

PAUL'S ETHICS IN COLOSSIANS

Colossae was a city in Phrygia in Asia Minor. While not one of the communities hosting the “Seven Churches of Asia addressed in Revelation – Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea – it was in the vicinity of the latter. Given their geographic proximity It is likely that all of the churches in Asia Minor were influenced by similar experiences, teachings, and heresies.

The Asian churches were alike in that they were predominantly Gentile in their membership – Greeks and native Phrygians for the most part – along with some Jews who had converted to Christianity. Being a pluralistic community, it was natural that there would be some degree of syncretism, as each group endeavoured to make meaning of their new common religion with reference to its own tradition and experience. Problems arose when ideas from other philosophies and religions were given the same respect as Christian truth. That this was occurring in Phrygia can be seen with reference to the Church at Ephesus. In his parting speech to the elders of the church, Paul alluded to dangerous teachers to which the church might be exposed. He had found there a number of disciples of John the Baptist who professed not to have received the Holy Spirit, and who said that they had been baptized unto John's baptism. Among the most distinguished and influential was

Apollos (Acts 18:24-25), whose teachings have been credited with the principal errors prevailing in the churches in Phrygia.¹

William Barclay has called the “Colossian Heresy” one of the great problems of New Testament Scholarship, because its exact nature is unknown.² It was, however, sufficiently serious, in Paul’s view, to threaten the life of the Church if left unchecked.³ Some commentators describe it simply as “syncretism”⁴. Others refer to an encounter with Cynic philosophy;⁵ yet others to a form of Jewish apocalyptic mysticism with some similarities to the problems that beset the church in Galatia.⁶

Whatever the source, it was clearly a threat that Paul – or the writer, if not Paul – regarded with concern. His Letter to the Colossians was his attempt to nip it in the bud. His prescription for doing so addressed both theological and ethical issues. The theological issues, concerned with the nature and authority of Jesus Christ, and are beyond the scope of this paper; except to say that if the nature of who Christ was changed then so would any rule of life based on the imitation of Christ, or of Christ-like behaviour in Paul. The first two chapters of Colossians are primarily

¹ The general information above was gleaned from a variety of sources, principally *Albert Barnes Notes on the Bible*, included with the e-Sword Bible Software (<http://www.e-Sword.com>)

² William Barclay, *The Letters to the Phillipians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, revised edition, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 95.

³ Ibid.

⁴ David and Pat Alexander eds, *The Lion Handbook to the Bible*, (Tring: Lion Publishing plc, 1973), 611

⁵ Troy W. Martin, *Philosophy and Empty Deceit: Colossians as Response to a Cynic Critique*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

⁶ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, Second Edition, (New York: Oxford Press, 2000), 346-347.

concerned with the former. The last two chapters deal with how to make the theology real in the lives of the faithful.

Ethical Issue

The ethical issue presented in Colossians is one of moral competency. Believers are made capable by God's grace of doing God's will, and demonstrate in their manner of living, the efficacy of their conversion.⁷ The contrast between vice and virtue in the life is the test. A virtuous character presumes conversion.⁸

The believer is expected to live according to the Law of Christ, manifesting love of God and neighbour and with a sense of graciousness; rather than in accordance with detailed and specific rules promulgated in the Old Covenant. In order to do this, Paul believes that the Colossians needed to take a fresh hold on Christ; on his complete supremacy and utter sufficiency.⁹

Why Paul is concerned

Paul's concern was for the survival of the Church; not only the church at Colossae, but the broader Christian Church.¹⁰ Barclay notes that it was not unknown for there to be a strange alliance between Gnosticism and Judaism. He maintains that it was such an alliance that was present at

⁷ Robert W. Wall, *Paul's Response to the "Spiritual Umpire"*, (<http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/?action=getCommentaryText&cid=9&source=1&seq=i.58.3.2>), 1

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Alexander, 611.

¹⁰ Barclay, 99.

