



Texts in Context

Christ and the Powers of Darkness: Lessons from Colossians^{*}

ROBERT PAUL ROTH

*Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota*

I. THE LETTER OF COLOSSIANS

THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS INVITES A HOST OF INTRIGUING QUESTIONS. WHAT is its place in relation to other Pauline literature? Who wrote the letter? Where and when was it written? Who were the false teachers against whom the author warns the Colossians? What can we learn from the epistle about christology, ecclesiology, apostolic office, eschatology, circumcision and baptism, overcoming sin and death, cancelling the written code, disarming principalities and powers, Christian conduct and social ethics? These are some of the questions we shall discuss as we comment on our four lessons in the context of the entire letter to the Colossians and in their context in the church and world today.

A. The Question of Authorship

The city of Colossae was situated on the southern bank of the river Lycus in Phrygia. Together with its neighboring cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis, Colossae was severely damaged, if not destroyed, by an earthquake in A.D. 60-61. It is likely therefore that the letter to the Colossians was written before this destruction and during Paul's lifetime. The people of Colossae were native Phrygians, settlers from Greece, and a community of Jews descended from two thousand Jewish families brought to the region from Babylon by Antiochus III early in the second century B.C.

^{*}This essay is based in part on a conversation in which the following persons participated with the author: James L. Boyce (who was the primary exegete) and Frederick J. Gaiser, both of Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary; and Grant Abbott, rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, St. Paul, Minnesota.

The church at Colossae was not founded by Paul, but along with all the churches of Asia it was under his apostolic jurisdiction. References to Epaphras in the letter (1:7-8; 4:12-13) indicate that he was the founder of the congregation in Colossae and also of those in Laodicea and Hierapolis. Other members of the congregation were Philemon and his runaway slave Onesimus, who was returned to Philemon in the custody of Tychicus; hence the connection between the letters to Colossae and to Philemon. The language and content of the letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians are similar enough to suggest that these two letters were written by the same person or, if not, by editors who were close associates of Paul. Some think Ephesians is a later expansion of Colossians, and others think Colossians is a contraction of Ephesians. The Pauline authorship of these letters has been doubted because of perceived stylistic differences as over against his other letters, but especially because it has been thought that the "Colossian heresy" was second century Gnosticism. New evidence of both Jewish and Gentile Gnosticism in pre-Christian times presents a serious challenge to this view, however. Eduard Schweizer argues convincingly that Timothy wrote the letter under Paul's direction during the apostle's imprisonment in Ephesus.¹ Peter T. O'Brien argues even more forcefully that the stylistic differences can be explained by differences in content and occasion for writing, while the christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology of Colossians are all woven on the same loom with the rest of Pauline teaching. On these matters there are almost as many theories as there are scholars, and one can only sigh regretfully that biblical research is not an exact science.²

B. *The Opponents*

For our purpose it is more important to know who the false teachers in Colossae were and what their heresy was. Again the scholars have a variety of opinions. Judging from certain catch phrases and some technical language in the admonitions, a syncretism of Jewish and pagan Gnosticism is a likely culprit. There are references to the *plērōma* so beloved of all Gnostics (2:9). Paul warns against "delighting in humility and the worship of angels" (2:18), which seems to be a perversion of the Old Testament teaching about angels being ordained to rule over the forces of nature. In Galatians Paul says, "The law was put into effect by angels through a mediator" (Gal 3:19). There may have been Persian and Chaldean astrological influences. Regulations about eating and drinking, celebration of the new moon, and sabbath keeping all indicate Judaistic legalism. The heretical philosophy enjoined strict asceticism with regard to handling, tasting, and touching, apparently referring to sexual proscriptions derived from pagan Gnosticism (2:21).

C. *The Hymn to the Cosmic Christ*

Although the great hymn to the cosmic Christ (1:15-20) is not included in our lessons, nothing in them can be understood without reference to the majesty

¹Eduard Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982) 23.

²Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Word Biblical Commentary 44; Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982) xlii ff.

of its teaching about the creating and redeeming Lord becoming concretized in the blood shed on the cross. It is wonderful irony that this hymn with its cosmological (1:15-18a) and soteriological (1:18b-20) strophes should be included in this little letter to such an inconsequential congregation, considering the tremendous influence the hymn has had on formulating the christological faith of the church. The style and language of the hymn indicate that it has been appropriated from the tradition of the church, but there is strong agreement among many scholars that two phrases were added by the author for special emphasis and interpretation. The first strophe deals with Christ as the head of the cosmos, since by him and for him all things were created, but it concludes with the declaration, "and he is the head of the body, the church."³ There is a notion in every culture that the universe hangs together as a cosmos, not just a heap, and everything finds its order under a meaningful principle. This view is manifest in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, in Philo of Alexandria, in Platonic-Pythagorean thought, in Iranian cosmology, and in Stoic concepts of the *logos spermatikos* and the *logos endiathetos*, the creative and sustaining reason. In the syncretism of late antiquity Iranian concepts of God becoming pregnant with the entire creation were combined with Orphic notions of the cosmos as the body of Zeus. The author of Colossians, in such a climate of opinion, finds it necessary to set things straight; hence he adds to the phrase *kephalē tou sōmatos* ("head of the body") the words *tēs ekklēsias* ("the church") in 1:18. He does a similar thing at the end of the second strophe (1:20), adding *dia tou haimatos tou staurou autou* ("by the blood of his cross"). Both additions connect the cosmic Christ with the historical and earthly church and Jesus.

As we shall see when we examine the text for the tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Col 2:6-15), the false teaching which Paul seeks to correct is the confusion of Creator and creature, God and nature, and the resultant idolatry of worshiping the creature rather than the Creator with all manner of ascetic disciplines. It is the same argument we find in the opening chapters of Paul's letter to the Romans. Christ, not anyone else, is the agent of creation. He is the image of the invisible God, the image humans have lost. Hidden from us through the ages, it is now visible in Jesus of Nazareth; the image which, because he has come to us, we can now put on, as we are exhorted to do (3:10). As Eduard Lohse says, "The description of the pre-existent Christ as the 'first-born before all creation' (*prōtotokos pasēs ktiseōs*) is not intended to mean that he was created first and thereby began the succession of created beings. Rather, it refers instead to his uniqueness, by which he is distinguished from all creation (cf. Heb 1:6)."⁴ Thus, as Kierkegaard said so often, there is an infinite qualitative distinction between God and his creatures, but now God has become visible in the man Jesus who is also, as the first-born, the head of all creation. This we know because he is the head of his body, the church. First-born does not mean elder brother but the best beloved of the Father. Christ is Lord of the universe, but his body is the church, and that is why the gospel of the church is producing fruit all over the world (1:6).

³Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 42ff.

⁴*Ibid.*, 48-49.

The second strophe, like the first, declares that Christ is the beginning and the first-born from the dead. As he was in the beginning the agent of the first creation, now through his death and resurrection Christ is the beginning and supreme Lord of the new creation. Reference to new birth from death puts this Christian teaching in sharp contrast to Gnostic notions of reconciliation with the timeless source of life by a return of wandering souls through renunciation of the material things of this world. The Christian hope does not renounce material creation; indeed the whole fullness of deity has come to dwell bodily in the creature. The Gnostics were especially fond of the concept of "fullness" or *plērōma*. The world for them was an emanation of life and light from the ineffable One. So long as the emanations remained close to their source the unity of the *plērōma* was maintained, but when the emanations strayed they became spatialized, temporalized, and individuated. Distance from the source of Oneness causes attenuation, and ultimate dissipation reduces the emanations to nothingness. The Pauline teaching says, on the contrary, that the Creator God enters the creaturely world bodily and suffers our separation of sin and death, so that being identified with us he can give us the hope of glory (1:2, 7). Nothing could be more scandalous to the Gnostic than the identification of the fullness of deity with the human body of blood and death. The shallow, simplistic optimism of the Gnostic view is contrasted with the Christian realism which involves a radical, wrenching, world-shattering death. Death is not a simple separation, an accidental wandering; death is the separation caused by our defiant rebellion, the insolent arrogance of grasping for the knowledge and being of God. Thus the theology of glory with Christ as head of all things is balanced by a theology of the cross, and this is the paradoxical good news that is proclaimed throughout the world.

