



Subversion: Jesus as Lord in the Book of Colossians

For the People of Jacob's Well, January 23rd, 2011

By Reid S. Monaghan

Introduction

Christ Jesus is Lord. With such a simple phrase God was subverting the powers of the earth and raising up the kingdom of his chosen one. Throughout history humanity has ruled one another through kings and potentates, small sovereigns who made big claims to power, dominance and authority. Many more have been dominated and subjected by their fear of spirits, false religion, and the basic forces of the world. Yet one king arrived humbly on the earth and went to the grave executed as a criminal. That same king arose triumphantly over death and then led a mission throughout the world by the power of the Spirit and the proclaiming of good news. This king was called **kurios**, Lord and Master, by subjects of the ancient Roman Empire. To declare Jesus as **kurios** is hard enough for modern humanity that so often chooses self-exaltation; it was utterly subversive in a culture where only Caesar was due such title. Jesus subverted all powers and every empire and brought a new kingdom of love and light under the rule and reign of God.

As we enter the book of Colossians, I want to take us through some of the interesting facts about and facets of this wonderful little letter. In doing so we'll first take a look at some historical details surrounding its authorship, people and places involved, and some major religious and philosophical issues which are addressed in this writing. Second, I want to lay out some of the major themes and theological emphases in the book that we will be traveling in together. In conclusion, I will offer some words of challenge to our community as we look to engage the teachings and implications of Colossians thoughtfully in our day.

Let me offer one quick word on reading this essay. The first half deals with some of the background issues related to the book of Colossians. It is a bit more academic in nature though I dare not call it scholarly. The second half, beginning with the header *Themes for Us*, deals more particularly with the teaching of the letter and our focus as a church. With that said, lets head off to the food fight that exists about the historical details surrounding Colossians – it is a fun study indeed.

The Letter to the Colossians

The letter to the church in the ancient city of Colossae is one of the shorter letters in the New Testament but also one of the most theologically rich. New Testament scholar Douglas Moo makes an insightful comment remarking that “Paul’s letter to the Colossians has had an impact on Christian theology and practice out of proportion to its size.”¹ It is a writing which aims to instruct a baby church plant in thanking God for the sufficiency of what he has done for them in Jesus Christ.² British scholar N.T. Wright summarizes the central thrust of this book quite well: “The church need look – must look – nowhere else for forgiveness for the past, for maturity in the present, or for future hope.”³ Jesus, their Lord and King, is all that they need in this age and the age to come.

The literary format of Colossians is that of a letter; it is a letter written in the epistolary fashion common throughout the first century Greco-Roman world. Such letters typically had a personal, often friendly, greeting followed by a body conveying a message. The body would be followed by some concluding thoughts and, many times, the signature of its author.⁴ These letters would carry the authority and presence of its writer into the lives of the recipients, who were usually living at some geographical distance.⁵ As such, we must read and interpret the message of Colossians in this light. As a letter or epistle, it had an author, was received by a certain group of people, utilized certain literary forms, and addressed concerns and issues related to the recipients of that time. In order to better understand the message of Colossians, we will now look briefly at the issues of authorship, date and place of writing, the city of Colossae and its new church, as well as the distinctive theological teachings that the letter seeks to address. To these issues we now turn.

Authorship of Colossians

Historically, Christians have held the epistle to the Colossians as an authentic letter written by the apostle Paul. It found quick recognition into the accepted writings of the New Testament Canon⁶ and exists in the earliest collections of Paul’s writings. The earliest direct reference to Colossians survives in the 2nd century writings of the Christian apologist Justin Martyr.⁷ Additionally, we find in the writings of the church fathers a univocal acceptance that Colossians was the work of the apostle Paul.⁸ The letter also claims within its text to be directly from Paul’s own pen (Colossians 4:18). However, as is the case with some other New Testament writings, modern critics have questioned Paul’s authorship over time.⁹ We will look at the arguments against Paul’s authorship of the epistle and weigh them in turn. After doing so, I will summarize the clear arguments which uphold the historical position that the epistle is indeed the work of the apostle.

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008, 25.

² N. T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Leicester, England Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press ; Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1986, 23.

³ Ibid, 42.

⁴ J.S. Lown, "Epistle." in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, edited by Geoffrey Bromily. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988, 2002.

