

DISCIPLES BIBLE ACADEMY

COLOSSIANS 2 : 6 – 15

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BY

NOELEEN TROLLIP

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INTRODUCTION TO COLOSSIANS 2:6 – 15

My desire to write a hermeneutical paper on Colossians was born out of a ‘love’ relationship I began with this little epistle in December 2010 and my appreciation of it has grown as I’ve studied it. Part of a prayer I wrote on the 1st January 2011 captures the essence of Colossians:

“May we be filled with joy and thanksgiving. You have rescued us from the kingdom of darkness. You have brought us into the kingdom of your Son... You have forgiven us... freed us... We have the victory in Christ Jesus our Lord.... May we be the family you have called us to be.”

Martin describes it as “high-voltage material”¹, Deissmann, impacted by its richness and grandeur, said, “When I open the chapel door of the epistle to the Colossians it is as if Johann Sebastian [Bach] himself sat at the organ.”² Barclay commented that “Colossians was distinguished by its depiction of Christ... It was in the realm of Christology that Colossians was to have its most singular influence.”³ Although we cannot be sure what heresy arose in the church, by doing solid biblical interpretation we can learn how Paul dealt with it apply these principles in appropriate situations. In spite of Colossians having been written to deal with a specific situation in a specific time it is still relevant to us today. Jesus Christ is still the answer to man’s questions about the universe as he is Lord of the cosmos.

¹(Martin 1993, 19)

² (Hendriksen 1971, 4)

³(Barclay 2004, 11)

HISTORICAL QUESTIONS

What is going on with the Author?

There has been ongoing debate about the authorship of Colossians since the 19th century⁴. Some theologians have claimed that this letter contains un-Pauline thought and doctrine, that the style is too different to the undisputed Pauline letters⁵, and that the “Colossian heresy” being dealt with was 2nd Century Gnosticism. However, the testimony of the early church including church fathers such as Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus is that Colossians was written by the apostle Paul⁶. Other strong support for Pauline authorship is based on the close relationship between the letter to Philemon and the letter to the Colossians. The letter to Philemon is widely accepted as having been written by Paul and both make reference to many of Paul’s friends, specifically Onesimus, Ephaphras, Archippus, Luke, Demas, Aristarchus and Mark. It seems unlikely that if the Colossian letter was pseudonymous and written at a later date that the author would have gone to such lengths regarding these details. It is far more logical that both these letters were penned by the same hand, Paul’s, at a similar time.

Colossians along with Philemon, Ephesians and Philippians are called the Captivity Epistles because they were written while Paul was in prison. Paul says in his letter, “For which I am in prison” (4: 3b) and “Remember my imprisonment” (4:18). Although it is possible that Paul was held captive in Ephesus it is more probable that they were written somewhere between A.D. 60 and 61 while he was imprisoned in Rome.⁷

⁴ (New Bible Dictionary Second Edition, 221)

⁵ Undisputed Pauline letters are those most interpreters agree were written Paul and include Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon (Sumney 2008, 2)

⁶ (O’Brein 2000, xli)

⁷ (O’Brein 2000, lii-liv)

What is going on with the Audience?

This letter was written to a fairly young church in Colossae which was planted sometime during Paul's Ephesian ministry (A.D. 52 to A.D. 55). Colossae was a small city in the Lycus valley in Asia Minor in close proximity to Laodicea and Hieropolis (2:1; 4:13, 15-16). Epaphras, one of Paul's co-workers, who was from Colossae (4:12), seems to have been responsible for evangelising in that area (1:7; 4:12-13).⁸ The population of Colossae consisted mainly of indigenous Phrygians and Greek settlers. In the second century B.C about two thousand Jewish families were settled in Lydia and Phrygia by Antiochus III.⁹ Colossae would have been a cosmopolitan city where different cultures and religions blended which would have influenced this young, growing church¹⁰. It is clear from Paul's letter to the Colossian that a particular form of erroneous teaching was present in the Lycus Valley which threatened to gain a foot-hold in the church.

What is Significant about the Stage in Paul's Life when he writes this?

Although Paul had not met most of the Christians in the church in Colossae, he cared about this church deeply and included them in his ministry (1:24-25; 2:1, 5). Out of deep concern Paul wrote this letter to encourage and warn the Colossian Christians. Since he was put to death under Nero in about A.D. 67 this epistle was written towards the end of his life¹¹. The prime purpose of Paul's letter was to combat the heresy that was present in Colossae and threatening the life of the church. He did this by laying a solid Christological foundation, reminding and teaching them about the divine supremacy and all sufficiency of Christ. It was upon this base that Paul built his argument opposing the false teachings. He warned the

⁸ (Wilson 2004, 6)

⁹ (Bruce 1984, 9)

¹⁰ (O'Brein 2000, xxvi)

¹¹ (New Bible Dictionary Second Edition, 892)

Colossians not to be taken in by these and exhorted them to continue living out the “in Christ” life.