Colossae. The false teachers were attempting to make Christianity into what it was not - a philosophy and theosophy.¹¹

Gnosticism can manifest in asceticism (laws and restrictions), or antinomianism (any immorality is justified).¹² By trying to retain circumcision, food-laws, and festivals Jewish Christians brought the whole basis of man's acceptance with God into question. They were saying, in effect, that faith is not enough; that man must do works to merit salvation - the Old Covenant instead of the New. Moreover, angel intermediaries were a direct challenge to the supremacy of Christ; and the introduction of asceticism and high-flown philosophy threw men back on themselves, and human wisdom; not reliance on the saving grace of God mediated through Christ Jesus.¹³

As Barclay notes, It was a heresy out to limit Christian freedom by insistence on all kinds of legalistic ordinances.¹⁴ It also presented something of an antinomian streak; tending to make men careless of the chastity which Christians should have, and to think lightly of bodily sins.¹⁵ There was also a component of spiritual and intellectual snobbery. It appeared that the "heretics" advocated limiting access to the gospel to

¹¹ Barclay, 99.

¹² Ibid, 98.

¹³ Alexander, 611.

¹⁴ Barclay, 96.

¹⁵ Ibid, 97.

some chosen few; introducing a spiritual and intellectual aristocracy into the heretofore wide welcome of the Christian faith.¹⁶

If had been successful, the Christian church as Paul was building it, and as we know it, could have been destroyed.

There is, perhaps, another element to Paul's concern. His was a realized eschatology. The Christian of his age was living between two aeons – in the now – no longer dichotomy. Those living a life of wrongful relation to God, a life of enslavement to sin and at its worst immorality, shall not inherit God's kingdom.¹⁷ Living in the end times already, one had to be constantly prepared for the second coming and the day of judgment. The Colossians were jeopardizing their justification and salvation.

Prescription for the Problem

For Paul, the exchange of the secular life for the sacred constitutes the central moral reality of the new life in Christ..¹⁸ Essentially, he instructs the Colossians to become what they already are. Since they are resurrected with Christ, because they are in Christ, they should seek the things of where Christ is to be found – his heavenly Kingdom (3: 1-4).¹⁹

¹⁶ Barclay, 97.

¹⁷ J. Paul Sampley, Walking Between the Times: Paul's Moral Reasoning, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 12.

¹⁸ Robert W. Wall, The Foundation of Pauline Ethics, (<http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/?action=getCommentaryText&cid=9&source=1&seq=i.58.3.1>), 1

¹⁹ Rev. Charles R. Biggs, The Pauline Paranesis: The Ethical Application of Colossians 3:1-4, (<http://www.aplacefortruth.org/Pauline.Ethics>), 10.

Paul teaches that the Christian's reality is in Christ; a reality he envisages practically with various codes of Christian conduct.²⁰ The letter's "paranetic" section (3:1 – 4:6) provides exhortations for the new life; teaching about how believers should live. It is divided into four major subsections: an introduction (3:1-4); a series of instructions – put-off the old, put-on the new (3:5-17); a household code (3:18-4.1); and duties to outsiders (4:2-6).²¹

Essentially, Paul's message is that the church will not grow and prosper by conflict, but by stable and resolute daily living in accordance with the will of God.²² The spiritual life of Christians, with Christ through death and resurrection in baptism, is the decisive reality in their lives, determinative of all else. Paul's dominant image of putting off the old being, and putting on the new one is a metaphor for baptism. It lays out negative and positive moral standards that apply to all believers. In doing so, it emphasizes responsible living in present world - Paul's realized eschatology - in ways radically different from those proposed by the errorists.²³

"Putting Off the Old Vices" (3.5-9) emphasizes what the Christian life excludes: appetites and activities that characterize the realm of darkness, and the body of flesh stripped off in baptism.²⁴ Sexual

²⁰ Wall, The Foundation of Pauline Ethics, 1

²¹ David M. Hay, Colossians, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 114.

²² Ibid, 115.

²³ Ibid, 119.

