

**COLOSSIANS:
MORE THAN ENOUGH**

LESSON FOUR

COMMENTARY

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COLOSSIANS 2:6-7

Douglas Moo, in the *Pillar Commentary*, shows how remaining centered on Christ is really the heart of the letter:

This paragraph, along with the closely related 2:8-15, is the heart of Colossians. In these two verses Paul succinctly summarizes the basic response that he wants from his readers. Paul ties these verses to their context by reflecting language and ideas found earlier in the letter.⁴ The positive exhortation to *continue to live in Christ*, which is elaborated in a series of four participles (vv. 6-7), is very similar to what Paul has prayed for in 1:10-12. And the warning about avoiding false teachers (v. 8) echoes 2:4-5 and, to a lesser extent, 1:23.

6 If 2:6-15 is the heart of Colossians, this verse (along with vv. 9-10) is the heart of 2:6-15. It serves as the hinge between the first major section of the letter (1:3-2:5) and the second (2:6-4:6). The first clause succinctly restates the key theological argument of the letter to this point: Jesus Christ is Lord, and we have entered into his Lordship. The second clause then summarizes the specific commands and warnings that follow: we are to *continue to live in him*, to work out just what it means in both our thinking and our acting to live under the Lordship of Christ.

Paul's choice of the verb "receive" in the first clause is significant. This verb (*paralambano*) is usually used by Paul to refer to the "receiving" or "accepting" of tradition about Christ and his significance (1 Cor. 11:23; 15:1, 3; Gal. 1:9, 12; 1 Thess. 4:1; 2 Thess. 3:6; the verb occurs with other senses in Phil. 4:9; Col. 4:17; 1 Thess. 2:13). In keeping with the christological focus of this letter, however, Paul refers here not to the receiving of teaching, or tradition, or the word of God (cf. 1 Thess. 2:13), but of Christ himself (this is the only occurrence of *paralambano* in Paul with a personal object). To "receive Christ"—in this verse at least—is not only a matter of believing "in" his person; it also involves a commitment to the apostolic teaching about Christ and his significance. This tradition, which the Colossians have heard from the faithful Epaphras (1:7-8), stands in contrast to the "human tradition" of the false teachers (v. 8).

This point is underscored in the way Paul describes Christ: *ton Christon Iesoun ton kyrion* (literally, "the Christ Jesus the Lord"). Paul exhibits considerable variety in the way that he uses these three names, or titles, from the simple "Jesus" or "Christ" or "Lord" to combinations of two or three of them. But never elsewhere does he use exactly the same sequence of names and articles that we find here; indeed, this combination is found nowhere else in the New Testament. Views on just what this unusual construction might indicate vary. Some think "Christ," because of its prominence in Colossians, is the main object of the verb and that "Jesus the Lord" is added to explain further who this Christ is: for example, "you have received Christ [who is both] Jesus and Lord." These two qualifications of "Christ" might, then, be directed to aspects of the false teaching, "Lord" summing up the high Christology of 1:15-20 and "Jesus" emphasizing the real humanity of Christ or the public ministry and teaching of Christ. But the name "Jesus" is too common in such phrases to justify this assumption; nor, again, does Paul anywhere else in Colossians make a point of Jesus' humanity or earthly life. Others suggest that the phrase conceals a double confession: that Jesus is Christ (the Messiah) and Lord; cf. NJB, "you received Jesus as Lord and Christ." It is likely, indeed, that "Christ" is not simply a proper name here—that it carries with it implications, however weak, of Jesus as the promised deliverer/King of Old Testament and Jewish expectation. But it would seem more likely that the article before *kyrios* sets it apart and that it is this title that receives the emphasis in the verse. Furthermore, coming after a transitive verb such as "receive," the title may function predicatively; hence TNIV's *Christ Jesus as Lord* (see also NLT; NET; REB; TEV). Paul is probably intentionally echoing, then, what was arguably the early Christian confession: that "Jesus is Lord" (cf. Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3). And "Christ" is added to this formula in two texts that may (despite the different syntax) be cited as close parallels of what Paul probably intends here: "For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord (*Christon Iesoun kyrion*)" (2 Cor. 4:5); "and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord (*kyrios Iesous Christos*), to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:11). By alluding to this confession here at a key transitional point in the letter, Paul connects a fundamental expression

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of what it means to be a Christian with the Christology that he has developed in the earlier part of the letter. “Jesus Christ is Lord” is a succinct way of saying that he is “the image of the invisible God,” “the firstborn over all creation” (1:15), “the head of the body, the church” (1:18), “the mystery of God” (2:2; cf. 1:27), and the repository of “all wisdom and knowledge” (2:3). It is this central confession, with all its varied and far-reaching implications, to which the Colossians need to return in order to ward off the threat of the false teaching.

