony here, because these divisions of humanity, as important as they seem to each society, are drawn differently by each group, and those groups do not agree on who are the civilized ones and who are the barbaric ones.

There is one area in which everyone could be in complete agreement: the **slave** was nothing compared to the **free**. However, even in this area the new humanity is utterly different.

These distinctions are of the greatest importance in the world, but one sign of Christian maturity is the absence of these racial, social, and economic prejudices. In the world an outsider, a domestic worker, or a day laborer might be despised and mistreated, but a Christian that despises or mistreats people of a different class or race is only demonstrating his or her immaturity in Christ, knowing too little of being renewed into understanding according to the image of **Christ**. There, right in the midst of the new humanity, he is acting just like a member of the old humanity.

When Paul writes, **but Christ is all, and in all**, he is reminding us of the exalted preeminence of **Christ** which he described in Colossians 1:15-20. With Him as the founder and head of our new humanity, there is no place for these old earthly prejudices. The Christian whose understanding is deeply renewed according to the image of **Christ** rejects all these social and economic rankings, and says about born again people that are of different races, "All these people that seem so different from us have Christ as their Head, and Christ is in all these members of His humanity as much as He is in us." This is not to say that we are to pretend that everyone is socially and culturally identical to us. Phrygians that have become believers do not stop being Phrygians, Jews that believe in the Messiah are still Jews, and Greek Christians are still Greeks – but now we are brothers in a family. Masters are still masters even though they are believers, and slaves are still slaves, as is clear from Colossians 3:22 and 4:1. This is not a call to

an outward revolution, it is a far more demanding call to apply spiritual realities in all our relationships. Whether we act like it or not, we are all brothers in the Lord.

Such a statement in today's world may sound like a cliché, but it was a new idea in Paul's day. There are no known contemporary parallels to this proclamation of universal brotherhood in Christ.

3:12 So as the chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience,

First restating the fact of the marvelous transfer they experienced by referring to them as **the chosen of God**, **chosen** as members of this new humanity, a **holy** humanity, a **beloved** humanity,³⁷⁴ Paul then urges them to **put on heartfelt compassion**. This grace/command combination is not a one-time event in this letter. Over and over again in Colossians, Paul pairs theological undergirdings with his commands. See Appendix B for a listing of these pairs in Colossians. We see that here as well. We are not simply told: "Be kind!" Paul knew that lists of rules without a foundation of empowering grace would just drag the congregation down into spiritual defeat – or even worse, allow a misguided pride over superficial obedience. In this letter Paul intertwines the foundations of grace with his commands, so that the reader of a command is never very far away from a reminder of God's uplifting grace. It is true that we must wrap ourselves up in **heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience**, but the reminder that we are **chosen of God, holy and beloved** is to lift us into such obedience.

The underlying assumption here is that obedience that grows out of rich gratitude and thankfulness is powerful and enduring, but obedience that is driven by guilt, fear, or shame is weak and fading. If this is true, then the more profoundly we understand – through study, worship, answered prayer, and life experience – what a great God we have, and how great are His riches upon each of us personally and upon the church collectively, the more obedient we will be to Him. A man will run from a whip only far enough to escape the whip, but for love a man will cross oceans and continents.

It is far more difficult to imbue an awe of this amazing grace into a congregation than to simply convince them that they really should be good Christians. Far too

³⁷⁴ In the NT similar terms are used of the church in Rom. 1:7 and 1 Pet. 2:9-10. Although these three terms, **chosen**, **holy**, and **beloved**, are never used in combination together anywhere else in the Bible (Moo, p. 276), they are similar to terms used of Israel in the OT. Note Dt. 7:6-7 in which the two words **holy** and **chosen** are used of Israel, and in which God is said to have "set His affection" on them. While it is clear that in this age the church has been given Israel's place as the chosen people of God, that is far from being proof that the church has permanently replaced Israel in the plan of God.

often only the latter happens. Paul will not let that happen here. He will not compromise. The only way he will move forward is to win them into awe. If he can accomplish that, they will be motivated from within their hearts to **put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience**, five virtues³⁷⁵ which oppose the five vices that the congregation was called to “put off” in 3:8. Paul would have the congregation be driven into obedience, but driven not by rantings, not by fear, not by scoldings, not by shame – driven rather by awe and thankfulness.

The first virtue that is to be **put on** is **heartfelt compassion**. Perhaps it is emphasized that this is to be **heartfelt**³⁷⁶ in order to remind us that only as awe of God’s grace towards us works into our hearts, **compassion** which is truly **heartfelt** can emerge from those uplifted hearts.

The second virtue is **kindness**,³⁷⁷ which is defined as either “uprightness in one’s relations with others” or “the quality of being helpful or beneficial, goodness, kindness, generosity.”³⁷⁸ That second definition seems to fit better in the context of the other four virtues in this list.

The third virtue, **humility**,³⁷⁹ could be translated “humility of mind.” Here it has a positive meaning, but the other two times it is used in Colossians it is about false **humility**.

The fourth virtue, **gentleness**,³⁸⁰ also has the idea of being “unassuming.”

³⁷⁵ Barth, p. 418, notes that the principal Greek virtues of wisdom, bravery, sobriety, and fairness are missing, and that instead OT values are represented here. Indeed, some of these virtues could be at odds with those Greek virtues. Although Paul knew well how to communicate to Greeks, he did not compromise on the content that he presented. As a cross-cultural missionary he was well contextualized, but he did not allow syncretism. He never compromised on content.

³⁷⁶ The expression is *σπλάγχχνα οικτίρου*/*splagchna oiktirou*, which might be translated “bowels of compassion.” That word, *σπλάγχχνα/splagchna*, literally refers to “entrails” (as in Acts 1:18), because that part of our internal organs was considered the seat of **compassion**, like the “heart” in English. Note the use of this Greek term in Phil. 1:8; Philem. 12 and 20. The term can be used of divine or human **compassion**.

³⁷⁷ The term *χρηστότης/chrēstotēs* can be used of divine **kindness**, as in Rom. 2:4 and 11:22, or human **kindness**, as in 2 Cor. 6:6 and Gal. 5:22.

³⁷⁸ *BDAG*.

³⁷⁹ See the endnote about this word, *ταπεινοφροσύνη/tapeinophrosunē*, under the discussion on 2:18.

³⁸⁰ This word, *πραότης/prautēs*, and the closely related *πραΰτης/prautēs* and *πραῦς/praus*, refer to “not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance, gentle, humble, considerate” according to *BDAG*. These Greek words are used of the Lord in Mt. 11:29; 21:5 and 2 Cor. 10:1. In Mt. 5:5; Gal. 5:23; 6:1; Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:12; 1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:25; Tit. 3:2; Jms. 1:21; 3:13; 1 Pet. 3:4; and 3:15 we are urged to have this attitude. In 1 Cor. 4:21 Paul offers to come to them “with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit,” using the word *πραότης/prautēs*.

The fifth virtue, **patience**,³⁸¹ might also be translated “long-suffering.”

3:13 bearing with one another, and forgiving³⁸² each other,³⁸³ if anyone has a complaint³⁸⁴ against someone; just as Christ³⁸⁵ forgave you, so also you should forgive.³⁸⁶

The patience that is called for in the previous verse is elaborated upon here. As a start, sometimes we need to be patiently **bearing with one another**. Sometimes in our fellowships there are people we find difficult to get along with. The first step we are called upon to take is to be patiently **bearing with** or putting up **with one another**. That, however, is only a start.

As we seek the things above, as we live according to our new and true identity, and as we experience the renewal of the new man, whenever we have **a complaint against someone** we will **forgive**. Believers that do not respond like this are living as if they had not been transferred into the new humanity, as if they had not “put on the new man.” Thus in verses 13 and 14 Paul completes the thought of the command of verse 12.³⁸⁷

Almost tucked in so we hardly notice it, the expression **just as Christ forgave you, so also you should forgive** is actually a concise presentation of a key

³⁸¹ This word, μακροθυμία/*makrothumia*, has two parts, μακρός/*makros* (“long”) and θυμός/*thumos* (“intense feeling,” “passion,” or “anger”), and came to be used to express the idea of **patience**. It is used of the Lord or of God in Rom. 2:4; 9:22; 1 Tim. 1:16; Jms. 5:10; 1 Pet. 3:20; and 2 Pet. 3:15. Sometimes by way of example, sometimes by way of exhortation, this word is used of believers in 2 Cor. 6:6; Gal. 5:22; Eph. 4:2; Col. 1:11; 3:12; 2 Tim. 3:10; 4:2; and Heb. 6:12. Since four out of these five virtues are sometimes used of God or Christ, Moo (pp. 276-277) suggests that putting on these virtues is very much like putting on Christ, as in Rom. 13:14. If we have **put on** the new humanity, of which Christ is Head, should we not as well **put on** His virtues?

³⁸² See the endnote on this verb, χαρίζομαι/*charizomai*, under the discussion on Col. 2:13.

³⁸³ It is true that the word here translated **each other** (ἐαυτοῖς/*heautois*) most often means “yourselves,” but here it means **one another** or **each other**. Rather than repeating the word translated **one another** (ἀλλήλων/*allēlōn*), Paul uses this term for stylistic variation, as was common enough in Classical Greek. It does not mean that the one that is sinning needs to forgive himself (Barth p. 422 and Moo p. 279).

³⁸⁴ This word, μομφή/*momphe*, is only used here in the NT. However, other related words in the NT might be translated “blame” or “find fault” (μέμφομαι/*memphomai*), “blameless” (ἄμεμπτος/*amemptos*), and “blamelessly” (ἄμεμπτως/*amemptōs*).

³⁸⁵ In the dim early centuries from which there are no known surviving manuscripts, a copying error happened here as a manuscript of this letter was copied. Most Greek manuscripts now in our possession have **Christ** here, but ρ^46 , B, A, and some later manuscripts have “the Lord.” \aleph originally read “God,” but was changed in the 7th century to **Christ**. Of course the practical difference here is very very slight.

³⁸⁶ In the original Greek the words **should forgive** are not there, but were understood in the context. They are added in English.

³⁸⁷ The grammatical structure (an imperative in verse 12, then two participles in verse 13, and no verb at all in verse 14) does show that the imperative of verse 12 is the core idea of these three verses.

concept in this letter. As has already been noted in the discussion on 3:12 and summarized in Appendix B, very often in this letter Paul gives the theological underpinnings of his commands right beside the commands. Here the fact that **Christ forgave you** is the basis for the command that **you should forgive**. In the Lord's prayer (Matthew 6:12 and Luke 11:4) the fact that we forgive those who sin against us seems to be the basis of our prayer that God forgive us. In any case, there is a close connection between the two, and the relationship between the two here in this verse in Colossians is restated several times in this letter.

3:14 But upon all these put on³⁸⁸ love, which is the perfect bond.³⁸⁹

As in Romans 13:8-10; 1 Corinthians 13; and Galatians 5:14, **love** is the premier virtue, not one among many.³⁹⁰ Above compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, and beyond forgiveness, we must **love** one another. That is the **perfect** way to wrap us all up in unity.³⁹¹

3:15 And let the peace of God³⁹² rule³⁹³ in your hearts, into which also you were called in one body – and be thankful.

Whenever we need to bear with someone or forgive someone, we need to **let the peace of God** make the ruling as to whether or not we will forbear and forgive. We need to side with **the peace of God**. Although our emotions may want us to let strife make the ruling, we are **called to peace**.

³⁸⁸ The repetition of the command **put on** is implied in the Greek but supplied in the English for greater clarity. Some suggest that the metaphor of putting on virtues like we **put on** clothing is continued here, so the idea is that **love** is a belt that is put on above, or over, all the other pieces of clothing. However, that idea does not quite fit with the way clothing was worn in that day. People wore a single inner garment, fastened by a belt, and a single outer garment. There is no clear proof of a belt that is **put on** after the outer garment is **put on** (Barth, p. 423).

³⁸⁹ The expression σύνδεσμος τῆς τελειότητος/*sundesmos tēs teleiōtētos*, which is here translated **the perfect bond**, is literally “the bond of perfection,” or “the bond of maturity.” *BDAG* suggests the somewhat elaborate meanings “the bond that unites all the virtues (which otherwise have no unity) in perfect harmony or the bond of perfect unity for the church.”

³⁹⁰ Barth, p. 423.

³⁹¹ What is actually bound together is debated in the commentaries. For instance, Bruce (p. 288) says “Love binds the virtues into a harmonious whole,” so he says it is the virtues that are bound together. Moo (p. 282) seems to agree, saying “the community... will be brought to perfection when **love** binds the virtues together,” but it seems simpler to just say that better than all the other virtues, **love** perfectly binds the community together. Hendriksen (p. 159) agrees, noting Paul's purpose as he wrote in Col. 2:2, “so that their hearts might be encouraged, being drawn together in love and into all the riches of the certainty of insight...”

³⁹² The majority of Greek manuscripts read **the peace of God**, but some earlier manuscripts read “the peace of Christ.” Perhaps some early copyist saw the “of Christ” that begins the next verse, and incorrectly wrote it down at the beginning of this verse. The practical difference is very slight.

³⁹³ This verb is βραβεύω/*brabeuō*, similar to καταβραβεύω/*katabrabeuō* in 2:18. It is possible that there is an intentional play on words here, such that the evil teachers in 2:18 will try to “rule against you” like a bad umpire, but in 3:15 **the peace of Christ** can be allowed to “rule for you” like a fair umpire. If the athletic origin of this word was still apparent in the first century, Paul might even be saying something like, “let the peace of God decide which choice will win out as you face a decision between peace and strife.” See the endnote under 2:18.

Being **called** is one of Paul's common expressions for getting saved, as can be easily seen in 1 Corinthians 7:15-24. There in verse 15 we read that we are "called to peace." Our calling also involves grace (Galatians 1:6), freedom (Galatians 5:13), one hope (Ephesians 4:4), and holiness (1 Thessalonians 4:7 and 2 Timothy 1:9). However, here the idea is that when **God called** us to Himself He **called** us to **peace**, and that **peace** ought to characterize our relationships in the **body** of Christ.

This is not a mandate for **peace** at any cost. This is about **the peace of God**, not the **peace** of man. When Paul emphatically rejects false teachers that bring a "philosophy of empty deception according to human tradition," he is not contradicting this verse. This is about personal hurts and insults that should be forgiven, not a command to "peacefully" leave all false teachings unopposed.

At the end of the sentence, Paul slips in a brief but profound note: **and be thankful**.³⁹⁴ However, far from being superfluous to the line of thought of this epistle, the idea of thankfulness is core. An unthankful Christian is a Christian who, if he is motivated towards godly life and effective ministry at all, is motivated with motivation that will eventually fail him. Paul has consistently taught throughout this letter that the Lord has done unspeakably great things for us, and awe and thankfulness towards Him are not only appropriate, they are foundational to a healthy Christian life.