²⁴ Ibid, 123

immorality, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and greed (equated to the worship of false gods) are specified as vices to be let go. The proscription applies not only to behaviour, but also to inner desires. The implication is that that a present life in Christ does not render one immune from temptation. An additional vice list begins at verse 8 - human wrath and deception, anger, evil, abusive speech, and shameful language. This list emphasizes inner feelings (anger, wrath, malice); alongside outer words (slander, foul talk, and lying).²⁵

Paul then turns to putting on the New Virtues, positive actions and attitudes that the Christian faith requires of its members, balancing the vices that they are to overcome: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. (3:12-17).²⁶ The verb “clothe” is used as an imperative to indicate the new way of life believers must embrace. These five virtues combine inner attitudes and outward behaviour, They also are to govern good conduct in relation to others within the Christian community.²⁷ Moreover, Christians are to be patient with one another's faults, and forgive them as they are forgiven by Christ. Above all they are to love each other, an additional duty that brings everything together in harmony.²⁸

Verses 15-17 speak of ‘theological virtues.’ that involve more than human relationships. Christians are to let the peace of Christ rule in their

²⁵ Hay, 124

²⁶ Ibid, 130.

²⁷ Ibid, 131.

²⁸ Ibid, 132.

hearts so they may fulfill their calling of being one body. They are to be thankful (the only use of this adjective in the New Testament)²⁹. They are let the Word of Christ permeate their lives, teach and admonish one another and sing hymns of praise and thanksgiving³⁰. And they are to do dedicate all they do to the Lord Jesus, and to God through him.³¹

The third section (3:18-4:1), known as the 'Household Code' is controversial. In his commentary, *Colossians*, David Hay notes, "This passage has great structural clarity and an appearance of being self-contained, suggesting literary independence from what has gone before. Also, if it were deleted, 4:2 would follow 3:17 smoothly."³²

The passage defines ethical responsibilities according to positions within a household. There is no clear indication that it was meant to apply particularly to the Christians at Colossae. As Hay notes, the exhortations would apply in almost any ancient Christian community.³³

It does, however, tie-in to the rest of the letter. Given that the house-church was the basic cell in the Christian movement, it is appropriate that household relationships would be a proper illustration of Christian duties.³⁴ Its three sections - wives/husbands, children/ parents, servants/masters appear to assume that church members were to be found in all six categories. Essentially, inferiors are told to accept their

²⁹ Hay, 133.

³⁰ Ibid, 134

³¹ Ibid, 135.

³² Ibid, 137.

³³ Hay, 137.

³⁴ Ibid, 138.

subordination, and superiors are directed to use their authority with restraint and kindness. Interestingly, women are told to be subject to their husbands, not to all men. The prescription does not apply to unmarried women, who whose duties would apparently be defined by their position in the household rather than by their sex.³⁵

The final portion of the paranetic section (4:2-6), deals with prayer and witness to outsiders. Paul seeks prayers not for himself, not for his missionary activities.³⁶ Church members are to expected to witness by communicating effectively and appropriately with non-Christians; and are directed to prepare in advance to answer the questions of outsiders.³⁷

Why That Prescription

A.J.M. Weddurburn notes, "...here the ways of Christ are invoked to cement together the Church; and it is with the formation and holding together of the Church that the writer is concerned when the qualities are selected...for they are all ones which would serve to unite the Church, just as the vices that are to be 'put-off'; in 3.8-9 are ones that would tear it apart." ³⁸

Troy Martin, who identifies the Church's opponents at Colossae as Cynics, points to the use of the clothing metaphor – putting off the old humanity and putting on the new - as a reponse to the Cynic custom of

³⁵ Hay, 140.

³⁶ Ibid, 151.

³⁷ Ibid, 153.

³⁸ A.J. M. Wedderburn, The Theology of Colossians, in Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 56

shedding the garments of the old life and putting on the rough wool Cynic.³⁹ He also points to the use of the Household Code as a purposeful effort to show that Christianity is culture-affirming, as opposed to the culture-denying stance of cynicism.⁴⁰ He suggests that the intention was to indicate social roles should not be abandoned; but rather transformed and brought into conformity with the new reality in Christ.⁴¹ Indeed, this is consistent with Ehrman's view of Paul's realized eschatology. Since he believed the Second Coming was imminent there was no need for Christians to go out of their way to disrupt or sustain existing social arrangements.⁴²

Basically, Paul's ethical teaching flows from a moral vision rather than moral rules. He is less interested in doing 'codes of rules' although he provides them, than in 'being' Christian; which for him is to be able to do God's will. Without being in Christ, the faith community neither has the right goals, nor the transformed character sufficient to pursue God's goals.⁴³ In Colossians (3:1 – 4:6) Paul provided a handbook on how to do exactly that – to be transform themselves.

