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## THE GOSPEL AND SYNCRETISM: CONTEXTUALIZING THE GOSPEL IN COLOSSIANS

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A missionary colleague in the Philippines described a chance encounter he had with a grandmother in a part of the country where the local animistic religion was widely practiced. He noticed a cross hanging around her neck and asked her if she were a Christian. “Yes,” she assured him, “I am a follower of Jesus Christ.” When she discovered that my friend was a Christian missionary, she invited him to visit her humble dwelling. To his surprise, she showed him a traditional spirit house behind her home that was intended to ward off the evil spirits. “If you are a Christian,” he queried, “why do you still keep a spirit house?” Her matter-of-fact reply: “I just want to make sure that all of the bases are covered.”

Syncretism—the mixing of incompatible religious ideas and practices—is a constant threat to the gospel, particularly when converts have recently come out of a pagan religious background. Paul’s letter to the Colossians reflects such a situation. He writes to a young and predominantly Gentile church (cf. 1:21-22, 27; 3:5-7) in a region of Asia where religious pluralism and syncretism were a familiar part of the fabric of life.<sup>1</sup> These believers apparently were under intense pressure to syncretize their new Christian faith by incorporating elements from other traditions and teachings, including their own past religious experience. Presumably, Paul learned from the church’s founder Epaphras that a destructive error had emerged in the Lycus Valley, one that threatened to compromise the very heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Colossians had received.<sup>2</sup> Paul’s response is

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<sup>1</sup>For evidence of the syncretistic character of the religious scene in the region of Phrygia, see especially, Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

<sup>2</sup>We cannot be certain whether the error emerged from within the congregation or was imposed from the outside, or even the extent to which it had already been adopted. See Victor Paul Furnish, “Colossians, Epistle to the,” in

a letter which not only confronts the syncretistic teaching, but it positively affirms what is central to the gospel and offers a fresh expression of that gospel for a new life setting. This article will examine how Paul contextualizes the gospel in light of its encounter with a syncretistic context. Paul's brief correspondence with a first century Asian congregation, I propose, has important lessons for the church's theological task today.

### **The Colossian Context: A Syncretistic "Philosophy"**

One of the challenges facing any effort to understand Paul's contextual theologizing in Colossians is the notorious uncertainty over the specific background and nature of the teaching he is countering.<sup>3</sup> Scholars have tried to root the opponents' "philosophy" (2:8)—a term that could be used in a fairly broad sense—in some form of early Gnosticism,<sup>4</sup> in Greek philosophy,<sup>5</sup> or in Jewish mysticism,<sup>6</sup> all without full success. Since no

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*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1: 1091-92.

<sup>3</sup>Some scholars, in fact, have questioned whether there was a Colossian "heresy" at all. In an influential essay, Morna D. Hooker argues that Paul is not attacking an actual false teaching that had infiltrated the church but rather is offering a kind of "preventive medicine" against the external pressure to conform to certain pervasive beliefs and practices in the society at large. "Were There False Teachers in Colossae?" in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, C. F. D. Moule, FS, ed. B. Linders and S. S. Smalley (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1990), pp. 121-36; cf. N. T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 27-28; James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 25-26, 34-35. This argument, however, fails to adequately take into account the specific and unusual nature of Paul's polemical language in 2:8-23, which suggests he is citing specific terminology from his opponents.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, trans. W. R. Poehlmann and R. J. Karris (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), pp. 127-131; G. Bornkamm, "The Heresy of Colossians," in *Conflict at Colossae*, pp. 123-45; Petr Pokorný, *Colossians: A Commentary*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), pp. 117-120, all of whom see the Gnostic element of the Colossian error as part of a syncretistic teaching.

<sup>5</sup>Eduard Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians: A Commentary*, (London: SPCK, 1982), pp. 125-134 (neo-Pythagoreanism); R. DeMaris, *The Colossian Controversy* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) (Middle-Platonism); Troy W. Martin, *By Philosophy*

single religious movement we know of can account for the collection of polemical references we encounter in Colossians 2:8-23, it is better to see the problem Paul speaks to as a kind of syncretistic stew made up of a number of religious influences from first century Asia minor.<sup>7</sup> This is hardly surprising, given that the cities of the Lycus Valley in Western Asia Minor were intersections of various criss-crossing cultures. By the first century, the indigenous Phrygian culture and religion had become well integrated with Greek and Roman influences, and a significant Jewish minority contributed to the cultural mix.

Clinton E. Arnold sharpens the question by drawing attention to the often underestimated role of folk religious belief for understanding the worldview and teachings that are the backdrop for Paul's theologizing in Colossians.<sup>8</sup> Popular religion in Asia Minor was highly syncretistic and sprang out of a worldview that was conscious of a host of evil spirits, capricious gods and goddesses, and astral powers that formed ever-present

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*and Empty Deceit: Colossians as a Response to a Cynic Critique* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) (Cynic Philosophy).

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Fred O. Francis, "Humility and Angelic Worship in Col 2:18," in *Conflict at Colossae*, pp. 197-207; Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), pp. xxxviii, 141-45; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 22-26. For brief but helpful summaries of the various possibilities, see O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, pp. xxx-xxxviii; John M. G. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 39-48.

<sup>7</sup>James D. G. Dunn has argued that the Colossian "philosophy" was not syncretistic, but was rather a Jewish "apology" that promoted the distinctive religious practices of the Jews (*Colossians*, pp. 29-35); cf. idem, "The Colossian Philosophy: A Confident Jewish Apologia," *Biblica* 76 (1995): 153-81; Wright, *Colossians*, pp. 24-30; David E. Garland, *Colossians/Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 26-32. This reading of the evidence, however, seems to artificially impose on Colossians the "new perspective" on Paul, which maintains that Paul's critique of Judaism was centered on certain boundary-defining practices such as circumcision, food laws and Sabbath observance. The lack of a polemic against law observance such as we find in Galatians (the word "law" does not appear in Colossians) and the virtual absence of Old Testament citations makes this highly unlikely. Furthermore, it fails to account for the extensive polemic against the "philosophy's" deference to the cosmic powers.

<sup>8</sup>Arnold, *Syncretism*. For a more popular summary of his position, see Arnold, *Powers of Darkness: Principalities and Powers in Paul's Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), pp. 138-47.

threats to daily life.<sup>9</sup> Fear over the onslaught of the powers caused people to try various means of counteracting them, including “magical” practices such as calling on divine intermediaries for protection, ritual acts of power, and ecstatic forms of worship.<sup>10</sup> Arnold thinks that it is against this background that we may best be able to understand a number of the features of the Colossian “philosophy,” including the difficult phrase, “the worship of angels” (2:18), which suggests the veneration of angels by invoking them for protection against the hostile spirits.<sup>11</sup> Whether or not we accept Arnold’s whole picture of the false teaching Paul targets in Colossae, he seems to be correct in seeing it as a thoroughly syncretistic melange that drew heavily from the worldview and practices of the pluralistic environment in the region and especially emphasized the need to come to grips with the powerful heavenly forces that ruled the cosmos.