LITERARY QUESTIONS

What Type Of Literature Is This?

Colossians is an occasional¹² epistle which follows the typical Hellenistic three-part structure of an opening, a body and a closing.¹³ Most theologians, whose view I agree with, see Colossian’s prime function as polemical where Paul uses his argument to refute the false teachings. Others see it as primarily paraenetical, to shape the moral character and behaviour of the Christians in Colossae. Olbricht believes that Colossians can better be described as being “continual” rhetoric meaning that “the Colossian readers are encouraged to continue their current commitments because the writer claims credibility and concern for the welfare of his reader”.¹⁴

Paul would have been schooled in the use of Greco-Roman rhetoric. To construct a specific argument, structures were not rigid but certain common features were characteristic of the most typical forms of argumentation, namely judicial, deliberative and epideictic.¹⁵ Paul structured his letter as a deliberative argument¹⁶ to persuade his audience to stand firm in the truth of the gospel and not to be “deceived by fine sounding arguments” (2:4).

¹² Occasional in nature means that it arose out of certain circumstances and was intended to address a specific situation (Fee & Stewart 2003, 58)

¹³ (Bailey & VanderBroek 1992, 23)

¹⁴ (Porter 1996, 311)

¹⁵ (Bailey & VanderBroek 1992, 31-32)

¹⁶ A deliberative argument have a typical form consisting of a) a proem or exordium, b) a narration and/ or proposition, c) a proof and d) an epilogue ((Bailey & Vander Broek, 1992, 32)

Within this argumentation are many other rhetorical sub forms which Paul used to build and fortify his case. There is a powerful Christological creedal hymn¹⁷ (1:15-20). The large section from chapter 3:1 to 4:6 is paraenesis.¹⁸ It contains topoi¹⁹ (3:1-4; 3:6-11), a vice (3:5) and a virtue list²⁰ (3:12) and a house hold code²¹ (3:18-4:1). Parts of his letter are epideictic, such as the Christological hymn and the sections which speak about the salvation of the Colossians, for example 1:12-14. These were used to encourage and spur the Colossian Christians on.

What Is The Technique Used In This Type Of Literature?

A deliberative argument was carefully structured to be logically and emotively persuasive. Paul started his letter by building a strong rapport with the Colossian church - “we thank God for you” (1:3), “we pray for you” and “we’ve heard about your faith and love” (1:4). He also emphasised that they share a common salvation - “he delivered us” and “transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son in whom we have redemption” (1:13-14).

An important part of a deliberative argument was to establish the ethos²² of the speaker and Colossians 1:24 - 2:5 does this. Paul is described as one who suffers for the sake of the Colossians (1:24) and struggles for them (2:1). Paul has also been commissioned by God (1:25) and empowered by God (1:29). These together establish Paul as trustworthy and one who the Colossians ought to listen to. While a positive ethos is established for Paul, a

¹⁷ Creedal hymns are rhythmic, image-filled pieces which function as creeds or theological confessions and are usually borrowed from the liturgies of the early church (Bailey & Vander Broek, 1992, 79)

¹⁸ Paraenesis is ethical exhortation/instruction concerning how or how not to live (Bailey & Vander Broek, 1992, 62)

¹⁹ Topoi are extended paraenetical statements on particular themes or topics (Bailey & Vander Broek, 1992, 62)

²⁰ Vice and virtue lists are paraenetical lists containing examples of acceptable and unacceptable ethical behaviour (Bailey & Vander Broek, 1992, 65)

²¹ The household code is also a form of paraenesis which describes how key household relationships properly function (Bailey & Vander Broek, 1992, 68-69)

²² Theories of persuasion were developed under the headings: -ethos (how a speaker established his/herself as being trustworthy), pathos (knowledge of the audience and how they could be motivated) and logos (the content and logic of the speech) (Bailey & Vander Broek, 1992, 31)

negative one is established for the false teachers. They “deceive through persuasive arguments” (2:4) and advocate things which “have a reputation of wisdom” but really “they are not of any value” (2:24).²³

Paul appeals to logic as he presents his case to the Colossians. He masterfully shows the Colossians the advantages of being “in Christ” versus the disadvantages of the new teaching.

How Do These Rhetorical Devices Work To Convey the Author’s Intent?