If we read the command to **be thankful** alone, we might wonder how this thankfulness can be developed, but actually Paul has drawn us towards thankfulness all through this brief letter as over and over again he tells us about the wonders of our Savior and His great gracious work for us. And the very next verse is the great key for building a thankful heart.

³⁹⁴ In the parallel text in Eph. 5:19-20 this brief note is more extended: "giving thanks always for all things, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to God even the Father."

3:16 Let the word of Christ³⁹⁵ dwell³⁹⁶ among³⁹⁷ you richly in all wisdom, teaching and warning³⁹⁸ one another as you sing³⁹⁹ psalms and⁴⁰⁰ hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude⁴⁰¹ in your hearts to the Lord.⁴⁰²

Just as in 3:15 we are to let the peace of God rule in our hearts, so here we are to **let the word of Christ dwell among** us. This command is given in a rather poetic form, as if **the word of Christ** were a person that is to be invited to move into our homes to live with us and be **richly** treated by us. The **word of Christ** is to be a rich part of our lives, not sent to a corner and told to be quiet or told what it should and should not say! When the **word** dwells among us **richly**, we do not tell it what it must say when it is in our house. Instead it tells us how to live, and where we can get the strength to live like that.

People that “concentrate on the things above, not on the things upon the earth” will not ignore or reject passages of Scripture that are disagreeable or in conflict with their attitudes or lifestyle. According to this verse, the minds, mouths, and

³⁹⁵ This expression, ὁ λόγος τοῦ χριστοῦ/*ho logos tou christou*, occurs only here in the NT. It, and the related expressions “the word of God” (ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ/*ho logos tou theou*) and “the word of the Lord” (ὁ λόγος τοῦ κυρίου/*ho logos tou kuriou*), refer to the message that God has for men, whether it is given as Scripture (as in Mt. 15:6) or the preaching of those He has sent, including the Lord Jesus (as in Lk. 5:1), the apostles (as in Acts 8:25), or unnamed preachers (as in Acts 13:49). Note in Acts 13:44-49 how “the word of God” and “the word of the Lord” are used interchangeably.

³⁹⁶ The verb here, ἐνοικέω/*enoikeō*, is made up of the normal verb “to live” or “to dwell,” οἰκέω/*oikeō*, with the preposition ἐν/*en*, so it has the idea of “dwell in” or “dwell among.”

³⁹⁷ The preposition ἐν/*en* is repeated from the prefix on the verb, ἐνοικέω/*enoikeō*. It can be translated “in” or **among**. In this verse the translation “in” suggests a more individualized concept, and the translation **among** suggests a more collective concept. Since the words **you** and **your** in this verse are plural, and since Paul uses the expression **one another**, the translation **among** seems preferable.

³⁹⁸ See the endnote under 1:28 concerning this word, νουθετέω/*noutheteō*.

³⁹⁹ The verb **sing** here (ᾄδοντες/*adontes*) is a participle, and it is difficult to know for sure how this singing and the three kinds of songs relate to the words that precede it. Some (for instance *EBC*, Hendriksen, p. 161, and a variety of English translations) hold that there is a break in the sentence after **one another**, so that the singing has little to do with the **teaching and warning**. For them, **teaching, warning**, and also singing are simply some of the activities that happen when the **word of Christ** dwells **richly** in a community of believers. But others (for instance Moo, p. 288 and O’Brien, p. 208) note that in fact there is no “and” or any other indication of a break in the flow of thought, so that singing is an integral part of how we are to teach and admonish each other. Eph. 5:19 supports this view. In literal translation it reads, “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and psalming in/with your heart to the Lord.” If it be objected that “speaking” is not the same as **teaching and warning**, (Hendriksen, p. 161, makes this objection) it can be countered that **teaching and warning** is certainly among the kind of “speaking” that Paul would encourage. In addition, O’Brien (p. 209) writes that early Christian **hymns** really did include **teaching and warning**.

⁴⁰⁰ This **and** here and the next one are missing in the oldest manuscripts but present in the majority of manuscripts.

⁴⁰¹ The expression **with gratitude** is ἐν χάριτι/*en chariti*. This word, χάρις/*charis*, means **gratitude** in 1 Tim. 1:12 and 2 Tim. 1:3.

⁴⁰² The very oldest manuscripts have “to God,” but the majority of manuscripts have **to the Lord**.

hearts of those that are “seeking the things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God” will be filled with **the word of Christ**.

Paul teaches them and us about how wonderful our Savior is, but that will not help them or us unless **the Word dwells** in our **hearts richly**. Delighting in truths about our Savior and His grace is the perfect cure for the threat of anyone that would rule against us, judge us, or take us captive.

That basic idea is then supplemented with the idea that the **word of Christ** has that status in our lives when we are **teaching and warning one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs**. So just as the pulpit should be an instrument of praise, so the guitar should be an instrument of instruction!

It is no coincidence that Paul says in 1:28 that he is “warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom,” while here in 3:16 he says **teaching and warning one another**. The work that he has been doing towards all men he now gives to them to do towards **one another**.

It is very difficult to give precise definitions for the three words, **psalms and hymns and spiritual songs**.⁴⁰³ What we really learn here about the singing that Paul is encouraging is not musical genre (though a variety of musical genre is suggested by these three different terms), but that these **psalms and hymns and spiritual songs** have *content* which is useful for **teaching and warning!** Whether that is to be done with organ or guitar accompaniment or a cappella is not stated here, but the variety of words Paul uses suggests a freedom to praise the Lord with all sorts of song, as indeed Psalm 150 suggests.

Furthermore, there do not seem to be any contextual hints that would allow us to limit this verse’s application to just our worship services. This passage seems to be unlike 1 Corinthians 11, in which Paul is clearly discussing Christian gatherings. In fact, the use of the expression **one another** here suggests that Paul has in mind our daily interpersonal relationships with fellow Christians.

⁴⁰³ The first word here is ψαλμός/*psalmos*, which is the Greek word used for the Psalms of David in for instance Lk. 20:42 and Acts 1:20. Probably here Paul is thinking of the OT **psalms** and also songs of similar composition. The second word, ὕμνος/*hymnos*, is used in Greek literature of a song of religious character sung to the praise of a deity (*BDAG*). It may be that the translation, which is a transliteration, “hymn,” is misleading. There is not enough evidence to say that a ὕμνος/*hymnos* was a classic religious song, in the sense that a hymn is today. The third expression, ᾠδή πνευματικός/*ōdē pneumatikos*, simply means “a spiritual song.” The word “song” here, ᾠδή/*ōdē*, is a very general word, and we see it in Rev. 5:9; 14:3; and 15:3. It is interesting that all three of these words have come all the way into modern English, as psalm, hymn, and ode. The student will be cautious, however, in pushing the present English meaning of any of these three words back almost two thousand years to the Koine Greek words that Paul used. A ψαλμός/*psalmos* is not necessarily a psalm, a ὕμνος/*hymnos* is not necessarily a hymn, and an ᾠδή/*ōdē* is not necessarily an ode!

We are not exhorted in this letter to develop a special sensitivity to “God’s will” in any particular situation. We are instead shown our responsibility to be wise, to teach and exhort or admonish each other, and to be thankful. Actually there is quite a contrast between the popular and apparently spiritual idea of seeking God’s will, and the quite hard work of gaining **wisdom** and **gratitude** through being taught and exhorted. Ironically, the One whose will is so often sought explains to us here that His will is that we become more and more filled with **wisdom** and **gratitude**.

We can have **the word dwell richly in our hearts**, by **teaching and warning** each other with song, song which comes from our **hearts** and is directed **to the Lord**, and that **with gratitude**. The idea of **gratitude** is a major theme in this letter. First Paul says how thankful he is to God the Father for them (1:3), then he describes the thankfulness they should grow into (1:12), then five times he commands thankfulness (2:7; 3:15, 16, 17; and 4:2), so that the root idea is used seven times in the letter.

Here Paul is not interested in any measurable performance of spiritual activity. He left that sort of thing behind in Philippians 3:2-9, and is now concerned with what it looks like when we are seeking the things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. If we have been understanding something of what he has been telling us of the excellencies of **Christ** and all that He has done for us and in us, if **the word of Christ** has been dwelling **richly in our hearts**, if we have been **teaching and warning one another** with song, then surely we will have **songs** of grateful praise in our **hearts**. And we will be equipped to live and serve in the power of the Spirit.

This command to be **singing with gratitude** proves the great value of the undergirding of grace Paul gives before each of the commands in Colossians chapters 1, 2, and 3. How could we possibly have this **gratitude**, much less be **singing with gratitude**, without a deep heartfelt understanding of this grace? Are we commanded to fulfill a duty of thankfulness? To understand these words about **gratitude** that way, as a duty, is to sadly misunderstand Paul’s point.

To be thankful like this we need to deeply know His grace. Paul is trying to embed the truth of the riches of His grace into our hearts – then we can be thankful, and we will be ready to obey too, to obey out of thankfulness rather than duty. Duty can only drive the Law; thankfulness can empower the “grace-based obedience” which Paul is calling for here in this letter.

To do one’s “devotions” in Colossians by reading quickly through it and underlining all the commands in red would be to abuse the text. That is not

letting **the Word of Christ dwell among you richly**. This is not to say that New Testament commands are unimportant, but to think that all we really need to do is to concentrate on those commands and get out there and do them is a simple recipe for disaster. That would be like thinking you can go out and run a marathon without many months of careful training. We simply would not have the strength of character for it. We can save ourselves a lot of wasted time and pain by realizing our deep need for the encouragement and empowerment only brought to us by a profound awareness of God's abundant grace towards us.

The question might arise, how does one build an ongoing religious organization, a ministry, or a church, on such principles? What can be set in concrete to ensure that this is carried on from generation to generation, and from one people to another people, trans-generationally and trans-culturally? How can we systematize this and put it into the very heart of the organization? Throughout church history Christians have tried to do that with creeds, catechisms, confessions of faith, and church constitutions. None of those mechanisms are up to this task. They have produced the various branches of Christianity in the world today, but they cannot produce enduring faithfulness. The only thing that can do this is a personal devotion to the Lord, filled with **gratitude**, encouraged in an environment where **teaching and warning** is supported with **psalms and hymns and spiritual songs** sung with **hearts** focused on **the Lord**. That is the New Testament answer to this question.

3:17 **And whatever you might do, in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to our God and Father⁴⁰⁴ through Him.** To close this section, Paul gives a perfect summary of the principle of the grace-empowered Christian life. The false teachers of chapter 2 have lists and rules for you. They could never say anything like this. But Paul can say "Whatever you might want to do, if you can do it in accord with Jesus' character and work, and if you can do it with gratitude in your hearts to God, then you just do that!" What freedom there is in a life filled with this grace! Using the words **whatever, in word or in deed**,⁴⁰⁵ and **all** Paul gives a very broad and trusting commission that is contrary to a law-giving attitude in which each and every **word** or **deed** must be specifically delineated.

Making lists of proper Christian behavior was not a high priority for Paul. Here he is content to just say, **do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus**. The

⁴⁰⁴ The majority of the manuscripts read **to God and Father**, but the five oldest Greek manuscripts read "to God Father." In this translation the word **our** is supplied for clarity. The phrase could also be translated "to God even the Father."

⁴⁰⁵ The expression in **word or deed**, in various forms, is a common way of encompassing all of a person's activity. See also Luke 24:19; Acts 7:22; Rom. 15:18; 2 Cor. 10:11; 2 Thes. 2:17; and 1 Jn. 3:18.

expression **in His name** refers to all He is and all He has done for us.⁴⁰⁶ Paul has in fact taught us so much about that in this very epistle. So **whatever you might do**, make sure it all fits in His **name**. Make sure there is nothing that you **do, in word or in deed**, that does not harmonize with His character and His work for us.

Apparently the Apostle felt that he had already given the congregation in Colossae enough guidelines concerning **the name of the Lord Jesus**, that he could free them up with such an empowering statement. He did not feel that they, a congregation from such a dark pagan past, needed some of the Mosaic Law or any other written codes, even temporarily. The teachings that Epaphras had given them, this letter, and the Spirit in their presence were enough so that he could trust them to know how to apply this principle in all the thousands of choices they would have to make in their particular context. All that they have learned about the riches of God's grace upon them – if they received it with gratitude – was sufficient to assure Paul that they would want to do what they knew to be right! Again, he is counting on the power of the Spirit, the power of prayer, and the power of gratitude in response to God's grace to assure their ongoing growth in the Lord, rather than the power of Law. Dare any pastor today reject this approach because of his specific context?

Paul's "theology of transformation" was grace-based: transformation can happen when believers understand God's grace to them and have the Spirit within them. The Judaizers' theology of transformation was law-based: transformation can happen when believers are told what God commands them to do. Despite the many warnings Paul gives of the powerlessness of law (as in Romans 8:2-3), many Christian leaders apparently feel that there is transforming power in insistence upon obeying lists of rules and regulations, rather than trusting in the power of grace. Unhappily, in the end their congregations are living proof of the crippling power of law, rather than the transforming power of grace.

Having made his case for grace-based transformation, Paul goes on to give them some specifics of what that transformed life will look like in our interpersonal

⁴⁰⁶ Hendriksen (p. 164) says, "In the name' means, accordingly, 'in vital relation with him, that is, in harmony with his revealed will, in subjection to his authority, in dependence on his power.'" Moo (p. 291) says, "To do all things 'in the name of the Lord Jesus,' then, does not mean simply to utter Jesus' name but to act always in concert with the nature and character of the Lord."

relationships. Just as the expression “submitting to one another”⁴⁰⁷ in Ephesians 5:21 is worked out in more detail in Ephesians 5:22–6:9, so the expression **whatever you might do** is systematically applied to the Christian household in the following passage.

3:18–4:1 *This is how to live it out in our households.*

This passage, as well as Ephesians 5:22–6:9; 1 Timothy 2:8–15; 6:1–2; Titus 2:1–10; and 1 Peter 2:13–3:7, is sometimes called “a table of household relationships.” There are similar lists of household duties in the writings of the Greek moral philosophers,⁴⁰⁸ especially the Stoics. However, Hendricksen⁴⁰⁹ points out significant ways that all those tables of household duties fall short of the biblical tables. Only the biblical passages empower the reader to obedience, showing how a thankful response to the grace of God empowers believers to live out these household relationships. Also, the Lord Jesus has already provided a perfect example of submission (to His Father, as in Philippians 2:3–11, and to His human parents, as in Luke 2:51) and of humble servanthood (as in John 13:13–17 when He washed the disciples’ feet). So this passage gives us the pattern, the Lord showed us an example, and our thankfulness for our place in the new humanity gives us the empowerment.