Unfortunately, the limited and often elusive nature of Paul’s references to the Colossian syncretism make efforts to be more specific in describing its origin and character tentative at best.<sup>12</sup> We can therefore only suggest a number of features which may have been included in the opponents’ hybrid version of Christianity: (1) elements of popular Phrygian folk religion, with its fear of evil spiritual powers (1:16, 2:10, 15), and practices such as invoking angels (2:18), observing taboos (2:21), and rigid asceticism (2:23) as means of gaining protection from unseen forces; (2) a Jewish orientation toward legal ordinances (2:21), regulations concerning eating and drinking (2:16), and ritual observance of festivals and special days, including the Sabbath (2:16); (3) ecstatic visionary experiences, possibly

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<sup>9</sup>Arnold, *Syncretism*, p. 229.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp. 234-44.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 8-102, 310-11. The phrase “the worship of angels” (2:18) has been highly controversial, and there is still no consensus among scholars as to its precise meaning. Those who see the primary background for the Colossian error in Jewish mysticism generally take it not as an objective genitive, i.e., worship directed to angels, but as a subjective genitive, “the angels’ worship,” signifying the mystical experience of joining with the angels in worship around the heavenly throne of God. See Francis, “Humility and Angelic Worship”; Dunn, *Colossians*, pp. 179-182. For a critique of this position, see Arnold, *Syncretism*, pp. 90-95.

<sup>12</sup>See the helpful but somewhat overly skeptical comments about the possibility of reconstructing the Colossian error by John M. G. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon*, pp. 48-54. As always, we must be cautious about “mirror reading,” i.e., using the text of Colossians to reflect a reconstruction of situations behind it which are not actually mentioned.

connected with ritual initiation from the realm of the pagan mystery cults (2:18);<sup>13</sup> (4) a devaluing of the role of Christ, who may have been seen as an intermediary spiritual being and therefore unable to offer full deliverance from the fearsome forces that threatened peoples' daily lives.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Paul's frequent and rather polemical references to "wisdom," "knowledge," "understanding," and "fullness" in the letter may suggest that the false teachers saw their "philosophy" as a means of gaining access to a fuller knowledge of God than is available in the gospel they received from Epaphras.<sup>15</sup> Sharply put, this teaching represented an "over-contextualization" of the Christian gospel in relation to the local religious surroundings and worldview, one that was willing to embrace elements from both Jewish and pagan thought and religious practice.

In particular, the Colossian syncretism held that trusting Christ alone was not enough to deal with the vise-grip that the spiritual powers held on people. The gospel of Christ needed to be supplemented with additional "wisdom" (2:23) and with rituals and ascetic practices in order to help people survive in a world dominated by forces beyond their control. In effect, the rival teachers were trying to "cover all the bases" by paying homage to both Christ and the powers. No doubt, the strongly syncretistic nature of popular religion in the Lycus Valley made it an approach that would have seemed quite natural and appealing for the Colossian converts. For Paul, however, such a message poses a grave threat to the life of the community. On the one hand, it inflates the control of the supernatural

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<sup>13</sup>The interpretation of the difficult phrase "entering the things he has seen" (*ha beoraken embateuōn*, 2:18) as being derived from technical language for the initiates' entry into the holy chamber, resulting in their receiving secret knowledge and a climactic vision, was argued early in the twentieth century by William M. Ramsay, "The Mysteries in their Relation to St. Paul," *Contemporary Review* 104 (1913): 198-209, and Martin Dibelius, "The Isis Initiation in Apuleius and Related Initiatory Rites," in *Conflict at Colossae*, ed. F. O. Francis and W. A. Meeks (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1973), pp. 61-121, who cites inscriptional data from the sanctuary of Apollo at Claros; cf. Lohse, *Colossians*, pp. 119-120; and Arnold, *Syncretism*, pp. 104-157. This cultic background seems preferable to the more general sense of the soul's journey to heaven from earth advocated by Fred O. Francis, "The Background of EMBATEUEIN (Col 2:18) in Legal Papyri and oracle Inscriptions," in *Conflict at Colossae* ed. F. O. Francis and W. A. Meeks (Missoula: Scholars, 1973), pp. 197-207. In any case, the errorists likely claimed superior enlightenment and power as a result of their mystical spiritual experiences.

<sup>14</sup>Arnold, *Syncretism*, p. 311.

<sup>15</sup>Furnish, "Colossians," p. 1092.

powers over Christians. On the other, it drastically diminishes Christ's lordship over the cosmos and the effect of the salvation he offers to the church.

### **Paul's Contextualized Gospel in Colossians**

Paul responds to the threat of this "supplemental" Christianity both as a missional theologian and as a pastor who is deeply concerned for converts still struggling to fully make the shift from their old patterns of thinking and acting. The distinctive situation in Colossae calls for a new "translation" of the gospel into language and theological categories that address the vital issues at hand. Not only must Paul counteract the syncretistic tendencies of the false teaching, but he must also transform some of the basic worldview assumptions, beliefs, and behavior patterns of the Colossian Christians.<sup>16</sup> How does he accomplish this?

Part of Paul's strategy in Colossians is to expose the rival teaching for just what he believes it is—a "human tradition" that threatened to kidnap the Colossians through its "empty deception" (2:8). This is imperative, since Paul thinks the very boundaries of the Christian community are at stake. Adopting the false teaching and its associated practices means living as though one is still a part of the unbelieving world (2:20).<sup>17</sup> Paul's direct assault on the "philosophy" is mainly confined to 2:8-23. In this section, he apparently takes up a series of catchwords from the lips of his opponents, which he then turns against them in boomerang fashion.<sup>18</sup> These references serve as warnings to the Colossians against getting caught up in specific practices that are incompatible with the Christ-centered message they have received (2:6-7).

Paul's primary response to the syncretistic error in Colossians, however, is not to refute its features point by point. Instead, he challenges

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<sup>16</sup>See *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>17</sup>Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* (Collegeville, MN: Glazier/Liturgical Press, 2000), pp. 12, 106.