Paul uses these rhetorical devices to display the awesome power of Jesus Christ. In so doing he bolsters the convictions of his listeners. Christ is the image of the invisible God (1:15a), He is unique over creation (1:15b), He created all things through Him and for Him and so has supreme authority over every principle and power (1:16), He sustains the universe (1:17). Christ is also Lord of the church (1:18a) and He has conquered death to have first place in everything (1:18b). Paul then demonstrates the complete sufficiency of Jesus as Saviour. In Him God is with us (1:19) and in His redemptive work, God is for us (1:20). Paul drives home to his audience that if Jesus is supreme Lord, He is also a sufficient Saviour.

Chapter 2 contains many warnings: “Don’t let anyone enslave you!”(2:8); “Don’t let anyone condemn you!” (2:16) and “Don’t let anyone disqualify you!”(2:18). While the false teachers claim to teach the full knowledge of God and to have credentials based on tradition of old, Paul rejects them as deceivers (2:8). They claim that their “extras” are necessary to have a full spiritual experience. Paul shows how these acts of self-abasement and self-denial are simply a shadow of the reality - the full treasure, which is found in Christ (2:16-17).

²³ (Eriksson, Olbricht & Übelacker 2002, 341-342)

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 are filled with exhortation. These form an important part of Paul's argument as he shows his audience what it means to live "in Christ". This is in contrast to what the false teachers say is necessary.

Using these rhetorical devices, Paul makes a solid case for the superior power and authority of Christ. The fullness of God lives in Christ, and in Christ Christians possess all the fullness. The false teachings can add nothing to this fullness (2:9).

What Is The Structure Of The Text?

The text forms a critical part of Paul's deliberative argument. Verses 6-8, the proposition, states the main point of the argument. Paul proposes that since the Christians are living under the lordship of Jesus Christ, they should not become prisoners of another master through the false teachings. Verses 9-15, the proof, is carefully and logically structured and consists of evidences which support the proposition.

Evidence 1: Paul draws an analogy between verse 9 and 10.

9 The fullness of God lives in Christ.

10 In Christ you are full i.e. complete.

Evidence 2: In verses 11 and 12 Paul uses well known traditions of circumcision and baptism as examples for his proof.

Evidence 3: Paul uses metaphorical illustrations to drive home his point, a legal image (record of debt) in verse 14 and a military one (disarming rulers and authorities) in verse 15.

How Does This Affect Our Reading Of The Text?

The structure of the text helps us to follow Paul's argument logically. The connector, "therefore", at the beginning of this pericope attunes us to the fact that a transition is taking

place and that the text is dependent on what Paul has discussed prior to this point. Paul has reminded us about the supremacy of Christ over all powers and authorities, including the church. Having submitted to His lordship, which verses 2:6-7 encapsulate, Paul communicates why we must not be captivated by philosophy which is an affront to the lordship and complete sufficiency of Christ. This philosophy is presented in 2:16-23 which follows the text. If we are complete in Christ then nothing can be added to make us spiritually full. If circumcision is something demanded by men to be complete – we have already been circumcised by Christ in baptism. If anyone claims that certain regulations must be kept - the law with its ascetic rules has been annulled when Christ went to the cross. If the worship of angels and seeing visions is aspired to as the ultimate spiritual experience – you have been co-resurrected with Christ and are complete in Him. Jesus alone is worthy of our worship and lordship because He is the victor over all powers and authorities.

TEXTUAL QUESTIONS

What Is The Context Of This Pericope?

Since Colossians is a letter it ought to be read as a whole. The text falls approximately in the centre of the letter and contains what is certainly a main theme of the letter – the sufficiency of Christ. What lies on either side of the pericope reinforces this theme. What the text uniquely contributes to the letter is the reason why Jesus Christ is completely sufficient. The first half of the letter serves to encourage and motivate. There are no imperatives or admonitions in this section. There are however introspective checkpoints where we can ask ourselves questions such as, “Is our faith solidly grounded and resting on the hope of resurrection?” (1:23) and “Are we listening to any teaching which sounds good but is not based on the true gospel?” (2:4). The answers to these should be a resounding “Yes” to the first question and “No” to the second because of what is taught in the text. The text contains

the first imperative, “Continue to live in him.....” (2:6) and admonition “See to it....” (2:8).

We are commanded to keep growing under the lordship of Christ and avoid being drawn aside to teachings which do not fall in line with the true gospel because this gospel teaches us that salvation and sanctification are found in Christ alone. We cannot submit to teachings of men since Jesus Christ is our Lord and is in fact Lord of the whole cosmos (2:9-10). The paraenetical section which follows this pericope consists of ethical exhortation expressing how the lordship of Christ is manifest in every facet of the Christian life.