⁴⁰⁷ Although Eph. 5:21 (“submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ”) is interpreted by some to teach so called “mutual submission,” that is a modern idea that does not hold up to a more detailed look at that and related passages. In fact, Eph. 5:21 introduces 5:22–6:9, so that 5:22–6:9 explains just how we are to submit to one another. It does not mean that sometimes wives are to submit to husbands, and sometimes husbands are to submit to wives. The following three points support the idea that Eph. 5:21 is an introductory statement that is “unpacked” in the verses that follow it:

1. Who gets to decide whether any particular instance is a time for the wife to submit or the husband to submit? Since there is no satisfactory answer to that question, the idea of “mutual submission” would negate the entire passage, rather than simply introducing it.
2. 1 Ptr. 2:13 (“Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men”) likewise plays the same introductory role as Eph. 5:21. Both of them are introductory statements that are fleshed out by what follows.
3. If Eph. 5:21 were meant to stand by itself and somehow overrule what follows it, how is it that such a crucial verse is missing in the parallel passage here in Colossians?

The primary objection to this understanding is that if women have to submit to their husbands, then husbands must be more valuable to God than their wives. However, the reader of Colossians knows that all believers have value because of who we are in Christ, not because of whether we have to lead or follow in a particular relationship. This is demonstrated in the Trinity, because the Lord Jesus has equal value to God the Father, even though the Lord Jesus consistently submits to the Father. There is not a single passage in the Bible that speaks of God the Father submitting to the Lord Jesus.

⁴⁰⁸ Aristotle is one of the earliest philosophers whose writings we can read about this. He said that the household has three basic relationships: 1) master and slave, 2) husband and wife, and 3) father and children. He also stressed what he wrongly considered to be a natural superiority of the male husband and father over wife and children (Moo, pp. 293–294), an idea which simply is not in the NT teachings. The NT agrees that there is a differentiation of roles that requires submission (see especially 1 Tim. 2:8–15), but nowhere in the NT or the OT do we read that males are intrinsically superior to females.

⁴⁰⁹ Pp. 167–168.

The New Testament teaches that all members of the new humanity have equal value, and in the new humanity there is no prejudice regarding race, cultural background, or gender. Such prejudice, and the feeling of superiority or the oppression that accompanies it, are all a part of the old humanity. This is made very clear in Colossians 3:11 and Galatians 3:28. It is also clear in this passage, in that those addressed (even children and slaves) are treated as responsible human beings.

At the same time, the New Testament also clearly teaches that husbands, wives, children, masters, and slaves do have different roles. Submission is part of those roles. If submission *necessarily* included inferiority (as in such thinking as “only inferior people have to obey others”) then the New Testament teachings on these relationships are hopelessly flawed, and all we can do is perhaps salvage some useful truths from the flawed teachings of the Bible.

There are teachers and authors that try to do that very thing by declaring such books as Ephesians and Colossians to be forgeries that accidentally made their way into the biblical canon at the hands of male church leaders, even though (they tell us) no true apostle wrote them. Other teachers allow that Ephesians 5:21–6:9 and Colossians 3:18–4:1 are valid Scriptures, but they attempt to weaken their clear meaning. One way to do that is to bring in the idea of “mutual submission.” Another way to do that is to say that these commands for women, children, and slaves to submit are part of a compromise to the local culture, perhaps so that Christianity can prosper. Neither of these is acceptable. Paul was not calling for “mutual submission,” he was calling for each of the readers to submit to the authority over him or her, and in the next verses he delineated that arrangement of authority. “Mutual submission” is a contradiction in terms that simply invites the more forceful member of one of these relationships to call for submission on any given issue. Saying Paul compromised on ethical teaching so that such teaching would not become a stumbling block to Roman or Greek society is a false accusation against his ethical integrity, a harsh judgement that would open the door to accusations of other so-called compromises in any other area where Paul and 21st-century thinking conflict.⁴¹⁰

Paul has told us to “concentrate on the things above, not on the things upon the earth,” but he did not mean that we should abandon our earthly families and find a cave or a monastery in which to be “seeking the things above.” We are to live as new creations in our relationships with our fathers, our children, our spouses, and our employers or teachers.

⁴¹⁰ Moo, pp. 294-295, has an excellent discussion on this entire issue.

The arrangement of the elements of this passage is worth observing. There are three pairs of relationships that are addressed, and in each case the first is called upon to submit/obey to the second, and then the second is called upon to be careful to be good to the first. The order of the pairs is from the closest (husband/wife) to the most distant (master/slave). For some reason, the final pair has more explanation than the first two pairs. No element should be interpreted in isolation from the other half of its pair, and each element addresses the people involved as ethnically responsible human beings.⁴¹¹

Paul has instructed us that “whatever you might do, in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Here he begins his explanation of how that very broad comment works out in the Christian household, exhorting five kinds of people. Just because someone has joined the new humanity does not mean their obligations, formed while they were a part of the old humanity, are now dissolved. Although very brief, these exhortations need to be understood and obeyed if we are to live our lives “in the name of the Lord Jesus” in the new humanity. In the broader context, these exhortations need to be taken in the context of obedience empowered by gratitude for the awesome person and gracious work of our Lord and Savior. If we miss that, they become just another list of religious duties, and the whole point of the epistle up to here is undone!

God has arranged the institutions that He created – family, government, and church – with some clear leader/follower roles, and keeping to that arrangement is good and healthy. This can only be done while “giving thanks to our God and Father,” rather than as an unjust obligation. The Lord Jesus led His disciples with deep love, but He also submitted to the Father with thanksgiving. That submission brought Him all the way to the cross and to the exaltation that followed. Did that submission rob Him of anything? He is, of course, the perfect example not only for husbands, fathers, and masters, but also for wives, children, and slaves.

⁴¹¹ O’Brien, pp. 219-220.

3:18 **Wives**,⁴¹² **submit**⁴¹³ **to your husbands**,⁴¹⁴ **as is fitting in the Lord**.⁴¹⁵

Despite their essential equality, **wives** are called upon to **submit** to their **husbands**, because this is what is **fitting in the Lord**. If the idea of a wife being told she should **submit** to her husband seems abhorrent to the mind accustomed to the essential equality of all humanity, so should the idea of the Son's submission to the Father, as described in Philippians 2:3-11. He was called to humble Himself all the way to servanthood and death, and we are all called to imitate that same humility in servanthood. Would not the Christian wife that says she cannot lower herself to **submit** to her husband (a very concrete step of faith) also be unable to lower herself to a humility that brings on such Christlike servanthood (a rather abstract attitude)?

⁴¹² The Greek word here for "wife" is simply the word γυναίκα/*gunē*. The context always makes it clear whether this term means "woman" or "wife."

⁴¹³ This word, ὑποτάσσω/*hupotassō*, is from the word τάσσω/*tassō*, which means "to arrange authority in an orderly way," "to classify someone or something into a certain category," or "to order or assign." In Lk. 7:8 τάσσω/*tassō* is used of the way the military arranges who has authority over whom within its ranks. In Acts 22:10 it is used to describe all that God has arranged for Paul to do in his apostolic ministry. In Acts 28:23 it is used when the leaders of the Jews in Rome arranged a certain day for Paul to speak to the Jews. This root word can then have various prefixes attached to it, so that ἀνατάσσομαι/*anatassomai* in Lk. 1:1 means "to arrange in proper order," ἀντιτάσσω/*antitassō* in Jms. 4:6 means "to oppose or resist," ἀποτάσσω/*apotassō* in Lk. 14:33 means "to renounce," ἀτακτέω/*atakteō* (from α + τάσσω/*a + tassō*) in 2 Thes. 3:7 means "to be without prescribed order," διατάσσω/*diatassō* in Acts 20:13 means "to put into proper order," ἐπιτάσσω/*epitassō* in Lk. 4:36 means "to command with authority," συντάσσω/*suntassō* in Mt. 21:6 means "to direct that something be done in an explicit fashion." So the word in our text, ὑποτάσσω/*hupotassō*, means "to be under the arranged authority of someone." It is used of military structure in 2 Macc. 8:22. In Ps. 18:47 and other OT passages it is used of the subjugation of one nation by another. In Rom. 13:1 it is used of the way God sets up governing authorities. The very use of this word strongly suggests that God has arranged an orderly arrangement of authority in society, and in that arrangement **wives** are to **submit** to their **husbands**. If they do not, then they are ἀνυπότακτος/*anupotaktos*, (Tit. 1:10) which means they reject the established arrangement of authority.

This word, ὑποτάσσω/*hupotassō*, is used six times in 1 Cor. 15:27-28, which can be translated "For all things He has subjected under His feet. But when it says that all things He has subjected, it is clear that this excluded the One who subjected all things. But when He has subjected to Him all things, then also the Son Himself will be subjected to the One who subjected to Him all things, so that God might be all in all."

⁴¹⁴ The Greek word here for "husband" is simply the word ἀνὴρ/*anēr*. As in the above note, the context makes it clear whether the word means "man" or "husband." This text is complicated a bit by the fact that some Greek manuscripts do not have the clarification "your own," but that difference disappears in the English translation.

⁴¹⁵ The word translated **as** here (ὡς/*hōs*) does not allow the meaning "only as far as is fitting in the Lord" even though we might like to see some limit on how far this obedience should go (Moo, pp. 301-302). Whether this is easy or difficult in a given marriage or a given culture, Paul is simply saying that **in the Lord** it is **fitting** that **women submit** to their **husbands**.

So the wife must resist the temptation to rule her husband. In Genesis 3:16 God told Eve that part of the results of their sin would be that her “desire”⁴¹⁶ would be for her husband, but that he would rule over her. That word, “desire,” used only three times in the Old Testament, means romantic or sexual desire in Song of Solomon 7:10, but in the nearer context, Genesis 4:7, it is used of sin’s “desire” to control Cain in his envy over Abel. Its use in Genesis 3:16 tells us that the desire to control a husband is part of the effects of the fall on women. Because of that, we can be sure that the “romantic or sexual desire” meaning of this term is not intended here, unless such desire was absent in the Garden of Eden!

Over and over again in this letter the Apostle Paul has given theological support for the commands he makes. This is a distinctive pattern in this letter. See Appendix B where the incidents of this pattern in Colossians are listed. Paul does the same thing here, in abbreviated form. **In the Lord**, given that we have been transformed into the new humanity whose head is **the Lord** Jesus, it **is fitting** that **wives submit to their husbands**.

It is fair to ask concerning the limits of this submission and the limits of the obedience required in the next few verses. Perhaps a military metaphor would be helpful here. If a soldier is told by a sergeant to advance, but at the same time is told by a general to retreat, he is to **submit** to the higher authority. Likewise if a wife is told by her husband to sin, and told by God not to sin, she is to **submit** to the higher authority. However, we should take care not to let this limit of submission expand. When the sergeant tells the soldier to do something unpleasant, he cannot try to get out of the task by saying that he is only submitting to the general, who certainly would never ask him to do anything unpleasant!⁴¹⁷

If at this point the reader remains unconvinced of the need for the grace-based empowerment described in Colossians, and he or she feels this is it enough to know and obey these rules, perhaps this and the next verse will convince the reader of the need for grace-based empowerment!

⁴¹⁶ The Hebrew word is תַּשׁוּקָה/*tesuqa*. If this Hebrew word’s meaning in the Hebrew of The Song of Solomon 7:11 (verse 10 in English) were applied to Gen. 3:16, that would mean that a woman’s romantic or sexual desire for her own husband was a result of the fall, and part of the curse. That in turn would mean that before sinning, Eve had no romantic or sexual desire for Adam. This is a very odd understanding of the passage. It is better to interpret the meaning of תַּשׁוּקָה/*tesuqa* (“desire”) in Gen. 3:16 based upon the word’s clear meaning in Gen. 4:7. Thus one of the effects of the fall is that women will desire to control their husbands.

⁴¹⁷ The same reasoning, and the same limits, would apply to children and slaves in the following verses.

3:19 **Husbands, love⁴¹⁸ your wives, and do not become bitter⁴¹⁹ against them.**

Although the ancient lists of household duties would include the need for **wives** to submit to their **husbands**, they did not include the need for **husbands** to **love** their **wives**. Even so, it would be an exaggeration to say that the call for **husbands** to **love** their **wives** with a love beyond sexual love was absolutely unique in the ancient world, because a few rabbinical writings did say that Leviticus 19:18 (“love your neighbor as yourself”) means that **husbands** should **love** their **wives**.⁴²⁰ Nevertheless, this was a rare note in a world in which a man’s wife was generally considered his personal property, and it remains a revolutionary concept in societies that have preserved that ancient attitude.

This list of household relationships does not include a command for **husbands** to lead their **wives**, even though passages like Ephesians 5:23 (“the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church...”) and 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 clearly indicate that they have that responsibility.

In the new humanity, the husband’s cry is not, “I have a right to a submissive wife!” but rather, “I have the right to love my wife and not be harsh towards her.” Likewise the wife’s cry is not, “I have a right to a loving husband!” but rather, “I have the right to submit to my husband.”

A marriage in which the wife submits to an unloving husband would be tragic. Likewise a marriage in which a husband loves an unsubmitive wife would also be tragic. In a marriage that reflects the reality of the new humanity, the wife gladly submits and the husband gladly loves.

Husbands are further commanded, **do not become bitter**. Paul felt that this was a real danger that is threatening enough that he should put this special exhortation against it here. It is one of very few commands directed specifically to **husbands**, and should be taken seriously!

⁴¹⁸ See the discussion on this verb in the endnote on 1:4.

⁴¹⁹ This verb, *πικραίνω/pikrainō*, in this form, would be translated literally as “to make yourself bitter,” as is the related noun, *πικρός/pikros*, in Jms. 3:11. We must remember that it is not at all certain that the metaphorical meaning of “bitter” in English is the same as the metaphorical meaning of “bitter” in ancient Greek. Moo (p. 303) says that this word family is used in ancient Greek texts “to refer to rulership that is domineering and harsh.” Barth (p. 439) says that Eph. 4:31 (“all *πικρία/pikria* and anger and wrath and shouting and slander”) is a list of manifestations of anger that grows from an inward quiet *πικρία/pikria* to increasingly louder forms of anger, and he quotes Aristotle who says that this is “the attitude that creates a lasting wrath, hard to reconcile, and sustaining anger for a long time.” This word seems to point to an inward **bitter** anger that produces a domineering and harsh leadership.

⁴²⁰ Moo, p. 302, refers to Strack and Billerbeck 3.610.