⁵ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989, 109

⁶ For a great treatment of the formation of the canon of Scripture see F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*. Glasgow: Chapter House, 1988. Also my short introduction to this subject may be a good place to begin as well. See Reid S. Monaghan, *One Bible, Many Books*. North Brunswick: Jacob's Well, 2008. http://www.powerofchange.org/storage/docs/canon_web_jw.pdf.

⁷ D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. 1st ed. Zondervan, 1992, 337.

⁸ Ibid, 338.

⁹ See Peter Thomas O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary. Waco, Tx.: Word Books, 1982, xli. Doug Moo quotes a statistic from Raymond Brown estimating some 60% of current NT scholars hold to a non-Pauline authorship of Colossians. Moo, 29.

The Anti-Paul Arguments

Though there have been other arguments against Paul's authorship, the two most prevalent today deal with the literary issues on the one hand and the theological teachings contained within it on the other.

The literary arguments proceed along the lines of the language and style being non-Pauline. First, there are thirty-four *hapax legomena*, words that appear nowhere else in the New Testament, in the letter to the Colossians. Furthermore, in addition to these terms, there are only twenty-eight additional words that appear in Colossians but nowhere else in the other letters of Paul. In light of this difference in vocabulary words, some have posited a different author of the work. In addition to the vocabulary choices of the book, the style of writing has also been used to argue that Paul must not have written it.¹⁰ However, these literary issues have not persuaded many scholars because they can be easily explained without jettisoning Paul as author. The following are just a few explanations that have been given.

First, different occasions and circumstances call for different vocabulary. The unique issues which are addressed in Colossians (see discussion of False Teaching below) certainly would require corresponding unique word choices in which to confront them. This should hardly be surprising. Furthermore, a man with the training and intellectual ability of Paul could have certainly been able to write letters addressed to varied circumstances using different words than he used in others. F.F. Bruce argues that such a limitation on Paul's ability as a writer and thinker would be highly unwarranted.¹¹ Additionally, in reading the other New Testament letters which are agreed to be authentic to Paul, we see that he is quite capable of a diversity of style. Douglas Moo also mentions that Colossians is a letter written later than some of Paul's other works and he could have certainly evolved as an author.¹² Another possible explanation for the style of Colossians is found in Timothy's involvement in the letter, perhaps as an amanuensis.¹³ Finally, NT Wright makes a good case that the style is actually quite like that of Paul in many ways when given a fair examination.¹⁴ In light of the various explanations available, many scholars have deemed the literary issues inconclusive in dismissing Pauline authorship. Instead of this, others make the case that the theology in the letter is much more developed than that of Paul's other works and remove his authorship along these lines. To these we will very briefly turn.

The theological argument against Pauline authorship usually claims that the teaching of the book on certain issues demonstrates a more mature thought than previously articulated by Paul. The particular issues addressed are the authority of tradition, Christology (the nature of the person and work of Christ), the church, and eschatology (teaching about the final state of the world).¹⁵ It is beyond the scope of this brief introduction to handle each of these issues bit by bit. I refer the reader to other works for this.¹⁶ I will only say that none of the teachings of Colossians contradicts Paul's theology in other letters and the issues raised complement them. Finally, it may also be the case that the letter was written from Paul's Roman imprisonment in the early 60s AD (see below on place of writing). If this be the case, then we can see a reason for a maturing in his thought from his earlier epistles.

A few final issues must be covered about the authorship of Colossians. First, an important question must be raised to the skeptic: if the letter was not written by Paul, then who did? There is no forthcoming answer. Second, if the letter was written by someone other than Paul after his death, then the book appears to be a sophisticated work of forgery as Paul's authorship is stated openly at beginning and end. Though many attempt to make the case that this was an

¹⁰ O'Brien, xlili.

¹¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1984, 29.

¹² Moo, 31.

¹³ An Amanuensis is sort of a scribe or an assistant in the composition of a work. Timothy, who is mentioned in the greeting, could have very well written down Paul's dictation using some of his own style. See FF Bruce, *Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 30.

¹⁴ Wright, 35.

¹⁵ Moo, 32.