Paul has earlier prayed that the Colossians might learn to *live a life pleasing to the Lord* (1:10, where, we suggested, “the Lord” is Christ). Paul makes the same connection here, urging the Colossians, since they have received Christ Jesus *as Lord, to continue to live your lives in him*. “Continue to live your lives,” as in 1:10, translates the Greek verb *peripateo*, “walk” (and see the notes on 1:10 for the significance of this word). The word “continue” in the TNIV is intended to bring out the significance, in this place, of the present form of the imperative verb (so also NLT; NET). Paul is telling them, in effect, to “remain where you are!”¹⁴ *In him* will have its usual “local” sense: “conduct your lives as incorporated in him,” setting the stage for the important use of this idea in the following passage (vv. 7, 9, 10, 11). The polemical context in which Paul writes (see v. 8) justifies our seeing in this language an exclusive emphasis typical of the letter as a whole: “Let Christ—and no other! for he is Lord—establish your values, guide your thinking, direct your conduct.”

7 We have noted earlier the similarity between Paul’s prayer in 1:10–12 and his exhortation in vv. 6–7. In both texts, Paul uses four participles to elaborate the nature of the “life” or “walk” that should characterize believers. Both series of participles employ a horticultural metaphor, and both conclude with a reference to thanksgiving. The parallelism is a striking example of the way Paul will use his opening prayer to anticipate some themes of the letter to follow. It also suggests what for Paul was his central concern for the Colossian Christians. The participles in v. 7 are assigned various syntactical labels by interpreters, but, however we label them, it is clear that they tell us how we can continue to live a life that gives Christ his rightful place as Lord. The first two—*rooted* and *built up*—are closely related: they express a similar idea, they both govern the phrase *in him*, and the former, in its only other New Testament occurrence (Eph. 3:17), is paired with a verb similar to “built up” (Eph. 3:17, “rooted and established [from *themelioo*, “lay a foundation”] in love”). To be sure, *rooted* and *built up* connote different metaphorical associations. The former (from the verb *rhizoo*) is obviously taken from the world of horticulture. Its few appearances in biblical Greek (only five in the LXX in addition to the two New Testament occurrences) are all metaphorical in character (as in Philo also). The imagery in the LXX passages (see esp. Isa. 40:24 and Jer. 12:2) reveals that, at least for some *koine* writers, it was still a “live” metaphor (that is, it would continue to connote horticultural associations to those using the verb).

Built up, equally obviously, is a construction metaphor. As the form of the underlying Greek word suggests, the verb basically has the sense of “build [something] on [something else]” (*ep-*[“upon”] *oikodomeo* [“build”]). But the word sometimes loses the local “upon” idea, simply expressing the process of building, and this would seem to be the case in our verse. As with the verb “root,” “build [up]” occurs in biblical Greek only with a metaphorical sense (1 Cor. 3:10, 12, 14; Eph. 2:20; Col. 2:7; Jude 20 [a variant in 1 Pet. 2:5]; it does not occur in the LXX). In Paul’s other uses of the verb, the “construction” metaphor remains quite strong: Paul and his associates “build” a community “on” foundations laid by others (1 Cor. 3:10, 12, 14); the people of God are “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph. 2:20). But, in common with Jude 20, the metaphor fades a bit here in Colossians 2:7. Together, these participles emphasize that believers can live lives that exemplify the Lordship of Christ only by remaining, like branches, firmly attached to the vine in which God has himself placed them (cf. John 15) and by continuing to allow God to integrate them, like stones, into the new structure that is nothing other than Christ himself (cf. 1 Pet. 2:5–8; “body of Christ” in 1:18, 24; and esp. 2:19). We have deliberately used the language of “remaining” with respect to “rooted” and “continuing” with respect to “built up” to reflect the probable distinction that Paul intends by putting the former into the perfect tense and the latter into the present tense; see NASB: “having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him.”