There is no point in a woman saying that it is unfair that she has to submit to her husband while all the husband has to do is love her. Is it unfair that a man has to love his wife, while all the wife has to do is submit to him? The real question in such a dispute concerning these complementary relationships is whether we should be deciding that anything the Word of God tells us to do is fair or unfair. If we believe this is the Word of God, then we should be growing in a thankfulness-empowered obedience. These are first steps towards the imitation of Christ!

3:20 Children, obey⁴²¹ your parents in all things, for this is pleasing in the Lord.

The Apostle does not deal with any complicated situations in which a child's **parents** might command him or her to do something bad. Here he simply tells **children** to **obey** their **parents in all things**. The only explanation or motivation he gives is the simple idea that **this is pleasing to the Lord**. His words to **children** are simple and straightforward.

Some commentators⁴²² debate whether the **children** here called to **obey** their **parents** include the idea of “adult children.” In the contexts of their parents, the Greek word⁴²³ here can refer to **children** of any age. However, in a very similar passage (Ephesians 6:4) fathers are given direction in how to raise up their **children**, suggesting that these are not adult **children**. Furthermore, given the idea that “a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife,” it is hard to see how a man that has grown up, left his father and mother and married, is then to obey the **parents** that he has left.

Such obedience **is pleasing in the Lord**. That expression may, as in verse 18, be an abbreviated way of saying that in the new humanity over which **the Lord** is head, such obedience **is pleasing**. Even though we are new creatures in a new humanity, we are still members of the same households.

⁴²¹ Unlike the word translated “submit” in verse 18, this verb, ὑπακούω/*hupakuō*, does not refer to the orderly arrangement of authority. Instead it simply means **obey**. Slaves (Col. 3:22), the Philippian congregation (Phil 2:12), unclean spirits (Mk. 1:27), and the winds and the sea (Mt. 8:27) all **obey**.

⁴²² For example, Barth, p. 439; Moo, p. 304; and O'Brien, p. 224.

⁴²³ τέκνον/*teknon*

3:21 **Fathers, do not provoke**⁴²⁴ **your children, lest they become discouraged.**⁴²⁵

The one special exhortation that Paul gives **fathers** is that they not **provoke** or embitter their **children**. They can become embittered when too much is demanded of them. This is something that **fathers** in particular need to be warned against. In Ephesians 6:4 we read the similar command, “Fathers, do not make your children angry,” which is followed by the positive command to “raise them in the training and instruction of the Lord.” In churches that have mistakenly assumed that transformation can happen through law, **fathers** are likely to discourage their **children** with far too many rules. Just as a husband’s authority is tempered by love, so a father’s authority is tempered by a gentle wisdom that understands his child’s heart.

This exhortation to **fathers** is very much in harmony with the theology of transformation presented in Colossians. A transformation-by-obeying-all-my-rules theology is very likely to cause **children** to become embittered and **discouraged**. Verses 20 and 21 are both vital in the development of the Christian home. Neither may be neglected.

⁴²⁴ This word (ἐρεθίζω/*erethizō*) is only used twice in the NT. In 2 Cor. 9:2 it tells of how most of the Macedonians were “stirred up” to generosity by the positive example of the Achaians’ generosity. However, it usually has a negative meaning. In the LXX of Dt. 21:20 it translates a word meaning “rebellious.” In the LXX of Dan. 11:10 and 25 it means “mobilize” as in “stir up the people to form an army.” In 1 Macc. 15:40 it means “to attack.” The sense here seems to be that **fathers** should not use their paternal authority so much that their **children** give up hope. The term παροργίζω/*parorgizō* is used in the parallel verse Eph. 6:4.

⁴²⁵ This word, ἀθυμέω/*athumeō*, means “to have no more θυμός/*thumos*.” This root word, θυμός/*thumos*, when it occurs by itself in the NT, means “anger,” as in Col. 3:8. However, outside the NT it can have rather neutral meanings that speak of an “intense expression of the inner self” (*BDAG*). **Fathers** are here warned not to extinguish such “passions” in their children.

3:22 Slaves, in all things obey⁴²⁶ those that are your masters⁴²⁷ according to the flesh, not for appearance' sake⁴²⁸ as pleasers of men, but in singleness⁴²⁹ of heart, fearing⁴³⁰ God;⁴³¹

In the old humanity the hearts of **slaves** are commonly filled with hate, fear, and a desire for revenge and freedom. The idea of working hard just to benefit their owners is probably rare there. The hearts of **masters** in the old humanity are commonly filled with assurance that they have a right to use their “property” for their own benefit; the idea that their “property” should be treated with justice and fairness was probably rare there. **Slaves** want freedom, and are sometimes willing to steal and kill to get it. There are whispers of uprisings. **Masters** want productivity and status, and are willing to go to slave traders to get what they want. There are whispers of means to crush uprisings, and means of getting more from **slaves**, too, because **masters** see **slaves** as property for their use and enjoyment.

However, in the new humanity into which Paul’s readers have been transferred, hearts are completely different. Paul declares specifically how members of the new humanity relate to one another. In the new humanity there are certainly no whispers of uprisings, or of crushing uprisings. There are no preparations for revolt, and there is no oppression to prevent even the thought of uprising. In fact, in 3:11 we read that in the new humanity “there is not Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, foreigner, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all, and in all.”

This is far from being an endorsement of slavery. Paul’s letter to Philemon, concerning the runaway slave Onesimus, presents the fullest exposition of how the new humanity deals with the evil of slavery. Never in that letter does Paul

⁴²⁶ This is the same verb, ὑπακούω/*hupakouō*, that was used in 3:20.

⁴²⁷ This word, κύριος/*kurios*, is very often used as a title of Christ Jesus. When it is used that way, it is translated “Lord.” Here it simply means “master.”

⁴²⁸ The expression ἐν ὀφθαλμοδουλείαις/*en ophthalmoudouleiais* literally means “in eye-slavery.” It is translated here **for appearance’ sake**.

⁴²⁹ This word, ἀπλότης/*haplotēs*, speaks of “personal integrity expressed in word or action” (*BDAG*). It might be translated “simplicity,” “frankness,” “sincerity,” or **singleness**.

⁴³⁰ Barth (p. 447) seems to want to take the fear out of **fearing God**, and supports that with references to the Binding of Isaac in Gen. 22 (which does not mention Abraham’s emotions at all); Dt. 6:13 (which is followed, two verses later, with the idea that the LORD is “a jealous God and His anger will burn against you, and He will destroy you from the face of the land”); and Dt. 10:12 (where we see that the LORD’s people are to both love and fear Him). It is common enough to read that the fear of the Lord should be understood as reverent awe, not fear, but one wonders whether the impetus to weaken the idea of fear is from the text or from contemporary culture.

⁴³¹ The ancient manuscripts disagree on whether this should read **God** (the very early p^{46} and the majority of manuscripts) or “Lord” (many other manuscripts).

command Philemon to free Onesimus – to do so would be to fall back into the power-based methods of the old humanity. To do so would be to unleash a new Law, vainly hoping that a Law of Freedom for Slaves would somehow, unlike every other Law, have some transformational power. This does not mean that slavery is acceptable in the new humanity. The reader should study Paul’s letter to Philemon and observe just how Paul strives to gain freedom for his brother, Onesimus. Transformed hearts are much more important than transformed legal structures,⁴³² and when hearts are transformed, then legal structures which are transformed and long-lasting can follow.

As in the exhortation to children, we see the unqualified **in all things**.⁴³³ Paul simply does not go into the ethics discussion about whether **slaves** should **obey** their **masters** when they are told to do something wrong. He probably has the much more practical idea that **slaves** should **obey** their **masters** in unpleasant as well as pleasant duties, rather than ethical as well as unethical duties.⁴³⁴

Paul does point out the limited sphere in which their **masters** have authority over them. They are **masters according to the flesh**.⁴³⁵ Only in this earthly sphere are there **masters**, because ultimately we all have only one Master. Though **masters** and Roman law might tell them something different, Paul tells the **slaves** of the congregation that they are fully human, and more than that, they are full members of the new humanity.

All of Ephesians 6:5-8 is clearly addressed to **slaves**. Since the same themes (obedience, sincerity of heart, as if serving the Lord, and impartial repayment from the Lord) are given in Colossians 3:22-25, this suggests that both passages are addressed specifically to **slaves**. Of all the members of the household that Colossians 3:18-4:1 addresses, this “lowest” class of society gets the longest and most encouraging exhortation. In 1 Peter 2:18-25 Peter addresses similar issues.

Even though the sphere of their obedience is limited, there is no limit as to the quality of the service urged from them. Paul exhorts them to serve their **masters not for appearance’ sake as pleasers of men, but in singleness of heart**. How easy it is, we may think, to just work hard enough to look good in front of

⁴³² This same realization is very evident in the gospels. In the midst of a Jewish society longing for the transformation of their legal structure (from being subjugated under Rome to being a free and independent nation), the Lord rejects the people’s political ambitions, and calls them to personal faith.

⁴³³ The expression *κατὰ πάντα/kata panta* is also used in vs. 20.

⁴³⁴ Hendriksen, p. 173, suggests this and refers to Acts 5:29, with its apostolic declaration, “We must obey God rather than men!”

⁴³⁵ In using this word, **flesh** (*σάρξ/sarx*), Paul is not saying that slaveholders were fleshly, in the sense of sinful. He is using this word in a neutral and physical sense, much like it is used in Jn. 1:14, “The Word became flesh....”

our employers, customers, or **masters**. As common as that may be, it is deceit, and it is forbidden here. When slavery was so common, there were probably many Christian **slaves** that thought, “my enslavement here is an abominable contradiction to the law of the God I serve, therefore I am justified in doing the very least I can get away with. My master is the one who is wrong in this relationship, I am not the one who is wrong.” However, here in Colossians there is not a trace of that sort of thinking. In fact, submission, even submission **in singleness of heart**, is commanded. If this is true under the bonds of slavery, these things certainly also apply when we are in mutually agreed upon employment.

At this point the only explanation or motivation Paul gives for such wholehearted submission and service is that they should be **fearing God**, but the next three verses explain that connection.

3:23 And⁴³⁶ whatever you might do, work at it wholeheartedly,⁴³⁷ as for the Lord, and not for men,

The first part of the explanation of fearing God is that a slave’s work is to be done **as for the Lord** Himself.

This is a hard verse, because Paul is saying they should **work** with all their strength for the family that is keeping them from their freedom. He is saying that freedom is not the highest value, and that they should accept their situation as being from **the Lord**. This is in accord with the previous verse, but it is still not an explanation of why they should not at least try to work with minimal effort, if not even rob and run away from the family that has been exploiting their captivity. Whether they were born into slavery, or born free but somehow captured and sold into slavery, makes no difference. These are hard words for the slave, and perhaps hard for us to accept in the 21st century. As we readers sense a clash in the values behind what Paul is saying and the values we grew up with we must decide whether Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, knew more about what was good for slaves than we know. The cynic can say that unenlightened Paul was just acting to preserve the status quo, and the unthinking can ignore the passage. However, we ought to see if the Word of God gives any further help in understanding and believing these words, beyond the simple idea that any form of deceit is wrong, including working hard only when the master is watching.

⁴³⁶ The majority of the Greek manuscripts have the words καὶ παν ὃ τι/*kai pan ho ti*, but the very oldest manuscripts have only ὃ/*ho*. In English translation the only difference is that the majority reading begins with the word **and**.

⁴³⁷ The expression ἐκ ψυχῆς/*ek psuchēs* is translated **wholeheartedly**. It literally means “from soul.”

3:24 **knowing that from the Lord you will receive⁴³⁸ the reward of an inheritance,⁴³⁹ for⁴⁴⁰ you serve⁴⁴¹ the Lord Christ⁴⁴² as slaves.**

The second part of the explanation of fearing God is positive, **serve** in this life well and gain a **reward** from **the Lord Christ**. Certainly the **you will receive** of this verse is conditioned upon obedience to the previous sentence's "whatever you might do, work at it wholeheartedly, as for the Lord." If that condition is not met, then verse 25 comes in to play,⁴⁴³ but the reward mentioned here certainly does not concern eternal salvation. It is a result of the work of obedience, so it concerns one's status in the coming Kingdom, not one's entrance into it.

Far from being a demeaning burden upon **slaves**, this exhortation suddenly turns into an expression of the highest encouragement. The slave – who by Roman law cannot inherit anything – suddenly is told that he has a **reward of an inheritance** in his future, and that from the hands of **the Lord**. How can this be so? It will be so, because the slave's service is for **the Lord Christ**, and not earthly lord. Of course this makes a great deal of sense – did not the Apostle just tell us that they should fear God, and that they should "work wholeheartedly, as for the Lord, and not for men"? If they are working for **the Lord**, it is **the Lord** that should recompense them. Now it is up to the slave, and to us, to decide if these are empty words, or words that **the Lord Christ** will stand behind as He rewards His faithful servants.

The fact that the Word promises special rewards to faithful believers is often overlooked, but surely passages like Matthew 5:1-12; Luke 19:12-27, 1 Corinthians

⁴³⁸ The very early p^{46} and the majority of other Greek manuscripts have the simple verb $\lambda\alpha\mu\beta\acute{\alpha}\nu\omega$ /*lambanō*, but the other early manuscripts have the more elaborate verb, $\acute{\alpha}\pi\omicron\lambda\alpha\mu\beta\acute{\alpha}\nu\omega$ /*apolambanō*. However, either verb can be translated **receive**.

⁴³⁹ The literal translation would be "the reward of the inheritance." Grammarians call this a genitive of apposition. In other words, it could be translated "you will receive a reward, an inheritance."

⁴⁴⁰ The very earliest manuscripts exclude the word **for**, but the majority include it. If it is original, then the meaning is certainly **for you serve the Lord Christ as slaves**; if it is not original then the meaning might be **you serve the Lord Christ as slaves** or it might be **serve the Lord Christ as slaves**. This is because the verb, $\delta\omicron\upsilon\lambda\epsilon\acute{\upsilon}\tau\epsilon$ /*douleuete*, might be indicative or it might be imperative.

⁴⁴¹ This word ($\delta\omicron\upsilon\lambda\epsilon\acute{\upsilon}\omega$ /*douleuō*) is used 25 times in the NT, but only here in Colossians. It means "to be owned by another as a slave" or "to work as a slave." The related noun, $\delta\omicron\upsilon\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ /*doulos*, is the common word meaning "slave." It could be translated literally as "you slave," but is here translated **you serve... as slaves**.

⁴⁴² The expression **the Lord Christ** occurs in the NT only here and in Rom. 16:18. Perhaps this rare expression is used here to emphasize that even though a slave may have a human lord, he needs to keep seeking the things above, where **Christ** is.