D. *The Structure of the Letter*

The structure of the letter to the Colossians is similar to that of Romans. There are general introductory and concluding personal greetings and instructions. The body of the letter divides into two sections, one dealing with doctrine (1:15-2:23) and the other with exhortations (3:1-4:6). In the introductory greeting Paul identifies himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, gives thanks for the faith, love, and hope of the Colossians which they receive from the gospel, and intercedes for them that they may have knowledge of God's will through spiritual wisdom and understanding. The Christ Hymn is followed by teaching concerning the sufficiency of reconciliation in Christ, Paul's mission and pastoral concern, the admonition against false philosophy, and the assurance of freedom from legalism. The hortatory section urges the Colossians to put away sins of the past, put on the graces of Christ, conduct their households in the freedom and responsibility of the gospel, and persevere in prayer and love for outsiders. The epistle is so tightly woven that, even though our four lessons do not include the Christ Hymn and the Household Rule, preaching from the four texts will embrace the entire teaching and exhortation of the letter.

II. THE LESSONS

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, 1:1-14. Apostleship in this letter, as in other Pauline letters, is defined as a commission of suffering service to proclaim the work of God in its fullness. What gives Paul's apostleship authenticity is not an authoritarian office, but the gospel of grace and peace. There can be no question about the insistence of Paul on the authority of apostleship. He is not an apostle by the will of the people. He is not the apostle of a particular congregation. He is the apostle to the gentiles sent by Jesus Christ and God the Father. There is a false piety today which says that the pastor should work himself or herself out of a job, as if the priesthood of all believers means that everyone should be one's own pope. We have a chilling anticlericalism because this office is seen only as a power issue. When clergy and laity vie for authority to exercise power, they both fail to see that in the New Testament the office of ordained ministry is always a suffering service for the people, the ministry of Christ *for us*. Protection of the apostolic office is not for the sake of the power of the person in the office but for the sake of Christ and his high office of bringing grace through the blood of the cross. What is needed is an ordained ministry that not only enables and facilitates but courageously leads with prophetic vision and daring compassion, preserving the truth of the gospel and guiding people into the terrible risk of God's future. This will become more explicit in the text for the ninth Sunday after Pentecost (1:24-25).

Paul introduces his letter by expressing his thanks to God for the fruits of the gospel—faith, love, and hope—which have been made possible in Colossae through the faithful ministry of Epaphras, and which are manifest throughout the world. He is preparing his readers for the Christ Hymn with its cosmic significance and for the catholicity of the church. The specific reference to Epaphras serves to authenticate the gospel that has been preached in their midst. This is the gospel that defines the truth which will protect the Colossians against false teaching. That truth is described in a wonderful triad—knowledge, wisdom, and understanding—that corresponds to the three graces of faith, love, and hope. Paul's prayer for the Colossians is that they may be sensitive to God's will which engenders good conduct in the form of another great triad—endurance, patience, and joy. The close connection between the preaching and teaching of the word of the gospel with the practical fruits in human conduct is compelling throughout this letter.

Finally there is in this lesson a remarkable eschatological teaching about a future heavenly inheritance which is assured because the saints have been rescued "from the dominion of darkness" (1:13). The reference to the dominion of darkness indicates that the reality of a cosmic adversary is included in the gospel story. This is not surprising, if the gospel is a story and not a mere message, because all stories contain some kind of antagonist. The biblical story of the conflict between God and Satan, with the victory of the kingdom of the Son over the dominion of darkness, condones neither sophisticated Manichean metaphysics nor primitive, superstitious shamanism and exorcism. The dominion of darkness is not a future place of torment for the unfaithful dead. The Greek aorist form *errusato* ("delivered") requires us to think of an eschatology that has been realized, and so the reference is to our deliverance by

baptism from the death of our sinful lives to the new life in Christ. Whereas before we were living under the dominion of malicious perversity, now we are liberated to live in the light with conduct that is pure and holy. This does not mean that the baptized are lifted to some transcendent realm of ecstasy, but rather that they are free to live clean lives of love and service in the kingdom of the Son, the church, not the kingdom of God, which is future (cf. 1 Cor 15:23-25).

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, 1:21-28. The lesson begins with a powerful proclamation of Christ's ministry of atonement through his suffering and death in order to present us without blemish to God. It then moves to a description of Paul's ministry of suffering which likewise is in order to present everyone to God "perfect in Christ."

The dominant metaphor of atonement here is reconciliation, taken from a field of conflict, consonant with the theme in the previous lesson of the victory of the kingdom of the Son over the dominion of darkness. There are intimations also of the metaphors of ritual cleansing—"without blemish"—and justification—"free from accusation." This is typical of Pauline teaching, in which he combines many metaphors to give wealth to a subject that exceeds in mystery all human comprehension. Atonement between the creator God and his rebellious creatures includes first of all victory over the adversary and then liberating, adopting, cleansing, renewing, justifying, sanctifying, and finally raising from the dead.