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The third participle may shift metaphors yet again, for *bebaioo* occurs in legal texts to mean “validate” or “guarantee.” But the word does not occur often enough in this specific sense to justify our finding a legal metaphor here.²¹ It is used generally in the LXX and New Testament, where it means “confirm” (Rom. 15:8; 1 Cor. 1:6; Heb. 2:3), but, especially with a personal object (as here in Colossians), “strengthen” or “establish” (Pss. 40:13; 118:28; 1 Cor. 1:8; 2 Cor. 1:21; Heb. 13:9). “Establish” (as in most English versions) is preferable to TNIV’s “strengthen” because it brings out better the basic sense of the word-group: “firm” or “solidly grounded.”²² With this participle, Paul summarizes what he expects to happen as a result of the first two: by sticking to their roots and being built up, the readers will be established in faith. Like the first two participles, this one also is in the passive mood, implying that it is God who does the establishing—as he does the “rooting” and the “building up”—and, like the second, in the present tense, suggesting an ongoing process of “becoming established.”

It is uncertain just what Paul means when he qualifies this “establishing” with the word *pistei* (“in faith”). The word might refer, as it usually does in Paul, to one’s own believing, in which case it might indicate the means by which the establishing—“established by means of faith”—or what the establishing is in reference to—“established with reference to one’s own faith,” “established in one’s own faith” (cf. NASB; NET; TEV). But Paul occasionally uses the word to refer to *the* [Christian] faith, that is, to the content of what one believes rather than to the believing itself. In this case, again, “the faith” might be the means of becoming established (NJB?) but is more likely, with this meaning, to indicate the sphere in which being established takes place: “being established in the faith” (cf. TNIV; RSV; NRSV; ESV; NLT; HCSB; REB; NAB).

With the phrase as *you were taught*, Paul returns to where this sentence began, with the “tradition” that the Christians have received. It is unclear what it is that the Colossians were taught: the faith (cf. NJB, “the faith you have been taught”; also NLT)? That they should be “established in the faith” (so, probably, TNIV; REB)? Or that they should be “rooted and built up in him, established in the faith” (so, apparently, RSV; NRSV; ESV; NASB; HCSB)?²⁹ The first option, while it makes very good sense, is unlikely on syntactical grounds. Deciding between the other two is almost impossible, especially since, as we have seen, “being established” summarizes the first two. In any case, Paul wants again to remind the Colossians that Epaphras has faithfully conveyed to them the true message of Christ, an emphasis that we have seen at several points in chapter 1 (vv. 5–8 esp.; cf. also v. 23; and cf. Eph. 4:21; 1 Thess. 2:15). The allusion to what the Colossians have already been taught interrupts the flow of participles, causing *overflowing with thankfulness* to stand by itself as almost an afterthought. But we should not thereby underestimate its significance. As we have noticed already, thanksgiving plays a prominent role in Colossians, Paul apparently being convinced that true gratitude for God’s grace is an important “offensive” measure against the false teaching (see the notes on 1:12).¹

COLOSSIANS 2:8-15

N. T. Wright, in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, shows how Paul is reminding the Colossians (and us) that they are already complete in Christ:

a. Christ and his rivals (2:8-10). 8. Paul now sums up his negative advice to the Colossians: *See to it that no-one takes you captive*. The verb here translated ‘take captive’ (*sylagogein*) is a very rare one. I suggest that Paul uses it because it makes a contemptuous pun with the word *synagogue*: see to it that no-one snatches you as a prey (see RSV) from the flock of Christ, to lock you up instead within Judaism. The means by which young Christians might be snatched away is characterized as *through hollow and deceptive philosophy*. NIV well expresses the fact that Paul is not opposed to (what we would call) ‘philosophy’ in general:⁵ literally the word simply means ‘love of wisdom’. But this ‘love of wisdom’, like the facade of a grand house which remains standing when the insides have been demolished, promises much and gives nothing. Hellenistic Judaism called itself a ‘philosophy’

¹Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 177-183.

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on occasion, especially when in contact with the pagan world that thought in terms of competing philosophical schools. Paul, referring to it thus, contemptuously agrees that it should be seen as just another human system.