⁴⁴³ Barth (p. 448) says "since the discussion simultaneously concerns 'inheritance,' it is clear that we are not dealing with a reward that the slaves still need to earn. This reward has already been 'earned' by the Messiah...." However, his logic is faulty. The passage clearly says that **slaves** need to **serve** their earthly masters as if they were serving **the Lord**, and gives the positive and negative consequences for their choices.

3:11-15; 9:24-27, 2 Corinthians 5:9-11, 1 Peter 5:2-4, and 1 John 2:28 say quite clearly that the situation of believers after the return of the Lord will vary radically, based upon how diligent and careful they are in this era. The idea that some people will be granted a higher status in the Kingdom that Christ will establish might contradict a culture that emphasizes political equality, so it is hard for some people to see in Scripture. Perhaps they think this idea contradicts the truth that all our sins are forgiven by the death of Christ.

Nevertheless, right here in Colossians we are told that **slaves** that **serve** their earthly masters wholeheartedly, as if the **Lord Christ** Himself were their master, will receive a **reward**. The clear implication is that lazy or deceptive slaves will not receive any such **reward**. This implication is supported by the following verse, because both cruel masters and deceptive **slaves** are unrighteous.

In passages that refer to faithful believers' eternal rewards, which are to be awarded at the "bema"⁴⁴⁴ judgment seat of Christ at the end of the age, the idea of an **inheritance** is used fairly often. Note Matthew 5:5; 19:29; Romans 8:17; and Hebrews 6:12.

3:25 **But**⁴⁴⁵ **the one doing evil will be paid back for the evil he has done, and there is no favoritism.**⁴⁴⁶

The third part of the explanation of fearing God is negative.

At first the slaves in Colossae may have taken this verse as a great assurance that any slave's cruel master **will be paid back** for his cruelty. However, perhaps after a while those slaves might begin to understand it as a warning that they too are threatened with this sort of retribution, for they too have done an **evil** thing or two. At first they must have delighted in the fact that the Lord is not going to show **favoritism** to human masters, even though everyone in their experience does. But then they might start to realize that slaves are not shown **favoritism** either. At that point they might have more profound insight into what Paul meant when he wrote about "fearing God" in verse 22. If they knew the fifth chapter of the Book of Joshua, they might remember how Joshua once asked,

⁴⁴⁴ This term, βῆμα/*bēma*, is used to distinguish this judgment, which takes place prior to the thousand year reign of Christ on earth, from the Great White Throne Judgment, which takes place at the end of that thousand year reign. At the "bema seat" faithful believers are given rewards (Rom. 14:10 and 2 Cor. 5:10), but at the Great White Throne unbelievers are sent to their eternal punishment (Rev. 20:11-15).

⁴⁴⁵ The oldest manuscripts read "for" here, but the majority read **but**.

⁴⁴⁶ This word, προσωποληψία/*prosōpolēpsia*, literally means "receiving face," and is found in Rom. 2:11; Eph. 6:9, Jms. 2:1 and here in the NT. It was taken into Greek from a Hebrew idiom, as in Lev. 19:15; Dt. 10:17; 28:50; Job 32:21; 34:19; Ps. 82:2; Prov. 18:5; and Mal. 2:9, which can mean "to show partiality or favoritism."

“Are you for us or for our adversaries?” and was told, “No, for I am commander of the army of the LORD. Now I have come.”

They – and we – might ask, “Where then is the forgiveness of sins that we gained when Christ became our Savior?” That question might also arise reading Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 5:10, “For we must all appear before the ‘bema’ seat of Christ, that each one may be paid back for the things done in the body, whether good or bad.” In that verse Paul’s use of “we” and “all” includes all believers. So does the expression **there is no favoritism** here in Colossians 3:25. We are forgiven our sins, but we face a judgment seat where we will receive our due! We are forgiven of our sins, but **the one doing evil will be paid back for the evil he has done**. The solution to this apparent contradiction lies in the New Testament doctrine of rewards. As those that have believed in Christ as our Savior, the guilt of our sins is removed, but that does not mean that the Kingdom we will all enter is like a democracy in which all will be given equal status. Some will sit on thrones, some will wear crowns, some will rule over five or even ten cities, and others will just be glad they got into the Kingdom “as if by fire” (1 Corinthians 3:15).

4:1 **Masters**,⁴⁴⁷ **provide your slaves with what is just**⁴⁴⁸ **and fair**,⁴⁴⁹ **knowing that you also have a Master**⁴⁵⁰ **in the heavens**.⁴⁵¹

These **masters** may think of themselves as powerful people, but they need to keep in mind that they **have a Master** enthroned **in heaven**, so in effect they too are **slaves**. They should treat their **slaves** as their heavenly **Master** treats His **slaves**.⁴⁵²

Paul does not call upon **masters** to be charitable towards their **slaves**. He would rather they do what is **just and fair**, assuming they understand how things work in the new humanity into which their **Master** has transferred them.

Again, let the reader decide for himself whether he wants to accuse Paul of error because he does not call for Christian **masters** to free their **slaves**. A careful reading of Paul's letter to Philemon suggests that he did not agree with slavery, but wanted righteous acts like freeing **slaves** to be done out of gratitude rather than by apostolic compulsion or any other manifestation of Law.

In Colossians 3:11 Paul proclaimed that in the new humanity "there is not Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, foreigner, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all, and in all." In these last five verses he has explained how in our new life that is true, and yet in the world we live in, some indeed are **slaves** and some are free. Living in the world but not of the world, these Kingdom values need to pervade our lives, starting where it is most important, and yet most difficult: in our homes.

It should be noted that slavery, though it is illegal in almost every country, is certainly not eradicated in this world. Paul was writing in a context where slavery was legal. In today's context of illegal slavery, slaves and other victims of human trafficking deserve all assistance to help them gain their freedom, just like any other kidnapped persons. Those that traffic in human beings should be punished by the laws of the land.

However, for most of us there are principles here that easily apply in an employee/employer relationship, and in fact in all relationships where one person

⁴⁴⁷ This is the term κύριου/*kurioi*. It might also be translated "lords."

⁴⁴⁸ This word, δίκαιος/*dikaios*, can also be translated "right."

⁴⁴⁹ This word, ἰσότης/*isotēs*, has the idea of "equality."

⁴⁵⁰ The word κύριος/*kurios* is used again here. It might also be translated "Lord."

⁴⁵¹ The oldest Greek manuscripts read "in heaven," but the majority of them read "in heavens."

⁴⁵² Barth (p. 450) refers to Mt. 18:21-35 and 1 Cor. 7:22.

has authority over another, whether the context is work, home, church, classroom, or mission field. It is so easy for us to have “blind spots” in our relationships with those nearest to us. A father that would not dream of being harsh in relationships with church members has unattainable standards for his own child. A Christian mother that is obedient towards her husband thoughtlessly drives her domestic help with unfair demands throughout the day and long into the night. Paul calls upon all of us to carefully examine each of our relationships to see if they reflect life in the new humanity.

4:2-6 *This is how to live it out before outsiders.*

This passage, at the end of the letter, suggests that the Colossians were called to ministry just as Paul was called to ministry, as described in 1:24–2:5.

If the Colossians accept the heart of Paul’s message, they will have no problem obeying these few and simple directions – in fact, filled with such understanding about who Christ is and what He has done for them, their lives will be motivated by a powerful thankfulness for the grace of God.

Colossians 4:2-6 seems on the one hand to be the last of the previous exhortations, but on the other hand it seems to be the beginning of the conclusion of the letter, in which Paul gives his and others’ personal greetings.

4:2 *Persist*⁴⁵³ in prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving,⁴⁵⁴

Here Paul calls upon the congregation to pray. He is only asking them to do what he (1:3 and 1:9-12) and Epaphras (4:12) have already been doing for them. As is clear from Acts 6:3-4, this persistence in prayer was a characteristic of the apostles from the beginning of the church.

It is possible to **persist in prayer** without being **alert**, and it is possible to be **alert in prayer** but not **persist** in it. Paul urges, however, that we **persist and**

⁴⁵³ The usage of this word, προσκαρτερέω/*proskartereō*, indicates that it can mean “to stay alongside someone” as in Acts 8:13 and 10:7, “to do something full-time” as in Acts 6:4 and Rom. 13:6, and to **persist** in doing something as in Acts 1:14; 2:42, 46; Rom. 12:12; and here in Col. 4:2.

⁴⁵⁴ This word, εὐχαριστία/*eucharistia*, is also used in 2:7. See the endnote there.

be alert⁴⁵⁵ in our prayers. Our minds should not wander as we pray, and we should keep at it! **Prayer** is so mysterious, but here it is clear that rote or merely occasional **prayer** is inappropriate.

As has been emphasized throughout this letter, the healthy Christian life is certainly, not optionally, empowered by gratitude founded upon understanding of and appreciation for who Christ is and what He has done for us. If that is so, then our prayers will be full of thankfulness and **thanksgiving**.

4:3 praying⁴⁵⁶ **at the same time also for us, that God would open up for us a door**⁴⁵⁷ **for the Word, to speak the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in chains,**⁴⁵⁸

In Philippians 1:12-14 we read about how well the gospel was succeeding in Rome, even among the whole imperial guard. Paul's prayer request here suggests that Colossians was written before the ministry in Rome was so successful. It may even have been the Colossians' prayers that opened up that **door for the Word** among the whole imperial guard in Rome! Paul, under house arrest in Rome, does not ask here that the **door** to the outside world be opened for him; he is asking **that God would open up for us a door for the Word, to speak the mystery of Christ**. He would rather have **a door for the Word** be opened than a **door** for himself. This is the very same attitude he expressed in more detail in Philippians 1:12-26.

⁴⁵⁵ Commentators have various opinions about this word, γρηγορέω/*grēgoreō*, which is sometimes translated "to be alert" and sometimes "to be watchful." The difference between those two English words is very slight, but **alert** emphasizes a state of mind, while "watchful" emphasizes careful observation of the surroundings because of some danger or event. So, some ask what that danger or event might be. Chrysostom (in *Homilies on Colossians* 10, according to Sweeney, p. 236) wrote that we need to be watchful against the devil who will press heavily so that we become listless in prayer. O'Brien (p. 238) thinks it is the Second Coming, especially because this word is often but not always associated with the Second Coming. Lightfoot's explanation seems best: "long continuance in prayer is apt to produce listlessness. Hence the additional charge that the heart must be awake, if the prayer is to have any value" (Lightfoot, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 231 according to Sweeney, p. 236).

⁴⁵⁶ This verb (προσευχόμενοι/*proseuchomenoi*) is a participle, so it is translated **praying**. Nevertheless, it picks up imperatival force from the preceding imperative, "persist." Because of this, some translations put it as an imperative: "pray at the same time for us."

⁴⁵⁷ The metaphor of a **door** meaning "an opportunity" is also found in Acts 14:27; 1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12; and Rev. 3:8. In all these passages the **open door** is an opportunity for **the Word** to be preached.

⁴⁵⁸ Paul here is most likely referring to being under house arrest in Rome. He uses this same root word (δέω/*deō*) about his own condition twice in Ephesians, four times in Philippians, twice in Colossians (see 4:18), four times in the brief letter to Philemon, and twice in 2 Timothy. He does not use this word about himself in his other letters, most likely because those other letters were not written while he was **in chains**. See the Introduction for more on this.

The mystery of Christ needs to be spoken, not because it is a bit hard for people to figure out on their own, but because as a **mystery**⁴⁵⁹ it cannot be known except by revelation.

In this letter he only mentions his imprisonment here, in 4:10, and 4:18. Although he is clearly not ashamed of being imprisoned for the gospel, his own situation is not that relevant to his message, so he does not discuss it like he does in Philippians 1:7, 12-26, 30; 2:23-24; and 4:10-14. In those passages it is very relevant, because in his letter to Philippi he is celebrating and encouraging the gospel partnership he and the Philippian congregation have together. The Christian preacher that wonders how much of his own story should be in his own sermons might want to take his cue from Paul here, and only tell his own story when it actually contributes to the message that must be conveyed. May we be as interested in the **mystery of Christ** as Paul was, and may we be as uninterested in ourselves as Paul was!

At the beginning of this verse Paul's prayer request is **for us**, but by the end of the verse, and in the next verse, he has shifted from **us** to **I**. He may have been thinking of himself all along, or he was asking for prayer for himself and his coworkers, and then specifically for himself as their leader.

4:4 **so that I might make it known as I ought to tell it.**⁴⁶⁰

Paul not only asks them to pray that he would have opportunity to speak the gospel, but that he would speak it well. Hendriksen suggests that this probably included speaking it clearly, boldly, graciously, and wisely.⁴⁶¹

Throughout this letter, Paul has been very clear that his love and service to the Lord is based upon a deep and compelling understanding of God's grace. So here, this obligation to make the mystery of Christ known was not at all based on a regulation, a demand, or a fear of rejection. He was compelled by the love of God, as he makes so clear in passages like 2 Corinthians 5:14, where he writes, "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died."

⁴⁵⁹ See the discussions of this word under 1:26-27.

⁴⁶⁰ The word **it** is not present in the original, but was added to make an acceptable English sentence.

⁴⁶¹ Pp. 181-182. Moo (p. 326) and O'Brien (p. 240) note that the wording of the original Greek is ambiguous: Paul might be saying it is necessary for him to preach the gospel, or it is necessary for him to preach it in a certain way.

4:5 **Walk**⁴⁶² **in wisdom before those outside**,⁴⁶³ **redeeming**⁴⁶⁴ **the time**.⁴⁶⁵

After he asks for prayer, Paul gives two brief exhortations, both about the believers' relationships with those **outside** the congregation. The first concerns general behavior: they are to **walk in wisdom before** outsiders. The concept of **wisdom**⁴⁶⁶ has a rich heritage in the Old Testament, where it grew from the core idea of physical skill, and it took on the idea of "skill in living." Here in Colossians, **wisdom** is also mentioned in Paul's prayer (1:9), his purpose (1:28), and another exhortation (3:16). Its source is in Christ (2:3), and it is falsely claimed by some legalistic teachers (2:23).

Part of walking **in wisdom** is **redeeming the time**. It is easy to just let **time** pass by, but Paul exhorts the congregation to "redeem" it instead. Of course **time** cannot be literally purchased, but this metaphor is a colorful way of saying that we should not let hours and days and years go by without using them in effective ministry. In Ephesians 5:16 Paul makes the same exhortation, adding the comment, "because the days are evil." Rather than foolishly wasting **time**, we are to take advantage of opportunities for the Kingdom. In the expression **redeeming the time** there may even be a hint of the nearness of the end of the age.

This verse does seem to be related to Moses' prayer in Psalm 90:12, "Teach us to number our days rightly, that we would acquire a heart of wisdom."