<sup>18</sup>E.g., "philosophy," 2:8; "the elemental spirits of the universe" 2:8, 20; "insisting on self-abasement" and "the worship of angels," "dwelling on visions," 2:18, "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch," 2:21; "wisdom," "self-imposed piety," "humility," and "severe treatment of the body" 2:23. See O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, p. xxxii. Any identification of the language of the false teachers, however, must remain tentative, since it is not always clear if Paul is quoting or simply describing his perceptions of the error.

its misunderstandings by focusing positively on the meaning of the gospel. The paramount danger of the false teaching for the Colossians is its diminishing of the lordship of Jesus Christ, and it is on this bedrock concern that his exposition of the gospel in the letter concentrates. The Colossian syncretism gives Paul the occasion to reflect theologically on the supremacy of Christ and the sufficiency of his salvation in a way that becomes a targeted word for the church. Several closely-related themes emerge in this reframing of the Christian message, pertaining to the gospel, the all-encompassing role of Christ, the character of the Colossians' salvation, and the Christian lifestyle.

### The Truth of the Gospel

At the letter's outset, Paul reminds the Colossians that their hope is in "the word of the truth, the gospel" (1:5). This phrase almost certainly implies a contrast with the rival teaching that, if left unchecked, would undermine the authentic gospel of Christ. In the same spirit, Paul urges the new converts to "continue securely established and steadfast in the faith," not shifting from the hope of the gospel which they had heard (1:23). Yet, the gospel in Colossians is more than simply a truth to be believed. Unlike the restrictive human traditions of the "philosophy," it is a dynamic agent of God's transforming grace with a universal scope (1:5-6, 23).

Paul enlists a variety of terms to describe the gospel in Colossians, including "the word" (4:3), "the word of God" (4:3) and "of Christ" (3:16), "the faith" (1:23; 2:7), and "the truth" (1:5), all of which recall for his readers the content of the genuine message they have received. Especially noteworthy is Paul's identification of the gospel as the "mystery of Christ" (4:3; cf. 2:2)—a mystery that was formerly hidden but now has been revealed to the saints (1:26). Paul's understanding of "mystery" (*mysterion*) is rooted in Old Testament and apocalyptic Judaism, not in the Greek mystery religions of the day. Nevertheless, Arnold plausibly suggests that some of the Colossian Gentile believers may have had a background in the mysteries that were related to local deities. It is also conceivable that the "philosophy" of the opponents itself included elements of mystery belief and practice; the rival teachers may have even used the term "mystery."<sup>19</sup> Arnold concludes that "given the nature of the situation at Colossae and the background of the Gentile readers, it is surprising that Paul does not avoid using the term altogether."<sup>20</sup> Yet Paul is willing to take the risk of

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<sup>19</sup>Arnold, *Syncretism*, p. 272.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

seizing a term with strong local religious overtones in order to reinterpret its meaning to refer not only to God's eschatological plan of salvation, but to Christ himself. The content of God's mystery which has been made known among the Gentiles is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:27). As John Barclay observes, it seems to be no accident that Colossians portrays Christ as "mystery," since this term represented the supreme commodity offered both by Jewish apocalyptic theology and by Graeco-Roman mystery cults.<sup>21</sup> The Colossians need look for no other "mystery," because according to God's eternal purpose they have received *the* mystery—Christ—who now indwells their lives and embodies their hope for the future. What is more, they should abandon the search for any higher form of spiritual truth, since "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are hidden in Christ, the mystery of God (2:2-3).

### The Supremacy of Christ

The most glaring flaw of the Colossian "philosophy" from Paul's perspective was that it subverted the supremacy of Christ. That is not to say it necessarily denied Christ and his saving work. But it apparently "down-sized" his role in regard to creation and questioned his ability to fully protect believers from the influence of the unseen powers. Christ, in this shrunken state, became a part of the cosmos, not lord over it. As a result, Paul's theologizing in Colossians exalts Jesus Christ as unrivaled Lord of everything and proclaims him as the sole and sufficient mediator of salvation between God and his people.

Paul affirms the supremacy of Christ above all in the magnificent christological "hymn"<sup>22</sup> of 1:15-20. This passage is not polemical as such; however, it speaks forcefully to the concerns of the context and lays a foundation for Paul's christological response to the Colossian syncretism in

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<sup>21</sup>Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 79.

<sup>22</sup>While the majority of scholars take Col 1:15-20 as a pre-Pauline hymn which came out of early Christian worship and was adapted to the context by the author of the letter, it is not inconceivable that it was composed by Paul himself. So, e.g., O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, pp. 40-42; N. T. Wright, "Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1.15-20," *NTS* 36 (1990): 444-468; Larry R. Helyer, "Colossian 1:15-20: Pre-Pauline or Pauline?" *JETS* 26 (1983): 167-79. For overviews of the issues and the abundant research on the questions of the background, literary structure and authorship of Col 1:15-20, see especially O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, pp. 31-42 and Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, pp. 227-242. In any case, our main concern is with present form of the hymn and its theological function in the letter.



2:8-23.<sup>23</sup> Drawing on themes from the Old Testament and the Wisdom tradition of Hellenistic Judaism,<sup>24</sup> the hymn praises Christ as sovereign Lord of both creation (1:15-18a) and redemption (18b-20).

The hymn extols Christ's cosmic dominion in a variety of ways. He is the pre-existent "image of the invisible God," as well as the "firstborn of all creation" (v. 15), a phrase which affirms both his priority to and his sovereignty over the whole universe. In fact, he himself is the creator of all things (v. 16a)—the mediator ("through him"), the goal ("for him" v. 16b), and the sustainer of the whole created order (v. 17b). He has no rivals. The hymn gives special emphasis to Christ's pre-eminence over the cosmic powers. His lordship over "all things," includes things in heaven and things invisible, which are enumerated as "thrones," "dominions," "rulers" and "powers" (v. 16: cf. 2:10). Peter T. O'Brien is quite right that within the context of the letter "no doubt it is the hostile rather than the friendly powers Paul has particularly in view."<sup>25</sup> Given the fear and regard Paul's readers apparently held for the cosmic forces and the concern of the rival teaching to appease them, it is not surprising that Paul deflates the power of the powers by insisting they are a part of the order that was created and

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<sup>23</sup>Walter J. Hollenweger, building on the thesis of Ernst Käsemann ("A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy," in *Essays on New Testament Themes* [London: SCM Press, 1964], pp. 149-168), argues that the Colossian hymn itself in its original form reflected a kind of "New Age" syncretism characterized by mythical poetic language about Christ overcoming the powers. Hollenweger thinks that Paul, while accepting the syncretism of the Colossians, has refocused it by anchoring it in the historical realities of the cross and the church (1:18, 20, 22). This strategy is commended as an example of "theologically responsible syncretism" on the part of Paul ("A Plea for a Theologically Responsible Syncretism," *Missionalia* 25 [1997]: 12-15). I would question not only the attempt to assign different "theologies" to the "Colossian" and the "Pauline" parts of the hymn, but also Hollenweger's basic point that the hymn as it appears in Colossians is the product of syncretism—"theologically-responsible," or otherwise. Part of the problem seems to be terminological, and some of what Hollenweger would label as syncretism, I would term contextualization.