In place of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge that the Colossians already possess in Christ (2:3), this ‘philosophy’ offers only *human tradition and the basic principles of this world*. ‘Human tradition’, a phrase picked up in 2:22, recalls the polemic of both Isaiah (29:13) and Jesus (Mark 7:5ff.) against the transformation of true, living religion into a set of ideas and rules handed on at a purely human level. This is not to deny that there is a proper use of ‘tradition’ within Christianity, when Christ himself works by his Spirit to bring his truth to a new generation through the witness of the church. What Paul has in mind is undoubtedly the traditions of the Rabbinic schools in which he had grown up.

The second phrase, translated here as ‘the basic principles of this world’, is somewhat harder, though very important to the whole argument. The problem lies in the ambiguity of the word translated as ‘basic principles’ (*stoicheia*). NIV has opted for the meaning ‘rudiments’, the foundation principles of a subject: but the word could equally well mean the ‘elements’ supposed by early science to make up the physical world (earth, air, water and fire), or—as most scholars take it—the elemental spirits of the universe, identified as the ‘deities’ who preside over individual nations and peoples. All these meanings derive from the word’s root meaning of ‘series’ or ‘row’ and hence ‘member in a series’, ‘component’ or (in that sense) ‘element’. The context of Colossians 2 shows that here and in verse 20 the correct meaning is that of local presiding deities, the national ‘gods’ supposed to rule over the different areas and races of the world. The arguments for this are well summarized by Caird, and will be strengthened by our exegesis of this whole chapter.

But did Paul think that these presiding deities really ‘existed’? His clearest answer is in 1 Corinthians 8:4–6. We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’), yet for us there is but one God ... and but one Lord.

The gods may have some odd sort of existence, but they are not God. Certainly they ‘existed’ in the sense that pagans believed in them and worshipped them: Artemis (Diana), the great goddess of Ephesus, had better be taken seriously by anyone preaching the gospel in that city (cf. Acts 19:28–40). Three points are basic to Paul’s argument about these ‘powers’. (a) Christ is the ruler of all nations, and of any powers or authorities that may stand behind them in the shadowy world of superstition and mythology. (b) The Colossians, in being set free from their national solidarities by belonging to the new world-wide people of God, have also been released from their local ‘deities’. (c) What Judaism might offer to ex-pagan Christians is in fact just another local and, one might say, tribal religion, composed like any other of allegiances, rules and regulations which function at a purely worldly level.

The alternative to this superficially attractive ‘philosophy’ is the system of life and truth that depends *on Christ*: and with this the battle is joined. This passage brings to a climax the Christological theme that has been developing since 1:15–20, exploring one facet after another of what it means for Christians to be ‘in’ him (note the succession of ‘in Christ’ and similar phrases throughout 2:9ff.).

9–10. These verses give the main reason (for) why the Colossians must not be ensnared by this ‘philosophy’: *in Christ all the fulness of the Deity lives in bodily form*. This is probably to be taken simply as an expansion of Col 1:19; the tense is past there, present here, but in both the referent is the same, the glorified man Christ Jesus. The word translated ‘in bodily form’ can also mean ‘actually’ or ‘in solid reality’. We should not, however, drive a wedge between the two. Part of Paul’s point is that the incarnation, the taking of ‘bodily’ form by God, was and is the ‘solid reality’ in which were fulfilled all the earlier foreshadowings, all the ancient promises that God would dwell with his people. The word *theotes*, translated ‘the Deity’, is to be distinguished from *theiotes*, ‘divinity’—an attribute which might conceivably be possessed by a being of lesser standing than God himself. The verse is, of course, much more than a mere detached statement of a doctrine. It enables Paul to do two things.