The significant point of the atonement, and its purpose, is to present us to God. He is the Holy One, and we must be likewise holy if he is to receive us. To achieve this end God must rescue us from our bondage to sin, death, and the devil. God does this not with violent power but by identifying himself with us in our creatureliness, our sin, and our death. He suffers with us the separation from God the Father that is ours because of sin. This suffering is not dealt as punishment from an angry God. It is rather the onslaught of the devil which we invite by accepting freely his temptation. The cross of Jesus is not the vicarious payment of our penalty to God for our misbehavior. Jesus does not die instead of us; he dies with us. He does not offer his death to God to appease his wrath; he offers his life to God as a victory over death. We do not have a life to give to God, but Jesus does. The vicarious substitution in his atoning work is the offering of his risen life instead of us and on our behalf to the Father in heaven. This is the gospel Paul proclaims to the world: "The glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

As an apostle Paul is an ambassador for Christ, one who has been sent to act with authority in Christ's place. He fills the lack of Christ's absence. He makes visible the suffering of Christ; hence he can rejoice in it because through this suffering God in Christ releases us from death and the devil. The idea of filling up what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions does not mean that Christ's atoning work is insufficient and we need to add to it our suffering. Our reconciliations has been fully accomplished, but we still live in the flesh, and though we have been delivered by baptism into the church, the dominion of darkness still surrounds us. Hence God in Christ is still suffering in this histori-

cal era to bring all people and powers and institutions under his lordship until the Last Day when all is turned over to the Father "that God may be all in all" (1 Cor 15:25-28).

The story of the ascension of the risen Lord tells us that Christ is out in the world, wherever people are suffering, with their hopes and fears, their loves and dreams, completing the afflictions of his cross at the point of their pain. Hence Paul's mission is not a triumphal conquest, as if he had Christ in his pocket all packaged and ready to give to the benighted people of the world. Christ has already gone to the four corners of the earth, and we must follow him there. Our suffering mission is to look for the bridges of God that have already been built for the transfer of the gospel. And since the dominion of darkness is real we will find its enmity painfully evident when we preach the gospel in its fullness. But what we do in gospel ministry is to accomplish what Paul did. We present everyone in our charge to God "perfect in Christ."

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, 2:6-15. The human traditions and elemental spirits which shaped the culture of Colossae included Pythagorean-Platonic Gnosticism, Stoic asceticism, Iranian astral cults, worship of fertility goddesses like Cybele the great Mother and Artemis of Ephesus, and various kinds of Hellenistic Judaism. Some scholars think a particular organized philosophy was threatening the gospel as it was taught and practiced by the Christians in Colossae. There is debate over whether this philosophy derived from Essenic Judaism, Hellenistic Gnosticism, or a syncretism of both. There is no doubt, however, that the competing wisdom involved legalism, asceticism, and the worship of angels. The philosophy apparently had a code of regulations regarding festivals, celebration of the new moon, the sabbath, care of the body, and sexual conduct. The Gnostic view stressed the fragility of the material world and the need to escape from the body to achieve spiritual harmony with the Source of life. The astral cults stressed the control of celestial bodies over human destiny. This was combined with the Hebrew tradition of angels ordained to rule over the orders of nature. Paul in Romans 8:38, 1 Corinthians 15:24, and Galatians 4:3 refers to elemental spirits and powers having dominion over the forces of this world. He conceives of them as supporting the world through the power of God, but at enmity with God and therefore being disarmed by God.

In modern culture we do not have these old philosophical traditions and ascetic cults, but people today read their horoscopes, they frenetically watch their diets, they engage in exercises of body and mind which seek transcendence, and they foster ecstatic experiences that claim gifts of healing and prophetic utterance. Our age is so rife with pluralism and syncretism that pastors and teachers in the church are reluctant to declare the dangers of aberrant philosophies and practices. Paul was not afraid to admonish people in his charge when they were threatened and tempted by false teaching.