The general outline for Colossians is as follows:

The Colossians and the gospel	1:1-14
The supremacy of Christ	1: 15-23
The Colossians and Paul’s work	1:24-2:5
The sufficiency of Christ	2:6-15
The Colossians and freedom in Christ	2:16-23
The Colossians and life in Christ	3:1-4:6
The Colossians and other Christians	4:7-18

What Is The Text Saying?

The ESV has been used in quoting the text.

Colossians 2:6

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him,

Paul exhorts his listeners that as they began with Christ as Lord, when they heard the “word of truth” (1:15), so they should continue. O’ Brein makes the point that “received” was a term used to refer to something which was received by tradition.²⁴ Epaphras was God’s servant

²⁴ (O’Brein 2000, 105)

who delivered the tradition to the Colossians. Paul passed on this tradition as seen in 1 Corinthians 15:3 “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures...”. We need to hear the true gospel which was handed down from Christ to the apostles and is now found in Scripture. What one is taught about the lordship of Christ is important. In Acts 2: 36 Peter said, “...God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” Here he uses those same three terms together - Lord, Jesus and Christ. We need to submit to the lordship of Jesus for Him to be our saviour. We submit to His lordship by living in obedience to Him daily. Paul’s prayer earlier in the letter was that his listeners would walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God (1:10). The Greek word for “walk” is *peripateo* which figuratively signifies the whole round of the activities of the individual’s life.²⁵ So, because we have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord we need to imitate Him.

Colossians 2:7

rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Paul uses a number of metaphors to teach us how we can live in obedience to Christ. The first is a botanical metaphor which reminds us of Jesus’ parable of the seed in Matthew 13. Those who do not have deep roots wither in the scorching sun, namely the trials which we face in life. The Greek word for “root” is *rhizoo* which means “being firmly planted or established”.²⁶ We need to be firmly grounded in “the faith” which is the apostle’s teaching. In the building metaphor, “built up”, Paul exhorts his audience to rise up or grow from this grounding in Christ. This growth must be based on what was heard initially and not be

²⁵ (Vines 1996, 664)

²⁶ (Vines 1996, 539)

something ‘new’. Thanksgiving is a consistent theme of Colossians as Paul reminds his hearers to be thankful. He encourages us to let our gratitude towards the Father be expressive and genuine. The reason for this exuberant thanksgiving is because He has rescued us and brought us into His kingdom and so has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light (1:12-13).

Colossians 2:8

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

Paul gives his first warning to his listeners. The Greek word for philosophy is *philosophia* which denotes the love and pursuit of wisdom.²⁷ From 2:4 and 2:23 we understand that this philosophy was appealing to Paul’s audience and even sounded wise but he calls these teachings empty deceit. The warning is to look at whose teaching is being followed - the traditions of men or the tradition of Christ. Jesus condemns the traditions of men in Mark 7:8, “You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.” Paul makes the point that these teachings are according to the elemental spirits or forces otherwise described as the basic principles of the world. The Gentile Christians in the past would have believed in evil forces and powers which rule the world. The Greek word *sulago* $\square$ *geo* $\square$ means “To carry off as spoil or lead captive”.²⁸ Paul says that these deceivers would have them as spoil by seducing them into their beliefs. However, Paul says that there is nothing of value in their teachings which will only drag them back to where they were prior to knowing Christ. These beliefs are described as being enslaving in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. In Gal 4:3 he said “In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.” Further in Gal 4:9-10 he continued, “But now that you have come to know God,

²⁷ (Vines 1996, 470)

²⁸ (Vines 1996, 595)

or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years!” In Galatia the Jewish Christians told the Gentiles that to be part of God’s family they needed to keep the Law by being circumcised and keeping the special Jewish days. The false teachers were telling the Colossians something similar. These teachings enslave instead of bringing freedom. We can be enticed by teachings that are of human origin just as easily today. Many false teachers claim that one needs to have Jesus plus something else for true spirituality - Jesus plus speaking in tongues, Jesus plus an extra filling of the Holy Spirit or Jesus plus ‘health and wealth’. We need to look into the Word to ensure we are following Christ and not men’s tradition.