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First, he shows that Christians have no need to pay homage to lesser supernatural beings: or, to put it more strongly, that all other lords become idols when contrasted with Christ. The man Jesus Christ, now exalted, is not one of a hierarchy of intermediary beings, angelic or (in some sense) 'divine'. He is, uniquely, 'God's presence and his very self'. Second, Paul is anxious to show that all the advantages of monotheism (which attracted many Gentiles by its contrast to the confused and unedifying pagan pantheon) accrue to Christianity. Christ is not a second, different Deity: he is the embodiment and full expression of the one God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Those who belong to him, therefore, *have been given fulness in Christ*. (The same root underlies both this phrase and 'all the fulness' in v. 9.) The parallels in Ephesians (1:23; 3:19) suggest the meaning that God intends to flood the lives of men and women, and ultimately the whole creation, with his own love, power and richness, and that he has already begun to put this plan into effect through Christ and by his Spirit. That is the Colossians' inheritance in Christ, and they can want nothing more from any other source. Nor need they submit to any other master, for *(he) is the head over every power and authority*. NIV, by translating 'head of ...' as 'head over ...', rightly indicates that 'head' here is not to be understood in terms of the 'head-and-body' metaphor of 1:18 and 2:19. The word 'head' was as flexible and evocative in Hebrew or Greek as it is in English, and we should not squeeze all Paul's uses of it into exactly the same mould. It is probable that 'every power and authority' here, and in verse 15, refers primarily to the same entities as the *stoicheia* of verse 8 (and perhaps the list of 'powers' in 1:16). They, at least, are the powers and authorities which are relevant to Paul's argument at this point. All power structures, ancient or modern, whether political, economic or racial, have the potential to become rivals to Christ, beckoning his followers to submit themselves to them in order to find a fuller security. The invitation is as blasphemous as it is unnecessary. Christ brooks no rivals. His people need no-one but him.

b. Already circumcised in Christ (2:11-12). 11-12. In him you were also circumcised: or, perhaps better, 'and in him you were circumcised'. Paul emphasizes that the Colossians have *already* been 'circumcised' (in a sense to be explained), and therefore do not need to undergo the operation again in a physical sense, as would be required if they were to become proselytes to Judaism. The emphatic position of this statement in Paul's argument is one of the strongest reasons for seeing Judaism as his main target in the present chapter. The metaphorical use of 'circumcision' (*not with a circumcision done by the hands of men*) has a long history in the Old Testament and subsequent Jewish writings. Paul picks up this idea (that the heart, not merely the body, requires circumcision) and uses it to distinguish between Christianity and unredeemed Judaism, thereby designating the former as the true inheritor of the promises to the patriarchs. 'Christian circumcision', the point of entry into the community of Christ's people (as physical circumcision was the point of entry into the community of Israel), provides all the initiation one needs to belong to the people of God.

But in what does this 'Christian circumcision' consist? Literally translated, this passage reads 'and in him you were circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the stripping off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism ...'. NIV has changed the order and opted for one of the possible interpretations of 'the circumcision of Christ', reading *you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature* (the margin notes that this could be translated 'flesh'), *not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism ...* This last phrase, which envisages Christ as the actual performer of the spiritual circumcision, is somewhat strained: better, perhaps, to leave the reference general, 'the circumcision relating to Christ', or 'circumcision as (re)defined by Christ', hence simply 'the Christian circumcision'.

The earlier phrase explaining this spiritual surgery ('the putting off of the sinful nature') is more tricky still. NIV omits the word 'body' (see the literal translation above): but, even if we reinstate it, the problem of meaning remains. In what sense does one 'strip off the body of flesh' in becoming a Christian? The NIV (and NEB) apparently resolve the problem in one direction by interpreting 'body of flesh' to mean 'sinful nature': the old Adam, as in Romans 6:2-6, is put to death in baptism. But 'stripping off the body of flesh', even allowing for the multiple meanings of 'flesh' in Paul, seems a very odd way of making this point. Some scholars have therefore suggested that the reference

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is to Christ's stripping off of his own flesh, in his death (this would imply that the final phrase, 'the circumcision of Christ', was a reference not to 'Christian circumcision' but to the death of Christ, metaphorically referred to as 'circumcision'). It is true that Paul understands the death of Jesus itself, and not merely the believer's appropriation of it for himself, as the moment when sins were dealt with (see, e.g., 2:13-15 below). But this is not the point here: the context requires that Paul say something about what has happened to the Colossians in their becoming Christians. We must therefore enquire further.