¹⁶ See O'Brien, xlv-xlix, Moo 32-36 and Wright, 35-36.

accepted practice in the ancient world, this sort of forgery was never accepted by the church.¹⁷ Doug Moo makes this point very clear when commenting on a quotation of Serapion, Bishop of Antioch from around AD 200:

“We receive both Peter and the other apostles as Christ; but as experienced men we reject the writings falsely inscribed with their names, since we know that we did not receive such from our fathers” (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 6.12.1-6). The notion of an innocent, “transparent” literary device of epistolary pseudepigraphy, in other words, appears to be largely a modern scholarly invention....¹⁸

Finally, as canonical Scripture, we hold that the letter to the Colossians was inspired by the Holy Spirit and, thereby, not in any way misleading us when the opening words read “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.”

Date and Place of Writing

From the text of Colossians we read that Paul was a prisoner when writing the letter (Colossians 4:3, 10, 18). This gives several options from what we know of Paul’s life. He seems to have been in prison quite a bit. He was in jail overnight in Philippi as recorded in Acts 16. It is unlikely that this brief stay which included praise and worship and an earthquake is the time when he wrote this epistle. Three other imprisonments are known to us from the narrative in Acts. First, there is a time in Caesarea recorded in Acts 23, but there are no arguments made in favor of Paul’s writing the letter during this time.¹⁹ There was also an imprisonment in Ephesus in the early 50s, as well as Paul’s house arrest in Rome in the early 60s AD. Tradition holds that Colossians is one of the epistles known as Paul’s prison epistles²⁰ written from this time in Rome. Though this position is not without critique, we hold to this view for the following reasons²¹:

- The list of companions at the end of Colossians is in accord with Paul’s time in Rome - particularly in the presence of Luke, the beloved Physician, which we do not find in Ephesus with Paul, due to the language in the book of Acts. See both Colossians 4:7-14 and Philemon 23, 24 for a listing of various people present.
- The relative freedom of his house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:30, 31) gave Paul the opportunity for writing and the entertainment of associates which aligns well with Colossians 4:7-14.
- The maturity of thought may favor a time in the early 60s rather than the 50s.

There are several arguments for an Ephesian imprisonment,²² but for our purposes here we will prefer Rome. The location of the writing of the letter in no way effects our interpretation of the book, so we should follow the counsel of F.F. Bruce and avoid dogmatism on the matter.²³ Now, enough of this scholarly wrangling, and let us take a quick trip to ancient Colossae to learn a bit about the city to which Paul was directing his letter.

The Ancient City at Colossae

The recipients of the letter were a new church in the ancient city of Colossae. The city was located in what was then the Roman Province of Asia in the western part of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey).²⁴ The immediate region was known as Phrygia, and Colossae was located on the south bank of the Lycus River. It was one of three important cities in the region along with Laodicea and Hierapolis. We know of Laodicea biblically because the church in that city is mentioned in Revelation 3.

¹⁷ Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville, Tenn.: B & H Academic, 2009), 640. An interesting story recounted by Tertullian (160-225) records a presbyter (elder) of a church in Asia being removed from office for trying to pass off a forged letter in Paul’s name.

¹⁸ Moo, 38. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 32-33.

²⁰ Philemon, Ephesians, and Philippians are the other letters classified as such.

²¹ O’Brien, I-II.

²² See NT Wright’s case in Wright, 37-42 and Peter O’Brien’s enumerated summary in O’Brien, lii-liii.

²³ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 32.

²⁴ Moo, 26.

Most scholars think that by the mid-first century Colossae was waning in influence in comparison to others in the region. It was perhaps not unlike some of the rust belt cities of Detroit, Buffalo, and Cleveland, which had high points in the industrial revolution of our recent past. J.B. Lightfoot remarked, “Without doubt Colossæ was the least important church to which any epistle of St. Paul is addressed.”²⁵ On any account, Colossians was a city well known regionally, though not the most influential.

The Lycus valley was under Roman rule from 133 BC onward, but various aspects of Greek culture held sway, and it was never made a Roman colony like cities such as Philippi in Macedonia (modern day Greece).²⁶ Its chief products were derived from wool and colored dyes.²⁷ As with most cities of the ancient Roman Empire, there was a significant Jewish population there as well.²⁸

The Church in Colossae

The Book of Acts never mentions the city, as the apostle Paul never appears to have gone there. We do know of Paul’s impactful missionary activity in Asia Minor. He was based in Ephesus in the region for some 3 years around (AD 52-55). His evangelistic and church planting efforts from Ephesus were effective and multiplicative such that Luke records that all the residents of Asia heard the gospel during this time (Acts 19:10). Epaphras, who is mentioned in the letter (Colossians 1:7), was an associate of Paul and the man who planted the church in his home town.²⁹