<sup>24</sup>That the portrayal of Christ in Col 1:15-20 echoes descriptions of divine Wisdom in Jewish Wisdom teaching has become a matter of wide consensus. See, e.g., A. J. M. Wedderburn, "The Theology of Colossians," in A. T. Lincoln and A. J. M. Wedderburn, *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 18-19.

<sup>25</sup>O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, p. 46; cf. Arnold, *Syncretism*, p. 255.

is sustained through Christ and are thereby subject to his sovereign rule.<sup>26</sup> The Colossians need a redefined cosmology and a transformed worldview.

Paul goes on to stress that Christ is supreme not only over creation, but also the *new* creation; he is the head of his body, the church (v. 18a). Whereas in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 and Romans 12:4-5 the body metaphor primarily has to do with the interrelationship between the members of the community as the body of Christ, in Colossians the accent is on the relationship of Christ, the head of the body, to his church. This shift in focus to Christ's lordship over the universal church not only demonstrates the flexibility of the "body" image, but it is well-fitted to a context where the sufficiency of Christ was in question. When one is a part of the body of which Christ is head, there is no need to fear or try to manipulate any other spiritual beings.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, Christ is the one through whom God has reconciled all things, earthly or heavenly, to himself (v. 20). Christ's reconciling work is universal in its scope and encircles not only the church, but the heavenly powers that oppose it, as well. In the latter case, however, reconciliation takes the form of "pacifying" (v. 20c) or subjecting all the malignant forces under the rule of Christ.<sup>28</sup> This cosmic reconciliation has already been set into motion (cf. 2:15), but in the wider horizon of Paul's thought, it anticipates a final restoration of harmony when everything "in heaven and on earth and under the earth" will unite to acknowledge Christ as Lord (Phil. 2:10). The powers are not only subdued and defeated; they are re-enlisted in the original creative purpose of giving praise to God.<sup>29</sup> God's reconciling work in Christ is thus enacted on a broader cosmic stage in

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<sup>26</sup>Arnold, *Syncretism*, p. 258.

<sup>27</sup>P. J. Achtemeier, J. B. Green, and M. M. Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 410; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, pp. 49-50. It is therefore unnecessary to make the common assumption that the different usage of the body metaphor in the ecclesiology of Colossians from that of Paul's undisputed letters constitutes evidence of a deutero-Pauline author. Contra Lohse, *Colossians*, pp. 55, 179; Furnish, "Colossians," p. 1093.

<sup>28</sup>See Dunn, *Colossians*, pp. 102-103; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, pp. 56-57; Bruce, *Epistles to the Colossians*, pp. 75-76. This means that Col 1:20 cannot be interpreted to support universalism, in which Christ will redeem all persons and hostile powers in the universe in the end.

<sup>29</sup>John H. Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 61.

Colossians than in Romans (5:10-11) or 2 Corinthians (5:18-20), where Paul focuses on the reconciliation of the Christian community. In the present context, the hymn's all-embracing vision of Christ's victory resounds as a word of assurance to the Colossians that the subjugated powers "cannot finally harm the person who is in Christ, and their ultimate overthrow in the future is assured."<sup>30</sup>

Significantly, the hymn anchors the cosmic Christology and redemption it acclaims in the center of the gospel, Christ crucified and risen from the dead. He is pre-eminent over all things because he is the "firstborn from the dead" (v. 18b), and his universal reconciliation is put into effect through "the blood of his cross" (v. 20). Colossians 1:15-20 sings the story of Christ as pre-existent creator, as the crucified and risen redeemer, and as the exalted Lord of the universe. He is Lord over the total history of God's salvation.<sup>31</sup>

Paul gives this exalted and unrivaled picture of Christ in 1:15-20 concrete application to the needs of the congregation in the main polemical section of the letter in chapter 2.<sup>32</sup> Picking up language from verse 19 of the hymn, he affirms that in Christ "all the *fullness* of deity dwells bodily" (2:9). Has Paul co-opted the key term "fullness" (*pleroma*) from the rival philosophy and infused with new christological content?<sup>33</sup> Or has Paul himself drawn this language from the Old Testament to positively assert that the completeness of God's nature and power has taken up residence in Christ?<sup>34</sup> The answer is not entirely clear. In either case, Paul counters a heresy that devalues the role and power of Christ with the assurance that

<sup>30</sup>O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, p. 56.

<sup>31</sup>Robert W. Wall, *Colossians and Philemon* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 26.

<sup>32</sup>For the connection between the Christ hymn of 1:15-20 and Paul's specific arguments against the false teachings in chapter 2, see Stephen E. Fowl, *The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), pp. 131-154.

<sup>33</sup>So e.g., O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, pp. xxxii, 52, 113; Fowl, *Story of Christ*, pp. 128-29; Lohse *Colossians*, p. 100. Given the unusual usage of *pleroma* in Colossians, this is a distinct possibility. In any case, there is a widespread agreement that *pleroma* was not used either by Paul or his rivals in the technical sense of second century Valentinian Gnosticism as the fullness of heavenly emanations that came forth from God.

<sup>34</sup>So Arnold, *Syncretism*, pp. 262-264; 277; cf. Pokorny, *Colossians*, p. 121, n. 71; Dunn, *Colossians*, pp. 100-101.

Christ is the full embodiment of all that God is and does. The Colossians have no cause to pay homage to any lesser supernatural beings or angel-intermediaries.<sup>35</sup> He is not just one among the many competing gods or powers. Christ reigns supreme over every ruler and authority (2:10).

In 2:15 Paul profoundly contextualizes the death of Christ, bringing his theological argument in 2:8-15 to a fitting climax. Three vivid metaphors are drafted from the Greco-Roman world in order to paint in bold colors God's victory in Christ over the dominions of darkness. In the cross of Christ, God "disarmed" the rulers and authorities, stripping them of their power; he "publicly exposed" them as being shamefully weak and worthless; and he led them in triumphal procession, as a victorious Roman general paraded his vanquished enemies through the city in his train for all to behold.<sup>36</sup> Due to the needs of the situation, the "powers" that Christ has defeated in Colossians are not explicitly those of sin, death, and the law, as we find elsewhere in Paul's writings (e.g., 1 Cor 15:54-57; cf. Rom 6-8). Here it is the forces that ruled the cosmos that are conquered by the cross. The Colossians no longer need be tempted to appease the powers or to live in fear of forces that have already been broken. Only a cosmic Christology could adequately address the new concerns raised by the Colossian syncretism.

### The Present Experience of Salvation

The Colossian "philosophy's" inadequate view of the role of Christ meant that it also lacked a proper understanding of the salvation made available in him. Unlike the situation Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians, where he encounters Christians who claimed too much for their present salvation, defenders of the new teaching in Colossae claimed too little. In their thinking, redemption in Christ needed to be augmented with other means—ascetic and ritual practices, angel worship, legal regulations,

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<sup>35</sup>Wright, *Colossians*, p. 103.