Believers should understand that the Apostle Paul would reject as "another gospel" the idea that the discipline of **redeeming the time** could be motivated by a desire to gain salvation, or even to keep our salvation. However, too often in Christian circles today such discipline is motivated by a desire to grow spiritually. Discipline driven by a desire to become more spiritual must always fail. It must

⁴⁶² See the endnote concerning 1:10 about the word **walk**.

⁴⁶³ In 1 Cor. 5:12, 13; 1 Thes. 4:12; and 1 Tim. 3:7 Paul uses the same or very similar terms to refer to non-believers as **those outside**.

⁴⁶⁴ The word here is ἐξαγοράζω/*eksagorazō*, which literally means "to buy out." The root word, ἀγορά/*agora*, means "market," but the verb ἀγοράζω/*agorazō* is the normal word for "buy" in any setting, not necessarily in a market. Bible commentators have different views about what the ἐξ/*eks* (the lexical form is ἐκ/*ek*) does to this verb. It might have its core meaning of "out," or an intensifying effect, as in "buy it up" (O'Brien, p. 241). It is possible it is simply a stylistic addition that does not change the meaning at all (Barth, p. 456). In any case, we should remember that the literal meaning of a preposition used in a figure of speech is only a technical concern. The meaning seems to be that rather than being lazy, we should use our **time** well.

⁴⁶⁵ Often καιρός/*kairos* refers to a specific point in **time**, while χρόνος/*chronos* refers to the passage of **time**. However, comparing Gal. 4.4 (which uses χρόνος/*chronos*) with the very similar Eph. 1:10 (which uses καιρός/*kairos*), it is obvious these two terms have some overlap in meaning (Barth, p. 455).

⁴⁶⁶ The Greek word is σοφία/*sophia*, and the Hebrew word is חָכְמָה/*hokma*.

always fail because we grow spiritually when our hearts draw near to God in worship filled with thankfulness and instructed by His Word. If Christian discipline is not empowered by gratitude, the rules we set up for ourselves (or that others set up for us) will certainly degenerate into the powerless rules and regulations discussed in Colossians 2:20-23, “Do not eat! And do not taste! And do not touch!”

Over and over again in this letter Paul has made it clear that we are loved, we have God’s favor, because of what our wonderful Lord has accomplished for us. We are to enjoy that favor. Discipline in prayer, behavior, and speech is a part of that enjoyment. Such discipline is to flow from our gratitude. Let these words not be taken to mean that discipline is bad. It is good – here at the end of this letter the congregation is exhorted to discipline. But too often Christians have not bothered with “all that theology,” and gone straight to the “action point,” which they take as the command that they should be busy **redeeming the time**. As they bypass the wondrous truths about who Christ is and what He has done for us, they prevent deep gratitude from forming in peoples’ hearts, and spiritual danger awaits.

Up to this point Paul has asked for prayer concerning *his* evangelistic and discipleship ministry, but here there is a shift. This command concerns the congregation’s relationship towards **those outside**. Paul has a responsibility and ministry towards **those outside**, and towards the congregations. The Colossian believers have responsibilities towards their brothers in Christ, *and also* towards **those outside**.

If this and the next verse are commands to get involved in evangelism and church planting, they are very mildly worded. Even so, words like these, read by people that the Lord is calling into evangelism and church planting, would be deeply motivating, and would help them on their way into such ministry. These same words, read by people that the Lord was calling to have a supportive role for such ministries, would be helpful to them without creating the impression that going into full-time church work is the real work that brings the worker into a spiritual relationship with God!

4:6 Let your conversation always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you must give an answer to each person.

As Moo⁴⁶⁷ points out, the ambiguity of the words here translated **conversation**⁴⁶⁸ and **gracious**⁴⁶⁹ allows quite a bit of room for the translation, so that on the one hand the NASB reads “Let your speech always be with grace,” and on the other hand the NJB reads “Always talk pleasantly.” Moo⁴⁷⁰ tells us that because several of these words (here translated **conversation**, **gracious**, and **salt**) are sometimes found together in similar passages outside the Bible referring to all sorts of **conversation**, Paul probably means that all our speech, whether gospel witness or general **conversation**, should be **gracious** and attractive. When we say wise words but speak them harshly or ungraciously, our wisdom will probably not be well received. The gospel message has the same saving power with or without a **graceful** tone, but without that **graceful** tone it is much less likely to be accepted.⁴⁷¹

Our speech should **always be gracious**, wherever we are, and to whomever we speak, whether that person is of higher or lower status than us.⁴⁷²

Part of our “redeeming the time” is in participating with grace and wisdom in **conversation**. Given that each of the other verses in this section, 4:2-6, concern our interaction with “those outside” and also that 4:3-4 are about Paul preaching the gospel, it seems most likely that the **conversation** here is also with people outside the congregation. Indeed, the phrase **so that you will know how you must give an answer** suggests a **conversation** with an unbeliever in which questions arise that can and should be answered with gospel truths, but Paul is rather indirect in his wording here.⁴⁷³

⁴⁶⁷ Pp. 329-330.

⁴⁶⁸ Of course we think of this word, *λόγος/logos*, as a spiritual and Christian term, but when Paul wrote this letter it was a normal Greek word with a wide variety of meanings which included “word,” “speech,” “message,” “account,” and “matter” or “issue.” So we cannot simply reason that because *λόγος/logos* is a spiritual word, therefore the spiritual idea of “gospel” must be what Paul is writing about here.

⁴⁶⁹ The Greek here is *ἐν χάριτι/en chariti*. That word *χάρις/charis* is in Rom. 6:17; 1 Cor. 10:30; Col. 3:16; 1 Tim. 1:12; and 2 Tim. 1:3 with the meaning “thankfulness,” but very often it refers to the grace of God, as for instance in 2 Thes. 2:16; Col. 1:6; and 4:18. Besides meaning “unearned favor” as above, it can also refer to “earned favor,” as in Lk. 2:52 and 6:32-34. It can also have the meaning “winsomeness” or “attractiveness,” as in Lk. 4:22 and in several passages outside the NT (*BDAG*). That is the meaning here, where this expression is translated **gracious**. Barth (p. 457) basically agrees, suggesting the translation “friendliness.” See the comments and endnote concerning this expression under Col. 3:16.

⁴⁷⁰ P. 330. Moo notes that the majority of commentators (including Lightfoot, Abbott, O’Brien, Lohse, and Wolter) agree with him.

⁴⁷¹ There are references in the writings of the rabbis showing that for them **salt** is associated with wisdom (Moo, p. 331 and Barth, p. 457), but Paul was not writing to a rabbinic community in Colossae!

⁴⁷² Hendriksen, p. 183.

⁴⁷³ If Moo’s comment (p. 318) that vv. 5-6 are “exhortations regarding the Colossians’ evangelistic ministry” is correct, Paul is very subtle in these exhortations.

Then⁴⁷⁴ as now a very common use of **salt** was of course to enhance taste.⁴⁷⁵ A meal without **salt** would have nearly the same nutritional benefit as a meal **seasoned with salt**, but it would not be as enjoyable. Our speech should not be “empty or insipid, but thought-provoking and worth-while.”⁴⁷⁶

The expression **so that you will know** is literally “to know,”⁴⁷⁷ If we develop the ability to speak gracefully, we **will know how to give an answer**.

1 Peter 3:15 has a very similar statement, “always be prepared to give a defense to all that ask you the reason for the hope in you, with gentleness and fear.”

Many scholars⁴⁷⁸ note an emphasis on the *individuality* of the person to whom **an answer** is given. Different people need different approaches as we would talk with them about these things, as illustrated by the very different conversations the Lord had with Nicodemus and the woman at the well in John 3-4.

4:7-18 Conclusion

At this point Paul has finished the main body of the letter, but wants to leave his readers with some introductions, greetings, personal instructions, and a blessing.

4:7-9 Introductions for the letter bearers.

The personal comments to the congregation that Paul gives to close the letter start with these introductions.

4:7 Tychicus⁴⁷⁹ will let you know all about my situation. He is a beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow slave in the Lord.

One of the major accomplishments of the Roman Empire was the construction of a high quality road system, parts of which have endured even until now. Those

⁴⁷⁴ Plutarch (quoted by Moo on p. 331) says in *Moralia* 684E-685C that **salt** is the “crowning season” and that it imparts flavor to food.

⁴⁷⁵ **Salt** was also used to prevent food from rotting. If that idea is applied metaphorically here, there could be a secondary idea that our **conversation** should prevent inappropriate (“rotten”) activity around us, but that idea is a bit dubious.

⁴⁷⁶ Hendriksen, p. 184.

⁴⁷⁷ In other words, the infinitive “to know” is an infinitive of result.

⁴⁷⁸ Hendriksen (p. 184) and O’Brien (p. 243), who notes that Lightfoot, Abbott, and von Soden also pointed this out!

⁴⁷⁹ **Tychicus**, a member of Paul’s team, is mentioned briefly in Acts 20:4; Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7; 2 Tim. 4:12; and Tit. 3:12. In Acts 20:4 we learn that he was from the Roman province of Asia. He is commended twice, and Paul trusted him to send him on at least two assignments.

roads made land and sea travel much safer. Nevertheless it was still necessary to hand carry letters.⁴⁸⁰ As was discussed in the Introduction, the many similarities between Colossians and Ephesians strongly suggest that these letters were written at about the same time. The close similarity between Colossians 4:7 and Ephesians 6:21 indicates that **Tychicus** was asked to carry Paul's letters to Colossae and Ephesus.⁴⁸¹ Paul also trusted him to report on his **situation** under house arrest there in Rome.

The words here used to describe **Tychicus** were almost the same, though in different order, as the words used to describe Epaphras, who brought the gospel to them. Perhaps by using the same vocabulary Paul is suggesting that they should give **Tychicus** the same respect they gave to Epaphras.

4:8 I am sending him⁴⁸² to you for this very purpose, so that I might know your situation,⁴⁸³ and so that he might encourage your hearts.

A man less overwhelmed with the grace of God might say to himself, "I am sure you all are fine there in Colossae, but as you might have heard I have my own problems here." However, Paul is eager to hear more about their **situation** than what Epaphras has been able to tell him, so he has instructed faithful Tychicus to deliver the letters, **encourage** their **hearts**, observe what he can, and return to Rome to update Paul on the **situation** in Colossae.

4:9 He is⁴⁸⁴ with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother who is one of you.⁴⁸⁵ They will tell you all about the situation here.

Here **Onesimus** is mentioned only in passing, but with care. If Paul and **Tychicus** had considered **Onesimus** a mere slave he would not have been worth mentioning, but that is not the case. **Onesimus** is not to be considered a slave

⁴⁸⁰ It is true that the Roman government established and maintained a postal system that used those roads, but that postal system was exclusively for official business.

⁴⁸¹ The two cities were 100 miles (160 kilometers) apart, although the distance by road was of course somewhat farther. The journey from Ephesus to Colossae probably went over to the Meander River, then eastward up the Meander's long valley, and then a little further southward up the valley of the Lycus River.

⁴⁸² This is literally, "whom I sent," but it has been translated **I am sending him** to make a better English sentence.

⁴⁸³ The majority of ancient Greek manuscripts, and the oldest extant manuscript (p⁴⁶, written about AD 200) read **so that I might know your situation**, but the other old manuscripts (the earliest of which was fourth century) read, "so that you might know our situation," except **Ⲙ** which has the strange phrase "so that you might know your situation"! Eph. 6:22 reads "so that you might know our situation." Those first two readings (but not the **Ⲙ** reading) make good sense and have ancient support, but it is best to just take the weight of the majority of manuscripts, which in this case is supplemented by the earliest known manuscript.

⁴⁸⁴ The words **he is** have been added in English to make a better English sentence.

⁴⁸⁵ The expression **who is one of you** is literally "who is out of you." Almost the same expression is used of Epaphras in 4:12.

now but rather a **faithful and beloved brother**, and yes, this is the **Onesimus** that ran away from Philemon. Of course Paul also wrote a whole letter to Philemon (Onesimus's legal owner), Apphia, Archippus, and the church that met in his house.⁴⁸⁶ But here it is enough to say that **Onesimus** is coming along too.

4:10-18 *Paul closes with specific greetings.*

With greetings from six named people, and greetings to Nympha, these are the second most extensive greetings of all the letters of Paul, Romans having the longest list with greetings to 26 named people and greetings from 8 named people. The next longest list is in Philemon, with greetings from five named individuals.⁴⁸⁷

4:10 **Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner,⁴⁸⁸ greets you, as does Mark the cousin of Barnabas (you have received instruction about him, if he comes to you receive him),**

Having introduced the men that were carrying his letter, Paul now sends greetings from those there with him in Rome, and his own greetings. The first greetings are from **Aristarchus**,⁴⁸⁹ who is Paul's **fellow prisoner**. Paul also calls Epaphras his **fellow prisoner** in Philemon 23, but he does not mention that here in Colossians. It is no shame – or a shame that Paul willingly bears – to be a **prisoner**, so he does not hesitate to say that **Aristarchus** is also a **prisoner**.

In Acts 13 **Mark** quit the team when they were in Pamphylia and went back to Jerusalem. In Acts 15 Paul refused to have him on the team they were forming, but **Barnabas** insisted. Since they could not agree, **Barnabas** took his relative **Mark** and they went together to Cyprus. By the time Paul wrote Colossians under house arrest in Rome, they seem to have reconciled, and Paul could commend **Mark** with the words **if he comes to you receive him**. It appears that the other **instruction** was also a commendation, which Paul here endorses. Paul's attitude seems even warmer towards **Mark** in 2 Timothy 4:11 where he writes, "Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is

⁴⁸⁶ Paul's letter to Philemon is a beautiful example of apostolic persuasion. In it Paul never actually tells Philemon to free **Onesimus**, but Philemon certainly came to understand what the implications of the gospel were in that case. Though it is more subtle, the power of grace is greater than the power of command. This is a lesson that every Christian leader needs to understand and apply!

⁴⁸⁷ 2 Timothy has greetings from four individuals, and 1 Corinthians only has greetings from Aquila and Priscilla. There are greetings without names in 2 Corinthians, Philippians, and 1 Thessalonians.

⁴⁸⁸ This term, *συναϊχμάλωτος/sunaichmalōtos*, refers to a **prisoner** of war, so some suggest that this is a metaphor, that **Aristarchus** was like all disciples, a "fellow prisoner of Christ." However, given the fact that Paul was literally under house arrest, it does seem that **Aristarchus** was, with Paul, under house arrest. The use of such military metaphors is found in Eph. 6:10-17; Phil. 2:25; 1 Thes. 5:8; and Philem. 2.