The church was made up of primarily gentile (non-Jewish) converts to the faith that heard the gospel and converted.³⁰ At the time of Paul’s writing, they were apparently doing well and living faithfully to the gospel of Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:8; 2:5). They were living out the gospel in a metropolitan cultural milieu much like our own, with a multitude of peoples, philosophies, and religions swirling in a worldview stew.³¹ Like our world they were hearing lots of strange religious ideas being pandered on the Oprah Winfrey show. From what we see in the letter, we understand that this church was being pressed by various religious views and philosophies such that Paul sought to address these. The question of the source of these religious and philosophical ideas has been the subject of much debate and discussion over the years. We will close our introductory background study to Colossians by looking at these issues.

The False Teaching Opposed by Paul

Certain teachings and philosophies gaining hold in Colossae were putting the faith of the church there at risk. The ideological concerns Paul had for the church can be clearly discerned from the letter (particularly in the latter half of Colossians 2), but the precise source of this teaching is not as clear. The teaching has gone under many labels - “Colossian Heresy” being one historically used.³² We will simply call the body of teaching “false teaching” for the sake of simplicity. R.C. Lucas enumerates aspects of this teaching as follows³³:

- It offered a spiritual “fullness” not previously experienced.
- It promised a new spiritual freedom for its followers.
- It offered particular insight and protection over the powers of evil.

²⁵ Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 8th ed. (London and New York: Macmillan and co., 1886), 16.

²⁶ Moo, 8.

²⁷ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 7,8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁹ O’Brien, xxviii.

³⁰ Moo, 28.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

³² See Lightfoot, 71.

³³ Lucas, R. C. *The Message of Colossians and Philemon: Fullness and Freedom*, Bible Speaks Today. Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1980, 22-24.

- The teachers were known for their asceticism (such as fasting and other bodily denials) and religious observances (festivals, new moons, Sabbaths, worship of angels), but it apparently offered no help in combating self-indulgence.
- It offered a deeper “knowledge” of God.
- The teachers held that they were superior to other believers – they were varsity, and all others were JV Christians.
- The teachers were divisive to others.

These various aspects of the false teaching at Colossae are known precisely because of Paul’s masterful addressing and refutation of them in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The nature of these practices is so diverse that a myriad of options is offered as to the identity and source of these teachers. There are as many theories as to the identity as colors found in a bowl of Fruit Loops. No, there are more:

- The focus on secret knowledge and fullness have led some to see a gnostic Essene Judaism (Lightfoot)
- The focus on festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths led some to say the temptation was to abide by Jewish ritual, and it was Judaism only in view (NT Wright)
- Others look to various forms of Jewish mysticism (leanings of Calvin, Bruce, and O’Brien)
- Some speak of an always-present risk of syncretism, mingling the gospel with all manner of beliefs and philosophies (Lucas)
- Still, others study a varied list of pagan mystery cults³⁴

In her ground breaking study, Professor Morna Dorothy Hooker made the case that perhaps there were no actual false teachers in Colossae; Paul was warning them about various risks to the gospel present in and throughout the broader non-Christian culture. In her view, there was not a centralized set of teachings of a particular sect but, rather, general cultural risks floating about.³⁵ One can understand this in our own day where you may run across a Roman Catholic woman with a yard Mary who is into crystals and angels, while also doing eastern meditation poses in honor of Hindu gods. If one would write a warning to Christians living around us, it might include all of these. But there is no organized group called the lawn Mary, lucky crystal, yoga cult to which one might join. At least I do not currently know of one.

What I want you to know is this: Perhaps there was a specific organized heretical body of teachers in Colossae, perhaps there was not. What we see in Colossians is a clear refutation of the theory of “Jesus plus anything else,” rather than Jesus being sufficient for life and godliness. This is Paul’s purpose and the purpose of the Words of God given to us in Colossians. We need to know that there are no JV Christians, and we all find our sufficiency in the gospel of Jesus Christ who is Lord over all. Let us now move on to these themes.