<sup>36</sup>Scott Hafemann has demonstrated convincingly that the Roman triumphal procession normally ended in the prisoners of war being executed, meaning that the verb *thriambeuein* would mean "to be led to one's death in the ceremony of the triumphal procession as a display of the victor's glory." See Hafemann, *Suffering and the Spirit: An Exegetical Study of II Co. 2:14-3:3 within the Context of the Corinthian Correspondence*, WUNT 2.19 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1986), pp. 31-33, here p. 33. The metaphor in Colossians 2:15 would then spell the ultimate death knell to the powers.

visionary experiences—in order to be truly effective. Paul’s theological response is that Christ is not only supreme; he is also wholly sufficient for the Colossians’ present experience of salvation; nothing else is required.

In Colossians, Paul spotlights the completeness of the reconciliation believers have received from Christ. As in Romans, Colossians affirms that believers participate in the saving events of Christ’s death and resurrection, but with a striking difference. Whereas Romans 6:4-8 and 8:11 state that Christians have died with Christ, but their resurrection with him remains in the future (but see Rom 6:4b), Colossians declares that they have not only died (3:3) and have been buried with him in baptism (2:12), but they have *already* been raised with him to a new heavenly life (2:12-13; 3:1). In other words, Paul has shifted the weight of the tension between the salvation already realized and the salvation not yet obtained to the side of the present experience of God’s empowering and transforming grace. This is a daring move and no doubt capable of being misunderstood. Nevertheless, it is precisely what the Colossians needed to hear. By participating with Christ in his resurrection they share in the fullness of resurrection life, and in particular in his deliverance from the tyranny of the unseen powers.

Paul’s introduction of spatial categories in Colossians 3:1-4 (“things above” 3:1, 2) rather than temporal ones (“things to come”) likewise risks being misconstrued as a sell-out to a Greek dualism in which Christians must escape their earthly bodily existence for a heavenly, spiritual one. Once again, however, this familiar language speaks directly to the concerns of the Colossians. As Andrew T. Lincoln insists:

The heavenly realm centres around the one with whom they have been raised and since he is in the position of authority at God’s right hand, nothing can prevent access to this realm and God’s presence and there can be no basic insecurity about the salvation they have in him and its final outcome.<sup>37</sup>

Their lives are now “hidden with Christ in God” (3:3) in a place of security and safety, protected from any menacing forces.

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<sup>37</sup>Andrew T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet: Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimension in Paul’s Thought with Special Reference to His Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 125. Furthermore, for Paul, unlike Greek thought, the world above has a future eschatological dimension. His use of spatial categories in Colossians is therefore quite consistent with the thought of his undisputed letters (cf. Gal. 4:26; Phil. 3:14, 20). See Garland, *Colossians*, p. 214; Arnold, *Syncretism*, pp. 305-306.

The theme of the present appropriation of salvation in Christ runs throughout the letter like a scarlet thread, particularly in the heart of Paul's polemic against the syncretistic error in 2:8-15. The section is peppered with Paul's characteristic "in Christ" and "with Christ" terminology,<sup>38</sup> highlighting the church's ongoing participation in Christ and the fruits of his salvation. This *participatory* Christology is no less significant than Paul's *cosmic* Christology in Colossians.<sup>39</sup> In 2:9-10 he promptly applies the magnificent affirmation that the entirety of the divine "fullness" dwells bodily in Christ to the situation of the church: "and you have come to fullness in him." As a result, "The fullness of God—his power and grace—are bestowed on believers by virtue of their incorporation into Christ."<sup>40</sup> This is Paul's counterpunch to the opponents' apparent suggestions that fullness of salvation could not be secured by Christ or Christ alone. The immediate corollary of the believers' participation in Christ's fullness is that they also share in his "headship," particularly his ongoing authority over the ruling cosmic powers (v. 10b; cf. 1:18; 2:19).

In 2:11-15, Paul marshals a medley of images to interpret Christ's atoning death and resurrection and their present meaning for believers who are in him, some of which we have already noted. He describes in 2:11 the Colossians' union with Christ as a "spiritual circumcision" (literally, "a circumcision not made with hands"). Although the language of verse 11 is difficult to decipher, this seems to be a reference to the inward heart circumcision (cf. Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; Ezek 44:7) that is effected by Christ ("the circumcision of Christ") in his death and resurrection and actualized in the believer's union with him [in baptism].<sup>41</sup> While it is possible that the syncretists promoted circumcision among the Colossian

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<sup>38</sup>Note the "in him" references in 2:10, 11, 12 (and possibly 2:15) and the "with him" compound verbs in 2:12-13.

<sup>39</sup>See Wall, *Colossians and Philemon*, p.26.

<sup>40</sup>Arnold, *Syncretism*, p. 295.

<sup>41</sup>Bruce, *Epistles to the Colossians*, p. 104 Pokorny, *Colossians*, pp. 124-5. The alternative interpretation is to take the phrase "the body of flesh" as a reference to Christ's body and "the circumcision of Christ" as an unusual metaphor for Christ's own death ("circumcision") on the cross. So Dunn, *Colossians*, pp. 157-58; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, pp. 116-17; Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, pp. 364-5.

Gentiles as a rite of entry into the group,<sup>42</sup> the fact that Paul does not directly condemn the practice as he does in Galatians makes this less than certain. Even if they did not, the Jewish input into the Colossian “philosophy” and Paul’s desire to explain metaphorically the fullness of the redemption the Colossians have already received would have made this appropriate language. Incorporation into Christ effects a radical inward purification involving the stripping off of the old sinful self, in contrast to the outward physical circumcision of Judaism.<sup>43</sup>

Another colorful metaphor from the financial world of the day expresses the meaning of the Christ event in 2:14. The “certificate of indebtedness” (*cheirographon*)—a kind of commercial bond or IOU—incurred by their transgressions has been publicly displayed as canceled, through God’s “nailing it to the cross.” The occurrence of the term “legal demands” (*dogmata*) in the same verse suggests that Paul may have specifically had in mind the kind of ascetic and ritual requirements that the opponents were trying to impose upon the Colossian Christians (2:16, 20).<sup>44</sup> The cross

<sup>42</sup>So, e.g., Dunn, *Colossians*, pp. 155-56; Lohse, *Colossians*, pp. 101-102; A. J. M. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection: Studies in Pauline Theology against Its Graeco-Roman Background* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987), p. 83.