⁴⁸⁹ **Aristarchus** was from Thessalonica. He was on Paul's team as early as the commotion in Acts 19.

helpful to me in my ministry.” Apparently this same **Mark** wrote the Gospel of Mark, but there is no biblical proof of this.⁴⁹⁰

It is not known how it was that the Colossians **received instruction about Mark**, or how they had come to know **Barnabas**.

4:11 and Jesus who is called Justus. Of those out of the Circumcision,⁴⁹¹ they alone are my coworkers for the Kingdom of God,⁴⁹² and they have been a comfort for me.

It seems likely, though of course we cannot be certain, that this man’s Jewish parents named him after the Joshua⁴⁹³ that assisted and followed Moses. It also seems likely that he preferred to be called **Justus**⁴⁹⁴ out of deference to the Lord. It was very common for Jews to have a name from the Scriptures and also a Roman or Greek name that sounds similar to their Jewish name.⁴⁹⁵

Barth⁴⁹⁶ suggests that the **comfort** Paul refers to is related to the great distress he felt because the Jews had rejected Christ, as he explained in Romans 9:1-5. These three Jewish **coworkers** did not follow that pattern, so that might be why Paul says **they have been a comfort for him**.

⁴⁹⁰ The title of that gospel, “The Gospel according to Mark,” was added many years after it was first written. Since in 1 Pet. 5:13 Peter refers to **Mark** as “my son Mark,” there was obviously a close relationship between Peter and **Mark**.

⁴⁹¹ This term, **Circumcision**, usually refers to Jews in general, as in Rom. 4:9, 12; 15:8; Gal. 2:7-9; Eph. 2:11; and Col. 3:11. But in Acts 11:2 and Gal. 2:12 it has the narrower meaning of believers that propagate **circumcision**. It is hard to see how the latter could be intended here, since Paul opposed that group so strongly, but here these men are his **coworkers** (Moo, p. 342).

⁴⁹² Acts 28:16-31 speaks of Paul being under house arrest in Rome at this time and boldly preaching **the Kingdom of God** and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ (Moo, p. 343).

⁴⁹³ Joshua in Hebrew was *יְהוֹשֻׁעַ*/*Yēhoshuaʿ*. That was later shortened to *יְשׁוּעַ*/*Yēshuaʿ*. The Greek transliteration of that name was *Ἰησοῦς*/*Iēsous*, which in English is written **Jesus**. According to O’Brien (p. 251) and Moo (p. 340) this was a common name among Jews until the second century. It is likely that at that point Jews decided not to give their children that name, because all knew about the **Jesus** that many said was the Messiah.

⁴⁹⁴ Two other men have the name **Justus** in the NT. See Acts 1:23 and 18:7.

⁴⁹⁵ For instance, Saul was Paul’s Jewish name.

⁴⁹⁶ P. 482. Also Hendriksen, p. 190.

4:12 **Epaphras, who is one of you, greets you. He is a slave of Christ,⁴⁹⁷ always struggling⁴⁹⁸ for you in prayer, so that you might stand mature and fulfilled⁴⁹⁹ in all the will of God.**

In 1:7-8 we saw that **Epaphras** was Paul's "beloved fellow slave," "a faithful servant of Christ" for them, and the one from whom Paul learned of their love in the Spirit. As was noted in the Introduction, **Epaphras** may have gone back home to Colossae and started the church there as a part of the church planting efforts that Paul directed from his base in Ephesus. Then somehow he ended up under house arrest with Paul in Rome, where perhaps his stories of the ministry in Colossae prompted Paul to write this letter. Although we might wish to know more of his life and ministry, even this much involves some speculation. Here we are told that he is **struggling in prayer** for the church in Colossae.

The goal that **Epaphras** has **in prayer**, which was that the congregation **might stand mature and fulfilled in all the will of God**, is very much in accord with the purpose of Paul's ministry as recorded in 1:28, the purpose of the cross as recorded in 1:22, and the purpose of Paul's prayer for them, which according to 1:10 was that they "might walk worthily of the Lord, pleasing to Him in all things, in every deed bearing fruit, and increasing in your understanding of God..." In fact this is not the only similarity with Paul. Both struggle (see Colossians 1:29), and both are slaves **of Christ**. Perhaps Paul makes these parallels between himself and **Epaphras** to assure them of the soundness of Epaphras' teachings.

The reason a serious **prayer** ministry is such a struggle is because **prayer** is not simply bringing a list of needs to God's attention. In serious **prayer**, one owns the need as one's own. When we pray for a particular child who is suffering, it is almost as if we have adopted that child into our family, and we hurt with the child and the family. In short, serious **prayer** requires love. When we decide we must pray for someone, as **Epaphras** did, we have decided to love them. Their needs or their success become our own. We care, and we pray. The outcome of the situation, in this case that the congregation in Colossae would **stand mature and fulfilled in all the will of God**, became a burden that **Epaphras** willingly carried, because of his love for them.

⁴⁹⁷ The word **slave** here is δούλος/*doulos*. The same term is used in Phil. 1:1 of Paul and Timothy, in Tit. 1:1 of Paul, and in 2 Tim. 2:24 where Timothy is reminded that "the Lord's slave must not quarrel." However, the more common term for the Lord's servant is διάκονος/*diakonos*, which is used in Col. 1:7, 23, 25; and 4:7. Also, there is a minor textual problem here in Col. 4:12. Although several early manuscripts read "Christ Jesus," the earliest of them (p⁴⁶) and the majority of them do not have the name "Jesus" here.

⁴⁹⁸ This same verb (ἀγωνίζομαι/*agōnizomai*) is used by Paul of his own struggle for the Colossians in 1:29. See the endnote there.

⁴⁹⁹ Several early manuscripts read "fully assured," but the earliest of them (p⁴⁶) and the majority of them read **fulfilled** or "filled," from the verb πληρόω/*plēroō*.

4:13 **For I bear witness concerning him that he has great zeal⁵⁰⁰ for you and for those in Laodicea and Hierapolis.**⁵⁰¹

Paul's commendation of Epaphras continues here. Since Epaphras was under house arrest with Paul, the **great zeal** referred to here could only have been expressed in prayer and in telling others like Paul about those three churches.

We can surmise that Epaphras had been a church planter serving in the region of Colossae, **Laodicea**, and **Hierapolis**. **Laodicea** was located in the valley 19 miles (30 kilometers) down from Colossae, and **Hierapolis** was 15 miles (26 kilometers) almost due north of Colossae, across the valley and up into the hills. If you could travel in a straight line between the cities, it would have been a 50 mile (80 kilometer) trip to start at one of those cities, visit the other two, and get back to where you started. A standard day's walk for a healthy man then was 25-28 miles (40-45 kilometers), so ministry in all three cities would certainly have been feasible for a healthy person.

We know from Revelation 3:14-22 that the church in **Laodicea** was doing very badly when Revelation was written. However, if Revelation was written in AD 95⁵⁰² that would have been more than 30 years later.

4:14 **Luke the beloved doctor and Demas greet you.**

Luke and **Demas** must have either been confined with Paul or helping him however they could in his house arrest. Based on verse 11, they were not Jewish. We do not know much about **Demas**, except that he is also mentioned in a similar way at the end of Philemon, and later in 2 Timothy 4:10 we learn he deserted Paul, "having loved the world." Neither here nor in Philemon is anything said about him, except that he sent greetings. We might guess from this lack of explicit commendation that Paul was not enthusiastic about **Demas**. However, that guess is based on Paul's silence, and so it does not have a strong basis in the biblical text. There might be any number of reasons for Paul's silence which are not disclosed to us.

Luke the beloved doctor is only mentioned by name here, at the end of Philemon, and at the end of 2 Timothy. However, strong early church sources

⁵⁰⁰ There is a textual problem here. The majority of manuscripts and some early translations read **great zeal**, while the very oldest manuscripts read "great toil."

⁵⁰¹ **Hierapolis** was a town with many temples. The name probably means "Holy City." It is the site of hot springs, baths, and the now famous Pamukkale, a fantastic cascading series of pools, formed from the lime in the water that flows through them from a hot spring on the hill above. Also there was a famous Plutonium, a cave in a ridge on the hillside there, thought to be an entrance to Hades. Several ancient authors described the thick mist in the cave which killed any that entered, except certain priests who were all eunuchs.

⁵⁰² Conservative scholars rightly estimate that the Book of Revelation was written about AD 95.

indicate that he was the author of the Gospel of Luke.⁵⁰³ Further, there are strong reasons for thinking that Luke and Acts were written by the same person.⁵⁰⁴ As such, he would be part of the group that traveled with Paul from Troas to Philippi and he later rejoined the team when they traveled from Philippi to Jerusalem and then on to Rome.⁵⁰⁵

4:15 Greet the brothers in Laodicea, and Numphas,⁵⁰⁶ and the church in his⁵⁰⁷ house,

This is the only place in his New Testament letters where Paul has the recipients pass on his greetings to another **church**. It is not clear why he sent greetings to **the brothers in Laodicea** and also wrote a letter to them (which the following verse mentions).

We do not know where **Numphas** lived. If he did not live in **Laodicea**, it would make sense that Paul would send the church there separate greetings.

There is debate among scholars as to whether **Numphas** (or Nympha) was a man or a woman. There is also a debate about whether there were any female **church** leaders at the time. Even if the correct reading is “the church in *her* house,” evidence that a **church** was *hosted* by a woman in her home is not at all proof that a woman *led* a church in the New Testament era.

Until the middle of the third century, there were no buildings specifically built for Christian gatherings, and the **church** would gather in people’s homes. **Numphas**, Philemon (Philemon 2), Lydia (Acts 16:15 and 40), Gaius (Romans

⁵⁰³ The Muratorian Canon (written about AD 180) says that Doctor Luke wrote “the third book of the Gospel according to Luke.” Before that the heretic Marcion (about AD 135) acknowledged Luke as the author of the third Gospel. Irenaeus and later writers affirmed this as well (*EBC*, in its discussion of the authorship of Luke).

⁵⁰⁴ “The unique relation of Luke to Acts sets the authorship of Luke apart from the problem of the authorship of the other Gospels. The following facts are important: (1) both Luke and Acts are addressed to an individual named Theophilus (Lk. 1:3; Acts 1:1); (2) Acts refers to a previous work (1:1), presumably Luke; (3) certain stylistic and structural characteristics, such as the use of chiasm and the device of focusing on particular individuals, are common to both books and point to a single author; and (4) not only do the two volumes have a number of themes in common, but some of these receive a distinctive emphasis in this third Gospel that are not found elsewhere in the NT. These things point to a common author” (*EBC*, in its discussion of the authorship of Luke).

⁵⁰⁵ Note the use of the pronoun “we” in Acts 16:10-17; 20:6-21:17; and 27:1-28:16.

⁵⁰⁶ The early manuscripts did not have accents, so this name was Νυμφων/*Numphan*, which is an accusative singular form. It might be from the male name, Νυμφᾶς/*Numphas*, or the female name, Νύμφα/*Numpha*. Only the context would show the reader whether Νυμφων/*Numphan* was a man or a woman. Unfortunately that context, as noted in the next endnote, is confused by a textual variation.

⁵⁰⁷ There is a textual problem here. One very early Greek manuscript (B) reads “her,” and the other very early Greek manuscripts (8, A, and C) read “their.” The majority of the manuscripts read **his**, including D, Ψ, K, and L. This textual problem almost certainly arose prior to the writing of our earliest manuscripts.

16:23), and Aquila and Priscilla (1 Corinthians 16:19 and Romans 16:5) all hosted churches in their homes.⁵⁰⁸

4:16 and after this letter has been read among you, see to it that it is also read in the Laodicean church, and also that you read the Laodicean letter.⁵⁰⁹

This is the only place in the New Testament where Paul has a **church** pass on one of his letters, but Laodicea was so near that it would have been easy for the Colossians to pass on **this letter** to them.

The Laodicean letter which the Colossians were to read is rather mysterious to us now. Most likely it was lost, just as the other letter or letters that Paul mentioned in 2 Corinthians 10:9-11 have been lost. Although it would have been interesting to read those other letters, this is not really a problem. Doubtless the apostles wrote many letters during their ministries, but we trust that the God that inspired the Scriptures also made sure that the right texts became a part of the New Testament canon.

4:17 And tell Archippus, “Pay attention to⁵¹⁰ the ministry⁵¹¹ that you received in the Lord, so that you complete it.”

Paul’s letter to Philemon is addressed to Philemon, to Apphia, and “to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your house.” So there we learn that this **Archippus** was worthy of being called “our fellow soldier,” and that a

⁵⁰⁸ O’Brien, pp. 256-257.

⁵⁰⁹ Because the literal translation of the Greek is “and the from Laodicea so that also you read,” there are several ways the text could be understood. Because it says “from Laodicea,” it could refer to a letter written in Laodicea by Paul or by a Christian leader in Laodicea. However, that does not seem likely, because the verse speaks of an exchange of letters. It is also possible that one of Paul’s coworkers wrote the letter, and by writing this verse Paul endorses that letter. That seems unlikely, because the exchange of letters suggests that they were both from Paul. Some say that the letter that Paul wrote to Laodicea is now known as Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians, to Philemon, or even the Epistle to the Hebrews. (Since Ephesians lacks personal greetings, and some of its ancient manuscripts lack the words “in Ephesus” in 1:1, this is actually a viable possibility.) This verse in Colossians also sparked the imagination of some unknown writer sometime in or before the fifth century, who wrote an letter claiming to be Paul’s Epistle to the Laodiceans. So this brief verse has generated a great deal of speculation by authors through the years. It is most likely that Paul wrote a letter to Laodicea and wanted the Colossians to read it. That letter would have been an excellent letter, but it was not meant to become part of the canon, and it was eventually lost (Barth, pp. 487-488; Hendriksen, pp. 194-197; O’Brien, pp. 257-258; and Moo, pp. 350-351).

⁵¹⁰ This verb, βλέπω/*blepō*, literally means “see” or “look.” When it is not used literally, it often has the meaning “watch out,” but in that case it will always have no object or be followed by “lest” (μή/*mē*), “from” (ἀπό/*apo*), “what” (τίς/*tis*), “yourself” (ἑαυτοῦ/*heautou*), or “how” (πῶς/*pōs*). However, this verb’s usage in 1 Cor. 1:26; 10:18; Phil. 3:2 and this passage does not fit any of those structures. In these four passages this verb just means “consider,” “observe and learn a lesson from,” or **pay attention to**.