Themes for Us

As we come to the book of Colossians, we realize that there is more theological depth found in its pages than one could hope to grasp fully during a lifetime, let alone a few months. Yet, God in his gracious providence is leading our community into deep waters for our joy and maturity in Jesus. In our day so many things clamor for our attention, the ultimate allegiance of our devotion, and the time and energy of our lives. As we come to Colossians, I am praying that we see its major themes and are instructed by God in finding life and satisfaction in Jesus himself. Too often followers of Christ look to avoid certain things rather than drawing themselves to the one who can sustain them. Yes, we are to walk a certain path, worthy of Jesus and our calling. This will entail making choices to do, believe, think, and love

³⁴ See an excellent compilation of options in O’Brien, xxx-xxxviii.

³⁵ See “Were there false teachers in Colossae” in Morna Dorothy Hooker, *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2008.

certain things and not others. But, our call is to someone who is alive and is leading us spiritually today. Paul's focus in Colossians is to present Jesus as awesome and the one who gives us true fullness, freedom, hope, and purpose in the world. All other pretenders to the thrones of life and the cosmos must give way. If this be true in our hearts, we will serve, suffer, and sojourn well on the mission of God under the sun. Colossians' message is to look to Jesus for your life. As a wise beaver once said, "he's good. He's the King, I tell you."³⁶ We will begin with this theme: Jesus as Lord and King.

Jesus as Lord and King

One of the main themes of Colossians is its Christology - its teaching about the identity, person, and work of Jesus the Christ. Some of the finest and earliest writings about Jesus's full divinity, sovereignty, rule, and reconciling work in the gospel are found in the hymn cited by Paul in Colossians 1:15-17.

His Person

Jesus is said to be the very image or icon of God and preeminent among all things (Colossians 1:15). He is said to be the very agent of the creation of all things visible and invisible. He is said to sovereignly hold all things together as the great sustainer of creation. Jesus is the firstborn of creation (a word signifying place of preeminence, not physical birth³⁷ – Col 1:15) and new creation (firstborn from the dead – Col 1:18). In Jesus dwelled bodily the very person of God in all fullness (Col 1:19, 2:9). Who is Jesus? Colossians answers resoundingly that he truly was the preexisting Son of God³⁸ who became a human being on the earth. Jesus is uniquely God embodied. NT Wright makes this clear in his introduction to the letter:

Christ is not one deity (certainly not a 'Western one', as is sometimes claimed) among many. He is supreme over all. Monotheism has always been a scandal, as Paul well knew when he confronted Corinthian polytheism with the claim 'for us there is but one God... one Lord' (1 Corinthians 8:6). This is his great claim in Colossians, too. It stands over against all idolatry, modern or ancient, and all theological relativism.³⁹

His Works

Reading Colossians we also see the works of Jesus are broad and awe-inspiring. As stated, he is the one through whom all things were created and the one who holds creation together for his purposes in history (Col 1:16, 17). He is the one in whom the universe will ultimately be reconciled to God,⁴⁰ making peace with the fallen creation by the blood of his cross (Col 1:20). Jesus is also the savior and leader of the church, the first fruits of the new creation, those who have been personally reconciled to God (Col 1:18, 21-23). He is maturing and transforming his people and is including people from all nations into this new community (Col 1:24-29) called the church.

His Kingdom

Finally, Christ is seen in Colossians to have a kingdom and, as such, to be the high king of all things. In describing God's work of redemption in the lives of the Colossian believers, Paul tells them that they have been "delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:13, 14). As believers we are now part of the kingdom of Jesus and under his rule and reign on the earth. This kingdom began with Jesus's first coming and continues to grow with his redemption of people

³⁶CS Lewis, "The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe" in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, New York: HarperCollins, 1950, 2004, 146.

³⁷ See Macleod, Donald. *The Person of Christ* Contours of Christian Theology. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998, 56, 57.

³⁸ See treatment in Robert M. Bowman, J. Ed Komoszewski. *Putting Jesus in His Place - the Case for the Deity of Christ*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007, 104-109.

³⁹ Wright, 46.

⁴⁰ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 27.

throughout time. The kingdom will come fully when Jesus returns a second time as a conquering warrior described in the book of Revelation as “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Revelation 19:16).

Just what does Jesus’s kingship and kingdom imply for all other powers in the world? It is not good news, as their postured rules and dominions are seen for what they actually are - small pieces of cheese doled out as if to mice by the one and only sovereign creator God and king.