<sup>43</sup>Margaret Y. MacDonald suggests that circumcision in 2:11-13 could have been applied metaphorically to various rites promoted by the false teachers (2:16-23), which stand in contrast to the ritual of baptism (*Colossians and Ephesians*, pp. 107-08; 125). Accordingly, “[a]n appeal to baptism in 2:11-13 serves the author well in the attempt to rebuke the repetitive rituals and practices of the opponents because it instills a sense of finality and completion among the recipients” (p. 106). MacDonald is probably correct that Colossians promotes baptism as an alternative to the praxis of the “philosophy,” given the significance of outward ritual and ascetic practices for the false teachers. I have less sympathy, however, for MacDonald’s argument that competing visions of baptism and the relationship between the rites being promoted in Colossae and baptism were central to the conflict between Paul and the Colossian syncretists (pp. 13, 107). From Paul’s perspective, the heart of the problem is Christology, not ritual.

<sup>44</sup>So Pokorny, *Colossians*, pp. 138, 139; Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians* (London: Oliphants, 1974), p. 84; Arnold, *Syncretism*, p. 293. Alternatively, *dogmata* could refer more generally to the regulations of the Jewish Torah, which serve to condemn those who fail to keep them. So, e.g., Garland, *Colossians/Philemon*, pp. 151-152; Wright, *Colossians*, pp. 111-113. In light of Paul’s references to “submitting to regulations” (*dogmatizēin*) in 2:20, as well as the phrase “human commands and teachings” in 2:22, it seems more likely that Paul has in mind special human requirements.

of Christ has liberated them from the condemnation associated with such external and legalistic prescriptions.

Paul's portrayal of the present reality of redemption in Christ also addresses the Colossians' concerns about the hostile powers. At the conclusion of Paul's opening prayer for the Colossian church (1:12-14), he assures them that they have not only been rescued from the dominion of darkness, but they have been transferred into the kingdom of God's Son (v. 13). Here Paul draws upon Exodus language from the Old Testament ("rescue" v. 13; "redemption" v. 14) to describe their present deliverance from bondage to the evil domain over which the powers rule (cf. Eph. 6:12). A stalwart strain of realized eschatology runs through 1:12-14, as well. Believers in Christ even now share in the end-time inheritance of the saints (v. 12). They have already been uprooted from the old realm and transported into the new kingdom (v. 13). Whereas elsewhere in the Pauline corpus believers' full participation in the kingdom of God usually has a decidedly future cast (1 Cor 6:9-10; 15:50; Gal 5:21; 1 Thess 2:12; 2 Thess 1:5; 2 Tim 4:1), here the emphasis is on their present share in the blessings and the resources of the kingdom to come.<sup>45</sup> What this means practically for the Colossians, F. F. Bruce explains, is that "no longer was there any need for them to live in fear of those forces which were believed to control the destinies of men and women: their transference to the realm of light had been accomplished once for all."<sup>46</sup> Later in a polemical context, Paul reminds the Colossians that they have died to the "elemental spirits of the universe" (*stoicheia tou kosmon*), a term which, in light of the Colossian "philosophy," probably signifies the astral and cosmic powers that were thought to hold a sinister influence over the daily lives of human beings.<sup>47</sup>

This does not exhaust the present benefits of God's transforming grace. Believers have appropriated the reconciling work of Christ on the cross lauded in the Christ hymn (1:20-22). Christ's death has brought them forgiveness of sins (1:14, 2:13; 3:13), an aspect of salvation that receives

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<sup>45</sup>See Dunn, *Colossians*, pp. 77-78; Arnold, *Syncretism*, p. 289.

<sup>46</sup>Bruce, *Epistles to the Colossians*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>47</sup>See Lohse, *Colossians*, pp. 96-99; Arnold, *Syncretism*, pp. 158-194; Garland, *Colossians/Philemon*, pp. 159-163. For a discussion of the various possibilities for understanding the *stoicheia* in Paul, see Daniel G. Reid, "Elements/Elemental Spirits of the World," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, D. G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 229-233.



special attention in the letter.<sup>48</sup> They have already stripped off the old self and put on the new self that is now being transformed into the Creator's image (3:9-10). Their lives are currently indwelt by the presence of Christ (1:27). This accent on the indwelling of Christ rather than the indwelling Spirit (as e.g., Rom 8:9-11) fits the letter context. Paul apparently felt that Christology offered a stronger defense against the particular Colossian menace than did pneumatology.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the community is strengthened with the enabling and overcoming power of God (1:11, 2:10; cf. 1:29). Paul's prayer for the Colossians in 1:11 conspicuously piles up the language of "power." The Colossians need divine strengthening not only for fruitful Christian living and service (v. 10), but also for endurance in the face of all opposition (v. 11b), including "the pressure of evil forces in the Lycus valley that would lead them astray as well as make them dispirited."<sup>50</sup>

Given this pervasive emphasis on the *now* of salvation in Christ in Colossians, we might be tempted to think that the contextualizing of the gospel in Colossians has spun out of control—that the Pauline tension between the "already" and the "not yet" has collapsed and the future has been swallowed up by the present. This is not the case, however. For all of its emphasis on the Christian's present experience of resurrection life, Colossians retains a firm expectation of the future hope. When Christ returns, Christians "will be revealed with him in glory" (3:4; cf. 1:5, 22, 27, 28, 3:6, 24). Christ's victory over the powers is decisive (2:15), but it has yet to be consummated.

## The Transformed Life

The context-sensitive translation of the gospel in Colossians would be incomplete without Paul's unfolding its meaning for Christian discipleship and the formation of the community. Beginning with chapter three, Paul shifts his main focus to the practical holiness that is demanded by the

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<sup>48</sup>David M. Hay, *Colossians*, (Nashville, Abingdon, 2000), p. 98 may be correct that Paul's emphasis on the forgiveness of sins in Colossians "suggests that the Colossian philosophy induced great fear that Jesus had not brought full forgiveness."

<sup>49</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA, 1994), p. 637; Bruce, *Epistles to the Colossians*, p. 28. There is only one explicit reference to the Holy Spirit in the letter (1:8).

<sup>50</sup>O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, p. 24.

gospel. The ethical teaching in Colossians reveals a profound interaction between the constant gospel and the contingent situation he is addressing.

In the first place, Paul grounds the “imperative” of living in a way that is worthy of the Lord (1:10) in the “indicative” of God’s gracious and saving action in Christ. As they “received Christ Jesus the Lord,” they are now to “walk” in him (2:6). Since they have been reconciled to Christ, they must continue on in holy living or else risk falling back into their old evil way of life (1:21-23). In Colossians, as elsewhere in Paul’s letters, theology and ethics are interwoven. Nowhere is this more apparent than in 3:1-4, which provides a christological foundation for Paul’s instruction on living as a transformed community in 3:1-4:2.<sup>51</sup> Paul calls the Colossians to a new moral vision, one that is determined by their participation with the triumphant, exalted Lord and their experience of dying and being raised with him (vv. 1, 3). Consequently, they are to seek the “things that are above” and exchange what is earthly for what is heavenly (vv. 1, 2, 5). This entails a complete reorientation of their existence, a radically different way of viewing the world. They must now live by the norms and values of God’s future heavenly kingdom, not those of the world (cf. 2:20). The saving story of Christ, his death, resurrection, exaltation, and return (v. 4), thus becomes fundamental not only for their redemption, but also for holy living.