Colossians 2:9 -10

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

In the man, Christ, all the attributes and the very nature of God were found. Jesus was fully God and fully human at the same time. Only in Him can fullness be found and when we are united with Him we are filled and complete – we have everything that matters. We do not need to add anything to be more complete as Jesus is all sufficient for our salvation. As “the head” Jesus is also sovereign over every power and authority. We can be superstitious and think that powers or spirits around us can harm us. In the Xhosa culture dead ancestors still have power. If they are displeased they can harm those who have caused them displeasure. Many will perform rituals and prayers to appease the ancestors. The Christological hymn in 1:15- 18 is a powerful reminder of the extent of the supreme authority Christ has. In Him we have the complete victory. There is no power that can have a hold over us if we are united with Christ. We have been freed from the dominion of darkness (1:13).

Colossians 2:11-12

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Here Paul counters the false teaching that physical circumcision is important but much more than that he shows us how we have fullness in Christ by participating in His death, burial and resurrection. Nothing more is needed. Circumcision, the cutting away of flesh is used as a metaphor to describe what happens to us spiritually at baptism. The body of flesh which is removed is our sin. We die to our old sinful nature and are raised to new life in Christ. All this is accomplished through God's power. Because God raised Jesus from the dead he also powerfully raised us to a new life as Paul also teaches in Romans 6:4, "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." The Romans passage ties in with Col 2:6. The newness of life we walk in is in obedience to our new Lord, Jesus Christ especially as described in Colossians 3. Although Paul only mentions the Spirit once in his letter in 1:18, this life in Christ is what Paul describes in Galatians as "walking by the Spirit". In Gal 5:16 he says, "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh."

Colossians 2:13

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,

'This verse is almost identical to Ephesians 2:5 "...even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-by grace you have been saved." However, through the words "uncircumcision of your flesh", Paul reminds the Gentile Colossians that they were heathens and godless at one time. We were too and so figuratively dead or lost because of our rebellion to God. In the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:24 the father says, "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." Paul emphasises that it is only God who can make us alive. Rom 5:6 and 5:8 shows our helpless state we were in: "For while we were still weak (powerless), at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. "...but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." It is God who united us with Christ, forgave every sin and breathed new life into us. Paul wants his audience to know that God has provided them with everything they need and this cannot be found in the false teachers' philosophy.

Colossians 2:14

by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Paul turns to illustrations to help his audience understand that they have complete victory over all powers and authorities because Jesus has won that victory on their behalf. Paul first uses a legal illustration which we too can understand. A debtor issues a certificate of outstanding debt to the one owing him. This was an apt illustration because the false teachers were trying to draw the Colossians into legalistic practices which he addressed in 2:20-23. The Jews were given the law to obey and Gentiles had God's moral law written on their consciences (Rom 2:14-15). This is described as the "written code with its regulations" in the NIV. Without being in Christ we have a death sentence on our heads because of breaking God's law with its regulations. When Christ went to the cross the titulus bearing his crime

was nailed above his head. In the same way our own accusations were figuratively fastened there. In Greek the word *exeleipho* means “to cancel” or “to blot out” which implies to wipe away or obliterate.²⁹ God obliterated the record of debt against us through Christ’s death on the cross.

Colossians 2:15

He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Paul’s second illustration is a military one which would have been familiar to his audience. In Roman times a victorious emperor would lead his triumphant army into Rome with the spoils of war, including the conquered prisoners and their king. The Roman victory was displayed all the more in the enemies’ humiliation. When Jesus was stripped and nailed to a cross the Roman and Jewish rulers and authorities believed they had won a great victory. Here Paul says that the opposite was actually true. God stripped the rulers and authorities of their power when Jesus went to the cross. The image portrayed is one of God publically humiliating these powers and having complete victory over them. So along with 1:16 and 2:10 this verse shows the absolute supremacy of Christ. We do not need to fear any ruler and authority since we have the same victory over them in Christ.

What Is The Text Doing?

Paul wrote Colossians to persuade his audience to keep living according to the gospel they heard in the beginning and not to fall into error by listening to false teachings. As we read Colossians we feel encouraged and strengthened. Jesus is supreme and we are on His team. The text itself exhorts us to follow our Lord, warns us to watch out for deceptive teaching and teaches us why we can have complete security in Christ. For those of us who tend to have a

²⁹ (Vines 1996,71)

guilty soul and fall into the trap of feeling like we have to do good things or follow rules and keep a tick list to be in right standing with God, Colossians has the answer, “Jesus is all sufficient. In Him you are complete.” For those of us who fear that we are at the mercy of powers like fate and ‘the ancestors’, Colossians says, “Jesus is before all things. Jesus is supreme over every power and authority!” For those of us who cut ourselves too much slack and quickly forget that Jesus is Lord of our lives, Colossians teaches, “Remember what you were rescued from and be thankful. Live to please your Master – He is your only Lord. Now go live it, in community!”

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