⁵¹¹ This word, διακονία/*diakonia*, can be translated **ministry**, “service,” or even “assignment.”

church met in his home.⁵¹² Here in Colossians we see that **the Lord** gave him a **ministry**. Since Paul had never been to Colossae, he might have been told about **Archippus** by Epaphras, but we are simply not “invited in” to any more of the particulars of this verse. It is possible that Epaphras started the congregation there in the home of **Archippus**, but once Epaphras left **Archippus** had to take over responsibility for that **ministry**. Hendriksen⁵¹³ suggests that Paul is directing the congregation to say to their own leader, “Go right ahead, we are with you and we promise to help you in every way. The task you are trying to perform was given to you by the Lord, and you are discharging it with strength imparted by him.” This is a probable reconstruction of these events, but there is no certainty here. It is not possible to know whether this was meant as a rebuke or an encouragement. Neither is there any certainty in guesses as to why Paul felt that **Archippus** needed that brief message to be delivered to him by the congregation.

4:18 **I, Paul, write this greeting by my own hand. Remember my chains.**⁵¹⁴ **Grace be with you. Amen.**⁵¹⁵

Because papyrus was expensive, and it was difficult to write small and neat letters upon its uneven surface, authors commonly had professional scribes write for them. It was also common practice for authors to add a closing note like this in their **own hand** to prevent forgeries.⁵¹⁶

In 1 Corinthians 16:21 and 2 Thessalonians 3:17 Paul uses exactly the same expression, **I, Paul, write this greeting by my own hand**. Philemon 19 has nearly the same expression. In 2 Thessalonians 3:17 he adds the explanation, “which is a sign in all my letters. Thusly I write.” In Galatians 6:11 Paul wrote, “See what large letters I write to you with my own hand!”

He wants them to **remember** his **chains**. He also mentions his imprisonment in 4:3.⁵¹⁷ Since Paul uses this verb⁵¹⁸ in 1 Thessalonians 1:3, and a related noun⁵¹⁹ in Romans 1:9; Ephesians 1:16; Philippians 1:3; 1 Thessalonians 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:3; and

⁵¹² Since the word “your” in Philem. 2 is singular, it is clear that the church met in Archippus’s home, not in a house that was owned by Philemon, Apphia, and **Archippus**.

⁵¹³ P. 199.

⁵¹⁴ The word δεσμός/*desmos* can refer to **chains** or any other kind of bonds.

⁵¹⁵ While the oldest manuscripts do not have the word **Amen** here, the majority of them do.

⁵¹⁶ Moo, p. 353.

⁵¹⁷ See the discussion of Paul’s imprisonment under 4:3.

⁵¹⁸ The verb is μνημονεύω/*mnēmoneuō*.

⁵¹⁹ The noun is μνήα/*mneia*.

Philemon 4 to refer to prayer, Moo⁵²⁰ suggests that Paul was asking for prayer concerning his imprisonment. That is a better explanation than the idea that he was asking for sympathy, or highlighting himself as a suffering and authoritative apostle.

Normally, Greek letters ended with a farewell, but Paul almost always closed his letters with a benediction of **grace**. God's **grace** is core to Paul's message, so it is entirely appropriate that he should end his letter with this blessing. The life of a follower of Christ is a life of growing in delight and worship of our gracious and glorious Lord.



In these four chapters, Paul has proclaimed Christ so that the readers can grow to maturity by knowing and loving Him. He has taught the congregation how great Christ is, and how great the things are that He has done for us. He has also warned against substituting religious systems, with all their rules and pride, in the place of simple thankful devotion to Christ. He has shown how the life that pleases God is a life that springs up out of knowing and loving our Savior. If these things are understood in the mind and allowed to touch the heart, then the grateful believer will be fruitful, and the Father, who seeks those that will worship Him in spirit and in truth, will be pleased. At the end of the age such worshippers will be presented to God as mature followers of Christ.

⁵²⁰ P. 353.

Applying the Letter

If it were actually necessary to identify and understand one particular set of false teachings that the letter was written in response to, then the process we now must go through to apply the letter would be quite complicated.⁵²¹ The more scholars postulate, build, develop, think, suppose, speculate, write, and publish about the particular false teachers that they say were attacking the congregation in Colossae, the more difficult it becomes to understand and apply the letter. The reader must figure out the ancient context (perhaps some form of “Incipient Gnosticism”), then understand the letter in its (reconstructed) context, then figure out what principles he should bring over into his life, and then convert those principles into action.

If, for example, the congregation had succumbed to some form of “Incipient Gnosticism” as some claim, then if we do not have any incipient Gnosticism in our community, we will have to figure out how to apply this letter even though we are in a very different world from the Colossians. We will want to understand what that incipient Gnosticism was, what Paul said about it, and how what Paul said about incipient Gnosticism should apply in our lives today.

If, however, the congregation did not succumb to any false teaching, but was merely being warned against all kinds of false teachings that they or any congregation might face, our application process would be much more direct and simple: Paul is speaking in general terms about all sorts of errors, any one of which you might hear today on the radio or from a friend.

Understood this way, this letter is all the more valuable for us, and for believers through the ages all over the world, even though most of the particular religions and philosophies from which Paul drew those catch phrases are now long gone. It is all the more valuable because the wide “net” that Paul casts in this letter catches all the religions and philosophies that would ruin our hearts and minds by drawing us away from Christ who is the Savior in whom we delight. There is no need for us to identify and understand some particular long-lost religion or philosophy which was attacking the believers in Colossae in 61 AD, and which Paul wrote against, then understand Paul’s words, then draw abstract or general principles from that understanding, and then apply those principles in our various settings today. Once understood, Paul’s teachings are much more directly applicable to our settings.

⁵²¹ In the normal process of applying a passage we must understand it, then “decontextualize” it (take the original first-century Colossae context out and leave behind only the principles), and then “recontextualize” it (place those principles into the context of a particular congregation today).

The well-meaning Evangelical leader that has a problem with alcohol may rarely if ever quote Ephesians 5:18, “do not be drunk with wine, which is dissipation.” Likewise the well-meaning Evangelical leader that has a problem with sexual addiction may rarely if ever be heard quoting 1 Corinthians 6:18, “Flee from sexual immorality!” Further, we rarely hear Colossians 2:20-21, “If you died with Christ to the fundamental principles of the world, why, as if living in the world, submit to its decrees – ‘Do not eat! And do not taste! And do not touch!’” quoted in our schools and churches. Is that not perhaps due to a similar cause? We rarely if ever hear that passage quoted, because too many of us have succumbed to an addiction to laws, rules, and regulations. Just as the alcoholic has substituted being drunk with wine for being filled with the Holy Spirit, and the adulterer has substituted physical intimacy in the place of rich fellowship with Christ, so the legalist has substituted powerless regulations in the place of a powerful devotion to our good and gracious Savior. This is to our shame and to His grief.

Most of the readers of this letter are not immediately threatened by physical or sexual addictions. Those that are will find more help in 1 Corinthians than here. However, many of us are threatened with that third substitution. As the years have passed, and as our responsibilities and authority have increased, we are tempted to formulate or enforce rules and regulations upon ourselves and those under our authority, without stopping to think about whether or not such rules have power to transform character. We think they are not at all powerless, perhaps because we have the authority to enforce them. So we find ourselves using so much of our time and energy enforcing rules and regulations that are indeed powerless to develop Christian maturity. Somewhere in our busyness, the great transformational power that exudes from a deep devotion to Christ is neglected.

So despite the usually subtle messages we sometimes hear in Christian circles, Paul is not offering a comfortable system to us, a “deal” where God saves us, and then we settle into – or strive to obey – a set of rules for good living.

If an outsider examined the life of our church, and then wrote up the following as his simplified description of our guidelines to being a good Christian, how accurate would his words be?

- Go to church each Sunday
- Be a good member of your small group
- Tithe your income
- Don’t drink strong alcoholic beverages
- Don’t smoke
- Don’t use harsh language

- Don't gossip
- Ladies, keep that neckline up and that hem down
- Attend all church activities
- Do a short term missions trip

Pastors , missionaries, and their wives do ten out of ten from The List.

To be a faithful Christian, select eight of the Ten.

To be a good Christian, select five of the Ten.

To be known as a Christian in your community, select three of the Ten.

If you only do two out of ten, your salvation is in doubt.

That sort of thinking is a dangerous imitation of the relationship with Christ that the Apostle Paul has been presenting in this letter.

Instead Paul says, fill your minds with these wonderful truths, and let your hearts draw near in awe to our awesome Savior, and worship and thank Him in awe. We will then not be taken captive by fruitless and vain philosophy, when we deeply understand what a wonderful Savior we have, who has done so much for us! Instead we will be filled with a thankfulness that impels us to growth in Christ. We will find ourselves empowered by grace to rid ourselves of sexual immorality, filth, passion, evil desire, and greed. As we learn to more and more deeply delight in knowing the Savior who submitted to His Father's will all the way to the cross, we will find that we too can submit to the ordered relationships described in 3:18-4:1.

If you are giving or receiving rules, commands, or decrees with the idea that obeying them will give spiritual growth, stop it right now! There is a place for rules in the Christian life: we are to obey them out of gratitude, and that gratitude towards His grace is what brings growth. Obedience does not cause spiritual growth, but spiritual growth causes obedience. If you mix that up, you have in effect relocated to Galatia!

In our organizations, we have standards and rules, but we must not give anyone the impression that by following our rules they will draw nearer to the Lord. In a healthy Christian organization there will be some specific rules (certainly "do not lie" would be a biblical rule) and a great deal of love for the Lord, gratitude for His grace, and song in heart and on lips which inspires people to heartfelt righteousness.

Neither legalism nor license provide the path for us towards the maturity that Paul envisions for us. Delighting in Christ is that pathway. He is the way, the truth, and the life. He is our life.

Appendix A: Manuscript Variations

There are about 100 texts in Colossians in which the Greek manuscripts offer different readings. Of that 100, only about 17 of them are different enough to affect the English translation. Of that 17, eight of them are like the problem in 1:1, where some manuscripts read “of Jesus Christ,” and others read “of Christ Jesus.” Similarly in 1:2 some manuscripts read “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” while other manuscripts read simply “from God our Father.”

However, nine of those 17 textual problems more significantly affect the meaning of the passage. The strength of the manuscript evidence for each of those is discussed in the endnotes, but the passages are mentioned here so that the reader can get some perspective on the relative importance of these textual issues. In each of the nine texts below the reading of the majority of manuscripts is given first, followed by the reading of the fewer but older manuscripts.

In 1:7, was Epaphras “our fellow-slave, a faithful for *you* servant” or was he “our fellow-slave, a faithful for *us* servant”?

In 1:12, did Paul write “who has qualified *us*” or “who has qualified *you*”?

In 2:11, did Paul write about “putting off of the body *of the sins* of the flesh,” or “putting off of the body of the flesh”?

In 2:13 did Paul write that “He made *you* alive” or that “He made *us* alive”?

In 2:18 did Paul write that the false teacher goes into “things he has *not* seen,” or “things he has seen”?

In 4:8 did Paul write “so that *I* might know *your* situation,” or “so that *you* might know *our* situation”?

In 4:12 did Paul write of them standing “mature and *fulfilled* in all the will of God” or “mature and *fully assured* in all the will of God”?

In 4:13 did Paul write that Epaphras has great *zeal* for them or great *toil* for them?

Finally, in 4:15 did Paul write concerning the church in *his* house or the church in *her* house?

There are variations among the many ancient Greek manuscripts that are used to make translations of the New Testament. This overview was written so the reader

himself can see for himself how significant those variations are in the Greek manuscripts of Colossians.

The reader that is interested in formulating his or her own answers to those nine questions listed above will want to do further study in the area of textual criticism. A good place to start would be the Introduction to *The Greek New Testament according to the Majority Text*, the Preface to *The New King James Version*, Bruce Metzger's *The Text of the New Testament*, and the same author's *A Textual Commentary on the New Testament*.

Appendix B: Commands Undergirded by Grace

In this brief appendix, *undergirding grace is in italics*, and **commands are in bold**. Note how closely intertwined they are!

1:10-11 so that you might walk worthily of the Lord, pleasing to Him in all things, in every deed bearing fruit, and increasing in your understanding of God, with all power being strengthened according to the might of His glory in all endurance and patience,

1:12-14 with joy giving thanks to the Father who has made us fit for a share of the inheritance of the holy ones in the light. It was He that delivered us out of the authority of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins

2:6 Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him,
2:7 rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as you were taught,
abounding in it with thanksgiving.

2:8 Watch out lest anyone take you captive through a philosophy, an empty deception according to human tradition, according to the fundamental principles of the world, and not according to Christ,
2:9-12 because in Him dwells all the fullness of deity bodily, and in Him you have been filled, in Him who is the head over every ruler and authority. In Him also you were circumcised with a circumcision accomplished without hands, by the disarming of the sinful body – the flesh, the circumcision that Christ accomplishes....

2:14-15 He erased the record of debts against us, with its decrees, which was hostile to us, and He lifted it up out of our midst, nailing it to the cross. Disarming the rulers and authorities, He publicly shamed them, displaying them in a triumphal procession, by the cross.

2:16 Therefore do not let anyone judge you concerning eating or drinking or in the matter of a holy day or a new moon festival or Sabbaths,

2:17 which were a shadow of the things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

2:18 Let no one rule against you, taking pleasure in humility of mind and

the worship of angels, going into things he has not seen, puffed up in vain by his fleshly mind.

2:19 That kind of person is not holding fast to the Head, *from Whom the whole body, supported and knit together through the joints and ligaments, grows with growth from God.*

2:20a *If you died with Christ to the fundamental principles of the world,*

2:20b-21 **why, as if living in the world, submit to its decrees – “Do not eat! And do not taste! And do not touch!”**

3:1a *Therefore, since you have been raised with Christ,*

3:1b-2 **keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Concentrate on the things above, not on the things upon the earth.**

3:3-4 *For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ – who is our life – is revealed, then you also with Him will be revealed in glory.*

3:5 **Therefore put to death whatever of you is earthly: sexual immorality, filth, passion, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry;**

3:12a *So as the chosen of God, holy and beloved,*

3:12b-13 **put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, if anyone has a complaint against someone; just as Christ forgave you, so also you should forgive.**

Appendix C: Philemon as Appendix

Philemon is in a sense a perfect appendix to Colossians: it is a specific application of the whole point of Colossians – let us apply the grace of God, let the grace of God which we have experienced undergird all our lives. Read Philemon that way, and you will see the point. Here is a very difficult case for Paul, a slave has broken the law, broken trust with his master, probably stolen from him, and run away. Then Paul brings that slave to faith in Christ. What should he do? How does the gospel apply here. Should Onesimus obey the Law? Should Paul report him to the authorities, and let the state handle it? Of course we know how he did handle it. Note of course that he never actually says to Philemon, “Free him.” That is an incontrovertible observation, but what is the interpretation of that observation? What principles may we derive from it? This is an apostolic, and therefore authoritative, Christian leadership model being demonstrated here. This is the way we should lead. This is Colossians enacted for leaders.

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