Paul adapts the concrete instructions for Christian living that follow to his cultural setting and in the process employs a number of standard forms from the moral teaching of the day. These include traditional motifs (“put off/put on”), vice and virtue lists, and so-called “household codes.”<sup>52</sup> Yet he recasts each of them christologically, giving them a distinctively Christian basis and motivation. The list of vices to avoid (3:5-9) concludes with the motif of inward moral transformation into the divine image and the confession that “Christ is all in all” (3:9-11). The ensuing code of virtues (3:12-17) calls believers to forgive one another on the basis of their experience of Christ’s forgiving grace (v. 13) and then grounds community ethics in the ruling peace and the indwelling word of Christ (vv. 15-16). The list of virtues reaches a pinnacle in verse 17, where the church is urged to do “all things” under the lordship of Christ.

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<sup>51</sup>Paul refers to “Christ” four times in 3:1-4, in each case preceded by an article. Robert Wall, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 132, notes that “this grammatical strategy is quite unusual and may well stress the decisive importance of Christ for what follows.”

<sup>52</sup>Dunn, *Colossians*, pp. 199-200.

Paul's use of the Greco-Roman ethical convention of the "household code" (3:18-4:1) that fosters appropriate behavior for various members of the household, reflects a sensitivity to broader cultural concerns for order in family and social relationships.<sup>53</sup> It is a form of instruction that would have sounded quite familiar to his Hellenistic readers, and the ethic it promotes shares much in common with contemporary standards of social behavior. But although there is overlap with conventional Greco-Roman morality, there is also an internal difference. When Paul adds a phrase such as "in the Lord" (3:18, 20) to his instructions to wives or children, or when he tells slaves that by their working for their earthly masters they are in reality serving their heavenly Lord (3:23), this is no mere attempt to coat a pagan institution with a Christian veneer. It transforms mundane household relationships, giving them an entirely new orientation; the way Christians behave toward others is an outworking of Christ's lordship over the community (3:17).<sup>54</sup> The claim that "Christ is all in all" (3:11) means that every household role, every social condition, every cultural situation becomes an expression of allegiance to Christ.

At the same time, Paul's moral teaching, like his theological exposition of the gospel, involves a targeted response to the concrete issues facing the community.<sup>55</sup> As we have seen, Paul's polemic in 2:16-23 is directed in part against a bogus form of holiness that embraced human regulations and taboos, "self-imposed piety," "severe treatment of the body" (2:23), and possibly visionary experiences such as those found in the rites of the mystery religions (2:18). Paul considers such practices to be of the world (2:20) and the flesh (2:18), completely useless to restrain sinfulness (2:23).

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<sup>53</sup>See P. H. Towner, "Households and Household Codes," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G. R. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, and D. G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 419. The Colossian household table has numerous parallels in current Stoic and Hellenistic Jewish moral teaching, as well as discussions of "household management" by Aristotle (*Politica* I. 1253b.1-14) and others. The literature on the "household codes" is vast. In addition to the major commentaries, consult the bibliographies in David Balch, "Household Codes," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3: 319-20 and Towner, "Households and Household Codes," p. 419.

<sup>54</sup>See O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, pp. 219, 233-34; John M. G. Barclay, "Ordinary but Different: Colossians and Hidden Moral Identity," unpublished paper presented at the meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, 2000, esp. pp. 6-11.

<sup>55</sup>Against Petr Pokorny, *Colossians*, p. 158, who judges that "the paraenesis accords surprisingly little attention to the actual situation of the letter."

They are a part of the “earthly things” that Christians must put to death (3:2, 5) and are therefore “off-limits” for the people of God. At stake in Colossae is not only a false theology, but also a wrongheaded perception of what constitutes holy living. It is therefore important to see 3:1-4:6 “as an integral part of Paul’s polemic, setting forth the moral flip side of his theological argument against the ‘hollow and deceptive philosophy.’”<sup>56</sup> The “household codes,” for example, seem to challenge the asceticism of the false teaching by engaging the every-day institutions and kinship relations of Greco-Roman society in a transforming way. While Paul’s ethical exhortations in Colossians are not limited to a specific response to the heresy, they offer a radical alternative to the kind of external religious piety advocated by the opponents’ philosophy. N. T. Wright makes the point with characteristic verve:

The old taboos put the wild animals of lust and hatred (see 3:5, 8) into cages: there they remain, alive and dangerous, a constant threat to their captor. Paul’s solution is more drastic: the animals are to be killed (3:5). The old method of holiness attacked symptoms: the true method goes for the root.<sup>57</sup>

The goal of Christ’s redeeming work in the Colossians is no less than genuine perfection in Christ (1:28; cf. 1:22), a radical inward transformation in the Creator’s image (3:10).

In Paul’s thinking, the praxis of the errant teachers is simply an extension of their bad Christology. It represents a submission to the cosmic powers (2:20) and a devaluing of the lordship of Christ (2:17, 19). The Colossians do not need the “shadow” of ritual observances required by the philosophy; they already have the “real thing” that belongs to the exalted One (2:16-17).<sup>58</sup> This is by no means a condemnation of all religious ritual, or even regulations about special days and diet within Judaism, as such. Rather, such practices, apparently motivated out of deference to the elemental spirits (2:20), become transitory and irrelevant with the coming of God’s salvation in Christ. It is no coincidence, then,

<sup>56</sup>Wall, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 129. Cf. Wright, *Colossians*, pp. 128, 131; Lohse, *Colossians*, p. 132.

<sup>57</sup>Wright, *Colossians*, p. 128.

<sup>58</sup>The contrast between “shadow” (*skia*) and “substance” (*soma*) reflects familiar language that Paul has apparently drawn from Plato and Hellenistic Judaism. See e.g., Philo, *De plantatione* 27; *De migratione Abrahami* 12; *De confusione linguarum* 190. For additional references, see Lohse, *Colossians*, p. 116; Dunn, *Colossians*, p. 176.

that Paul begins his moral exhortations with an echo of Psalm 110:1, which calls believers to share the heavenly life of the enthroned Lord who has defeated all his adversaries, including the powers (3:1; cf. 2:10, 15). Later, the theme of the renewed creation where Christ is “all and in all” in 3:10-11 recalls the cosmic Christology of the hymn of chapter 1. Christ’s reconciliation of “all things” (1:20) includes the tearing down of national, cultural, and social barriers within the renewed community (3:11).<sup>59</sup> Eduard Lohse is quite right that the entire ethical section of Colossians “is stamped with the leitmotif that runs throughout the letter from beginning to end: Christ is Lord over everything—over powers and principalities, but also over the Christian’s daily life” (see 3:15, 17; 3:18-4:1; 2:6). In Colossians, exalted Christology and Christ-centered living walk hand in hand.