The Subversion of Powers

In the ancient world there were powers that people feared and cowered before that ruled their lives. There were visible thrones and invisible ones. There were human and earthly powers and spiritual and demonic forces which people feared. Colossians tells us that these are no powers at all. They take a seat behind Jesus, and we should take great comfort in this. Furthermore, we should not be governed by that which is contrary to the kingdom of Jesus. Our allegiance lay with one who is higher.

Political Powers

In Colossians 2:6 we read the following: “Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him.” This unique phrase echoes the teaching from the earliest days of the movement of Jesus on the earth. Jesus is Lord. The very interesting thing to note here is the language Paul chooses. The word for “Lord” that he selects is *kurios*, master or lord.⁴¹ It was used of God in Greek translations of the Old Testament, and it was also used broadly in the devotion of the Roman Empire. Every Roman citizen would have been accustomed to confessing “Caesar is Lord” as part of their Roman identity. From the earliest days of the Christian faith, followers of Jesus would not confess this. Caesar is Lord? No. We will not confess this for the throne of the highest master is already occupied by God - the anointed king Jesus. Furthermore, though the thrust of the passage is Jesus’s rule over invisible powers, Jesus is clearly presented in Colossians 1:19 to rule above all things visible as well. There is no domain above the rule of Christ. Interestingly enough, Jesus is said to be the “icon or image of God on the earth,” a claim made by Caesar and subverted by Jesus’s higher claims and rule. That little Caesar guy claiming to be a divine “icon” on the earth was simply a poser. The true and great living icon of God on the earth was not a man of political power, but Jesus, the second Adam, who manifests the rule of God on earth.⁴²

Demonic/Spiritual Powers

The false teaching swirling in and around Colossians seemed to indicate an obsession with unseen spiritual powers and forces. Paul goes to great lengths both in chapter 1 and chapter 2 to show Jesus as superior to them. In Colossians 1:16 Paul references “thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities” as a certain classification of angelic powers (and, likely, evil ones). Paul’s point is that Jesus is supreme over them. In Colossians 2:15 Paul tells of Jesus’s full beat down upon “rulers and authorities,” doing an end zone dance over these evil powers through the cross.

Religious/Philosophical Systems

One last area of warning Paul gives to the Colossians is in the area of deceptive philosophies which depend upon human traditions rather than on Christ. In that day there were philosophies and religions abounding in Colossae (see above introduction), and in our day this also frequently the case. The seduction of teachings will always be around, and to resist them we must always look towards Jesus. Personally, there is a passage I have gone back to again and again when looking at the viewpoints abounding in our world. After one of his more difficult teachings, many of Jesus’s

⁴¹ For more on the usage of *kurios* see M. J. Harris, "Lord." The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, edited by Geoffrey Bromily. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988, 2002, Vol 3, 157-158.

⁴² In Genesis we are told that God created male and female in the “image and likeness” of God. In Colossians we see that the full image of God is Jesus in the new order. Some have connected this to Paul’s theology in Romans where Jesus, the second Adam, redeems humanity from the curse brought by the failure of the first human beings. See O’Brien, 43.

followers turned back, tapped out, and quit following him. Jesus asked his inner circle if they were going to leave. Peter's answer for them, which has become my own, was simple: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:66-69) There is no answer to be found apart from the gospel. The godless and god-haunted worldviews, religions and philosophies do not offer better answers to life's mysteries. Colossians reiterates to us our duty not to be taken captive by philosophy (Col 2:8) but, rather, always look to Jesus and his work for us as the truth (Col 2:9-15).

Sanctification and Life Change

In chapter three of Colossians, we see that God's work in us through Jesus is the transforming power in our lives. There are several robust theological subjects in view here, so we will just mention them for our purposes.

Union with Christ

Paul wanted the Colossians to realize that Jesus was their life and that they were to set their minds on his purposes and ways (things above). Our lives are hidden in Christ in a union with him through whom our lives are transformed (Colossians 3:1-4).

Killing of Sin

In light of our vital union and position in Christ, we are called to put to death that which belongs to our sinful nature. Though God is the one who works in us to transform us, we have a role to put to death sin by our own choices and actions as God's people. This teaching in Colossians 3:5-11 is in accord with Paul's instruction to put to death the misdeeds of the flesh (Romans 8) as well as to live our new life in Christ as exhorted in Ephesians 4. We never make our lives a solo self-help endeavor; yet, with the indwelling power and help of the Holy Spirit we are called to kick sin to the curb and kill it off in our lives. Romans 6-8 is Paul's most robust teaching on these truths which are reiterated in Colossians 3.