³⁹ Troy W. Martin, *Philosophy and Empty Deceit: Colossians as Response to a Cynic Critique*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 194

⁴⁰ Ibid, 202.

⁴¹ 204

⁴² Ehrman, 349.

⁴³ Robert W. Wall, *The Foundation of Pauline Ethics*, 3

The Fundamental Shape of Paul's Ethic

In the first place, Pauline Ethics are understood as the *indicative* and the *imperative*. The indicative is what God has done for man's salvation in Christ, revealed in history. The imperative is the response the people ought to have to this work of God in Christ. The imperative answers the question: 'how then should we live?'.⁴⁴ The use of the indicative without the imperative can lead to licence and living in the Christian life with freedom, but no goal or direction toward Christ-likeness. The use of the Imperative without indicative can lead to legalism and bearing burdens too heavy for men to bear.⁴⁵ The indicatives of God's salvation are fully integrated with the imperatives of Christian existence. Paul does not speak of one without the other.⁴⁶

For example, he begins Chapter 3 with the indicative statement, '... you have been raised with Christ'. He expands its eschatological implications with 2 other indicative statements – (1) '...your life is now hidden with Christ in God'; and (2) "...you also will be revealed with him in glory". These surround and focus the critical imperative statement, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth..." (3:1). For emphasis, the latter is repeated in verse 2.⁴⁷

Secondly, Paul's ethics have a Christological foundation. This is made clear by 4 explicit references to Christ in 3:1-4 – all located at

⁴⁴ Biggs, 3.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 4.

⁴⁶ Robert W. Wall, Paul's Response to the 'Spiritual Umpire', 1

⁴⁷ Robert W. Wall, The Foundation of Pauline Ethics, 1

centre of passage. They form a centre of inverted parallelism, and give readers a visual aid to confirm Christ's central importance for life.

3.3 (A) ...your life... (B) ...with Christ ...

3.4 (B) ...when Christ... (A) ...who is your life ...

The 3 codes of Christian conduct (3.5-10, 3.12-16, 3.18-4.1) each concludes with summary statement of Pauline ethics (3.11, 3.17, 4.1); which includes a Christological confession that recalls the importance of Christ's lordship for the community's obedient response to God's will.⁴⁸

Thirdly, Paul presents a vital relationship between Christ and God which Paul sees in the critical phrase 'your life is now hidden with Christ in God' (3.3). He returns to this theme in 3.17 to conclude whatever done in Christ's name and through his power must be an offering of thanksgiving to God.⁴⁹

Paul uses a number of techniques to enhance his teaching:

1. He uses a "hidden-revealed" motif to draw attention to certain claims previously made by Scripture; for example, Jewish teaching that it was God's plan to stay hidden as a mystery until the messianic age, when revelation would announce the beginning of universal peace.
2. Colossians emphasizes a 'realized eschatology' – salvation available at the present time – rather than viewing salvation gained only in future.

⁴⁸Robert W. Wall, The Foundation of Pauline Ethics, 2.

⁴⁹Ibid, 3.

3. He uses an 'already- not yet' paradigm to illustrate that believers have already undergone death with Christ, and will share in his glory in life beyond the present one.⁵⁰
4. He uses a blend of the general and specific. For example: it is not just old humanity that is to be put off, but old humanity with all its deeds (examples at 3.8-9, 3.5). Putting on the new humanity involves displaying a number of qualities including the list at 3.12-14.⁵¹
5. The Christian ethical position is articulated via the metaphor of Christian baptism. His presentation reverses the normal sequence of death, burial and resurrection; beginning with resurrection to exhort readers to seek and think the things above.⁵²

In Colossians it is not the content of the ethical instruction that is specifically Christian, but rather the basis for it to which the writer appeals.

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⁵⁰ Hay, 120.

⁵¹ Wedderburn, 55.

⁵² Martin, 192.

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