One possible meaning of the words, the literal stripping off of the physical body, leaving (presumably) a naked soul or spirit, is obviously irrelevant to those who have yet to face physical death, and is scarcely Christian in its theology. A better solution might be to treat the phrase as meaning more or less the same as 3:9; but this reads into our present passage an unwarranted ethical emphasis. There is, however, another possible metaphorical meaning which gives excellent sense here. As a result of their baptism into Christ, the Colossians now belong first and foremost to the family of God, and not, therefore, to the human families (and their local 'rulers') to which they formerly belonged. 'Body' can, in fact, easily carry the connotation of a group of people, needing further redefinition to make it clear which group is envisaged (as in 'body of Christ'). In that context 'flesh' can easily provide the further requisite definition, since it can carry not only the meanings of 'sinful human nature' but also, simultaneously, the meanings of *family* solidarity. The phrase can thus easily mean 'in the stripping off of the old human solidarities'. The convert, in stripping off his clothes for baptism (the baptismal reference in the next verse has coloured the language) leaves behind, as every adult candidate for baptism in (say) a Muslim or Hindu society knows, the solidarities of the old life, the network of family and society to which, until then, he or she has given primary allegiance. This meaning fits very well with the rest of the section.

The transfer from the old solidarity to the new is accomplished in baptism. Such a statement alarms many Christians today: seeing the dangers of regarding baptism as a quasi-magical rite through which people are automatically transformed, many have drawn back from the realism of Paul's language, not only in this passage but in (for instance) Romans 6:2-11 and Galatians 3:27. It has sometimes been claimed either that 'baptism' here is simply a metaphor whose reference is the 'spiritual' event of becoming a Christian, or that the baptism in question has as its main significance the public profession of faith.

But Paul's thought is not to be forced into the 'either-or' of anachronistic Protestant—or, for that matter, Catholic—polemics. Paul is certainly not asserting anything remotely like the position Protestants have always rightly opposed, namely, that the rite of water-baptism 'makes someone a Christian' in the sense that the candidate is willy-nilly converted and made, automatically and inalienably, the possessor of eternal life. But his thought here contains another element. As a Jew, Paul had believed in the solidarity of the racial people of God. In becoming a Christian, he transferred to the church the idea that the people of God was indeed a *people*—not now, indeed, drawn from one race only, but made up from every family under heaven. This people is not merely an invisible family known to God alone, but is an actual company of people in space and time, the church in which Christ is confessed as Lord: outward and visible entry into this outward and visible family is accomplished through the rite of baptism.

This explains Paul's frequent appeal that the church should become in fact what it is in theory, should put into detailed operation the life to which it has been committed in baptism. 1 Corinthians 10 shows that it is possible, in Paul's mind, for people to be baptized and yet to be in danger of losing all. This does not make baptism a mere empty ritual. The candidate, being placed into the family where Christ is loved and served, is in the best possible position to grow into mature Christian faith and life. If we find Paul's definite statements about the effects of baptism hard to understand, it is probably because we have lost his vision of the church as the loving and welcoming family of God, the people who, by support, example and teaching, enable one another to accept the gospel down to the depths of their being, and so to make real for themselves (among other things) the rich statements of Colossians 2:12, to which we now return.

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Having been buried with him in baptism, so that his death is counted as their death, the Colossians have been—also in baptism—raised with him through your faith. Just as the doorway of a building will often indicate what sort of a building it is, so baptism, the gateway to the Christian life, demonstrates (compare Rom. 6:2–11) that being a Christian means dying with Christ to the old solidarities and habits and coming alive to the new family of God and its new life-style. Faith itself is the first sign of this spiritual life: not that spiritual life is God's reward for those who believe the gospel, but that true faith, expressed classically in the confession that Jesus is Lord, is the result of the secret life-giving work of God's own Spirit (see 1 Cor. 12:3).

As in Romans 4:16–25, this faith is characterized not simply as 'faith in Jesus Christ', but as *faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead*. To believe that God raised Jesus from the dead is to believe in the God who raises the dead. Such faith not merely assents to a fact about Jesus, it recognizes a truth about God. Paul, reminding the Colossians that they have professed this faith, draws attention to that characteristic of God which undergirds their new status in Christ. They belong to the new world, where the 'rulers' of the old world have no authority. By the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, the Colossians have been transferred (see 1:13) into the family of the new age. This does not mean (as is sometimes suggested) that, according to this passage, Christians live entirely in the new age—an idea which comes under attack in (e.g.) 1 Corinthians 4:8 or 2 Timothy 2:18. The 'heavenly' life which Christians now enjoy does not escape the rigours and temptations of earthly existence, but becomes on the contrary more than ever committed to working out the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection in practical human life (see 3:1–4; 3:5–4:6).