New Clothes

Not only are we called to put certain things to death in our lives, we are called, in the positive flow, to clothe ourselves in certain virtues which reflect the character of Jesus. There is a way of life, a way of love, a way of gratitude, a way of kind compassion, and a way of forgiveness that should be our path to the glory of Christ. Colossians 3:12-17 gives us the way forward out of a life of sin and into a new life together in the gospel.

The Church as Body of Christ and Spiritual Household

The community of faith known as the church is another theme that peaks out for us in Colossians. Flowering from Paul's earlier metaphor of God's people being one body made up of many parts (1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12:5), Colossians teaches us that the church is the body of Christ with him as our head and leader (Colossians 1:18, 24; 3:15). Additionally, the church is seen in Colossians as a household, and clear instructions are given for living together in household relationships as God's people (Colossians 3:18-4:1).

The Church as Missional Community

The final emphasis that Colossians brings forth for us is that the church is a gospel centered, gospel preaching, church planting band of sisters and brothers. One cannot but help to marvel at the growing, fruit-bearing gospel which gave birth to the church in Colossae and was blossoming all over the ancient world. That same gospel is bearing fruit in our lives and in people in Central New Jersey and all over the world today. (That stuff just fires me up!)

This is also not something that happens through nameless individuals in a galaxy far, far away. Paul had trained a Colossian named Epaphras who brought the gospel business to bear in his home town. A whole band of people were

involved as friends in mission moving forward in the purposes of God. The book ends with Paul, who is in prison, asking for prayer. What was on his heart and mind? The mission of Jesus in and through the church! He is praying for effective proclamation of the gospel and the wise missional engagement of the Colossian church. Here are his words:

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison - that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. (Colossians 4:2-6)

Concluding Thoughts

Jacob's Well, there are many leaders, rulers, powers, pleasures, philosophies, and religions scurrying around this world under the sun. They do desire for you to bow a knee to them. We shall not go away with such lovers. We will stand firm in the faith, rooted and established in love as his missional family here on earth. May all such powers be cut at the knees and utterly subverted in our lives. May King Jesus become ever more our focus, and may our hope be firmly fixed in him.

All for the glory of God! All for the good of the city! All by extending hope through the gospel of King Jesus in our time!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Reid S. Monaghan', with a stylized, cursive script.

Reid S. Monaghan

Bibliography

- Bowman, Robert M., and J. Ed Komoszewski. *Putting Jesus in His Place - the Case for the Deity of Christ*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007.
- Bruce, F. F. *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1984.
- _____. *The Canon of Scripture*. Glasgow: Chapter House, 1988.
- Buttrick, David, Thomas G. Long, and Edward Farley. *Preaching as a Theological Task : World, Gospel, Scripture : In Honor of David Buttrick*. 1st ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.
- Carson, D. A., Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. 1st ed. Zondervan, 1992.
- Harris, M. J. "Lord." in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, edited by Geoffrey Bromily. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988, 2002.
- Hooker, Morna Dorothy. *From Adam to Christ : Essays on Paul*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2008.
- Köstenberger, Andreas J., L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles. *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown : An Introduction to the New Testament*. Nashville, Tenn.: B & H Academic, 2009.
- Lewis, CS. *The Chronicles of Narnia*. New York: HarperCollins, 1950, 2004.
- Lightfoot, Joseph Barber. *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*. 8th ed ed. London and New York: Macmillan and co, 1886.
- Long, Thomas G. *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989.
- Lown, J.S. "Epistle." in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, edited by Geoffrey Bromily. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988, 2002.
- Lucas, R. C. *The Message of Colossians and Philemon : Fullness and Freedom Bible Speaks Today*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1980.
- Macleod, Donald. *The Person of Christ Contours of Christian Theology*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998.
- Monaghan, Reid S. *One Bible, Many Books*. North Brunswick: Jacob's Well, 2008.
http://www.powerofchange.org/storage/docs/canon_web_jw.pdf.
- Moo, Douglas J. *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008.
- O'Brien, Peter Thomas. *Colossians, Philemon* Word Biblical Commentary. Waco, Tx.: Word Books, 1982.
- Wright, N. T. *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon : An Introduction and Commentary* The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Leicester, England Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press ; Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1986.