There are some interesting ironies here. The natural orders of government, economy, education, arts, family, and religion are sustained by God through elemental spirits (in the story language of the Bible). But people worship these powers instead of the God who ordained them. They worship them with all manner of legalistic asceticism in order to escape their power. The result

is personal, privatized devotion (Luther's *cor incurvatus in se*) in which community is shattered through individualized divisiveness. This is done not only by transcendental meditation and non-Christian cults from the Orient, the fringe Christian sects like the Mormons and the Unification Church, and Christian fundamentalists and charismatics; most flagrantly and most successfully it is characteristic of the new religion of TV evangelists on both coasts who advocate the use of prayer in the name of Christ to gain material riches, health, and power. All this fanatical religious zeal has developed because today, as in Paul's day, people are afraid of the disintegration of our fragile world.

Paul teaches the Colossians and us that we need have no fear. We need no code of regulations, no bodily or spiritual exercises that we can add up on an account sheet to balance our debts with credits. In Hellenistic Judaism the commandments of God were called "regulations" (*dogmata*), and it was taught that God cancels a debt only when the scales are balanced by merits.⁵ Now, however, Paul says such legalism is cancelled and the ledger is posted on the cross for all to see. This grand grace of forgiveness comes to us in Christ in whom the fullness of deity dwells bodily. The fearful disintegration of the world is overcome not by only seeking escape from the body, but in the very body that God made good in the beginning and that now can be restored to its original image because Christ has come in that body.

We share in this reconciliation through baptism, which is not a circumcision done by the hands but done by Christ. Thus we too have this fullness of God in us because Christ is in us. Paul said the same thing to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (2:20). To be baptized means to die with Christ and rise in the Spirit with Christ (Col 2:12; Rom 6:4). Paul is not talking about a mystical, metaphysical fusion with deity; he is saying that our bodies, that means our total selves, are now under the rule of Christ who has disarmed the powers that formerly ruled over us. Therefore we are now free to walk with the wisdom of Christ and not by vain and deceitful human traditions.

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, 3:1-11. In this lesson Paul shifts from dogmatic teaching to practical exhortation. Our lesson includes only two sets of five negative admonitions, but in 3:12 a positive exhortation is given to put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Just as the five earthly vices—sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed—are wrapped up in idolatry, and the five spiritual vices—anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language—are capped by lying, so also the Christian graces are included in love which binds them in unity. As in Romans 1 Paul speaks of the wrath of God not as angry punishment but as the deliverance of sinners to their own unbridled wickedness. God simply lets them go their own way. Someone has said that when God wishes to punish us he gives us what we pray for. And Paul associates this unbridled wickedness with idolatry, the worship of the creature instead of the Creator. In lust and greed we attach ourselves to

⁵Cf. E. Lohse, *Colossians*, 110.

creatures that are in themselves good but become destroying demons when we make gods and goddesses of them.

If the grace of forgiveness is given and we have nothing to fear because Christ is totally in charge, why is there need for exhortation? The reason is that people fall from grace. In Galatians 5:4 Paul declared that the Judaizers have "fallen away from grace," and in Colossians 1:23 he warns the faithful not to shift from the hope of the gospel. We have been created in the image of God to be free and responsible persons. Grace does not rob us of that freedom. It gives us a new freedom to act with responsibility which we did not have when we were in bondage to sin. Now we can walk worthy of our calling because we have the wisdom of Christ. Since Christ is in us and for us we can and must love Christ in our neighbor. The imperative follows the indicative. This is just the reverse of Aristotelian and indeed all human religious approaches to holiness. Emerson captured the human ethic in the doggerel: "When duty whispers low, 'Thou must,' the youth replies, 'I can.'" Contrariwise, Paul tells us that Christ has made us free to love and now we must do so. It is like pregnancy. The pregnant woman receives the seed, but now she must nurture it in love until the child is born and ever after.

Where there is walking with the wisdom of Christ in love there is catholic inclusiveness. Notice the crashing paradox: the thrust of the whole letter is to affirm the uniqueness of Christ to the exclusion of syncretistic legalism and asceticism, and yet this Christ is "all and in all." The cosmic Christ reveals through the blood of his cross that God's world is one, wonderfully interconnected in all things. This has compelling force for ecology, ecumenicity, global village politics, the liberation of women and the poor, and family relationships. There is in this letter a striking progression of Christ, active through suffering, in the cosmos, in the church, and in the individual in society. The story of Colossians tells us that everything and everyone in this world is bound together under the loving lordship of Christ, and therefore we can exclude nothing and no one from our care. Moreover, this care does not involve a mystical escape from the body but rather a practical concern for all the goods of this world and for every neighbor far or near, friend or enemy, rich or poor, male or female, first world or third world.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.