## Conclusions

Paul’s letter to the Colossians bears importance well beyond its size for our understanding of contextualization in the New Testament. It provides a glimpse of how the gospel comes to grips with the challenge of a new situation, one that is colored by a syncretistic onslaught that threatens to dilute the gospel and to undermine the life of a young Asian church. Above all, the distinctive mixture that was brewing in Colossae tried to supplement the converts’ faith and offer them substitutes for an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ. Paul tailors his new translation of the gospel to address this alluring alternative with both firmness and flexibility. On the one hand, the truth of the gospel sanctions no compromise with syncretism or a religiously plural environment. Although Paul is willing to become “all things to all people” in matters that are non-essential, he draws a “line in the sand” before anything that challenges the unique supremacy of Jesus Christ, his sole sufficiency to mediate salvation, or his lordship over Christian conduct. If Jesus is Lord, he can have no rivals.

On the other hand, Paul’s expression of the Christian message in Colossians shows a remarkable sensitivity to the context. Writing out of a missionary-pastor’s heart, he seeks not only to turn the Colossians away from the errant teaching, but also to reshape some of their worldview assumptions in light of the gospel. This leads him to elaborate more profoundly on the cosmic dimensions of Christ’s lordship and redemption than we find in earlier letters of Paul. Furthermore, the need to assure believers of the present sufficiency of their salvation from sin and the forces of evil calls forth a daring vision of the Christian’s resurrection with Christ as something already realized. Sometimes such creative theologizing

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<sup>59</sup>See Dunn, *Colossians*, p. 227.

is interpreted as evidence for a post-Pauline author of this letter.<sup>60</sup> I prefer to see it as the result of a flexible missionary trying to re-contextualize the gospel in ways that are appropriate to the life circumstances of his audience.

Paul's contextual theologizing in Colossians engages his readers' world in transforming ways. He co-opts images and metaphors from Greco-Roman culture (see especially 2:9-15) in order to re-express the meaning of the Christ event in terms that resonates with his readers. He adopts a familiar ethical convention like the "household code," only to give it a Christological grounding recasts existing family and social relationships. He even risks seizing familiar language from the syncretistic religious culture of the Colossians (e.g., "wisdom," "mystery," "power," "fullness"?) and infusing it with new Christ-centered meaning. Paul's re-articulation of the language of his culture bears witness that Christian communities do not invent their own special language. Instead, they use existing language and forms from their social worlds in different and transforming ways.<sup>61</sup>

Finally, Colossians offers an instructive pattern for the church's encounter with syncretistic teaching today. We cannot miss the similarities between the context Paul addressed in Colossae and that of many non-Western worldviews and cultures, where established religions, popular folk beliefs, and Christianity routinely intertwine. The message of this letter speaks with uncommon force to contemporary situations where animism inculcates fear of the destructive powers or where idolatry pits rivals against the supremacy and uniqueness of Christ. Authentic contextualization recognizes that sinful worldviews and behaviors must still be challenged and transformed. Syncretism, however, is always a threat to the people of God, whether it takes the form of a blatant christopaganism or a more subtle capitulation to a materialistic "health and wealth" gospel. Unfortunately, the lines between syncretism and "cultural relevance" are not always easy to draw. Yet, like Paul, we must learn to recognize when the Christ-centered gospel cannot be bent without breaking. In a time in which a

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<sup>60</sup>See, e.g., Lohse, *Colossians*, pp. 177-83; Furnish, "Colossians," pp. 1092-94. The issue of the authorship of Colossians has by no means been settled. While the majority opinion among scholars favors a deutereo-pauline origin, a significant contingent of interpreters continue to support the traditional Pauline authorship of the letter. See, e.g., the arguments of O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, pp. xli-xlix; Wright, *Colossians*, pp. 31-34; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The New Testament Writings: An Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), pp. 393-395.

<sup>61</sup>Miroslav Volf, "When Gospel and Culture Intersect; Notes on the Nature of Christian Difference," in *Pentecostalism in Context: Essays in Honor of William W. Menzies*, ed. W. M. and R. Menzies (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), pp. 228, 232.

spirit of pluralism and flabby religious tolerance has become commonplace not only in the so-called Third World, but increasingly in Western societies as well, the unflinching christocentrism of Colossians needs to be voiced again and again. The unique and universal lordship of Jesus Christ must be the anchor of any Christian theology.

At the same time, Paul's context-sensitive theologizing in Colossians offers a paradigm for the church's theological task in every generation and culture. We must have the courage, guided by the Spirit, to find ways of authentically articulating the gospel that draw upon our own stories and cultural resources, that engage *our* audiences, with their worldviews and life experiences. Remarkably, Paul does not respond to the threat of syncretism by indoctrinating the Colossians with a pre-packaged, "one-size-fits-all" theology, as sometimes happens in mission settings today. Instead, he allows the gospel to speak directly to their fears and felt needs, to address their particular worldviews and behavior patterns. We might find a contemporary parallel in the gospel's encounter with worldviews that are still burdened with a fear of unseen powers thought to exercise control over practical concerns like crops, flocks, health, and family relations. Too often the form of Christian theology that has been imported to these settings from the West has failed to address such issues, giving people the impression that God was powerless to overcome the fears and forces that touched their daily lives. Unless we learn from Paul and proclaim Christ as the One who has defeated the powers and is able to free people from fear, it is likely that they, like the Colossian syncretists, will turn to other answers—amulets, rituals, shamans, occult practices—for protection against the enslaving spirits. A gospel that neglects such worldview issues and their practical outworkings may end up actually promoting syncretism rather than preventing it.<sup>62</sup>

Yet the contextualization of the gospel in Colossians does not dwell on the threats to Christ's lordship. Although Paul warns his readers of the dangers of the syncretistic error, he chooses to concentrate his energies on lifting up Christ—the all-encompassing and all-sufficient Savior against whom every human and cosmic alternative pales in comparison. Such a positive reformulation of the gospel, then and now, leaves no valid reason to syncretize the faith.

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<sup>62</sup>For an insightful elaboration of these issues, see Neville R. Bartle, "Developing a Contextual Theology in Melanesia with Reference to Death, Witchcraft, and the Spirit World," Unpub. D.Miss. dissertation (Asbury Theological Seminary, 2001).