c. Already free from the law's demands (2:13–15). It is utterly characteristic of Pauline theology that at the heart of a description of how people (particularly Gentiles) have come to belong to God's family we should find the cross. It is also characteristic that Paul should see the power of the law as abolished in Christ's death, and that this thought should follow a similar statement about circumcision (see Rom. 4:9–12; 13–16). (It has been argued above, and will be borne out in the detailed exegesis, that the subject here is the Jewish law even though the word 'law' does not occur.) That Colossians 2:13–15 provides a composite statement of this sort is not in question; but almost everything else about these verses is. In the case of many of the verbs here it is not even clear who the subject is, and the imagery employed seems to pile one obscurity on top of another. The context, however, indicates the overall line of thought. Paul is drawing out the significance of the fact that the new Christians have been united in baptism with the death and resurrection of Christ, and so have exchanged their previous status (Gentiles, outside the people of God) for that of forgiven sinners, welcomed into a family circle beyond the reach of legal accusation or previous national loyalties.

13. Every Jew would have agreed with Paul in telling the Colossians that, in their pagan days, *'you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh'*. The best commentary on this is provided by the parallel passage in Ephesians 2:12: 'remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.' Paul nowhere draws back from the position that he would have taken as a Pharisee, that the pagan nations were utterly lost. Rather, he offers the appropriate remedy for this condition. Just as the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:24, 32 'was dead and is alive again', so *God made you alive with Christ*. The verb in this sentence, formed by adding the word 'with' to 'made alive', is typical of expressions Paul uses when thinking about Christians dying and rising (or whatever) 'with Christ'. The logic of such constructions is that, when God looks at those who are 'in' Christ, he reckons that what is true of Christ (particularly his death and resurrection) is true of them also. They died *with* Christ, they have been raised *with* him. Events like resurrection, which were expected by Jews to occur at the end of time, have actually begun within history, so that those who belong to Christ find themselves living simultaneously in the old and in the new age, albeit owing fundamental allegiance to the new. It is this overlap of the two 'ages' of Jewish expectation that brings about the characteristic paradoxes and tensions of Paul's view of the Christian life. At one moment he must emphasize, as here, that believers already partake in the life and power of Christ's resurrection. At another (e.g. 3:5–11; Rom. 8:12–15) he must stress the consequent obligation to 'put to death' all that still remains of the old sinful life.

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Because of the close biblical link between sin and death, the logical precondition for the resurrection life is that sins must be dealt with. The claim that God has ‘made you alive’ requires, therefore, further explanation: and Paul answers this need, preliminarily, by saying that God *forgave us all our sins*. (The word ‘all’ goes with ‘sins’, not with ‘us’.) Paul has altered his pronouns here: he has now shifted from ‘you’ to ‘we’. Jews were not ‘dead in physical uncircumcision’, but they, just as much as pagans, needed forgiveness of sins. The Colossians have joined Paul in the people of God; Paul joins them in the category of forgiven sinners. The further question, of how this forgiveness was accomplished, is now to be addressed.

14. How, then, did the cross solve the problem of sin? Paul does not attempt here a full theological statement of the achievement of Calvary. He aims, more specifically, to show how those things that might have excluded the Colossians from God’s people were dealt with on the cross. The present passage stands at the centre-point, both in literary structure and theology, of the whole chapter and section.

In verses 14–15 Paul notes the two barriers which stand between human beings and membership in God’s family: *the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us*, on the one hand, and *the powers and authorities* on the other. God has apparently cancelled the former and *disarmed* the latter. But what are these two? And in what way were they ‘against us’? And how has this antagonism been removed? Paul clearly intends to provide answers to all of these questions, but he has done so in a way that makes it difficult for us to hear what he has said. In verse 14 we must ask: (a) what is the ‘written code’? (b) How does ‘with its regulations’ relate to the rest of the verse? (c) What does ‘that stood opposed to us’ add which was not already said in ‘that was against us’? And, most important, (d) how has God ‘cancelled’ and ‘taken away’ this barrier? (The further problems of v. 15 will be discussed presently.) NIV, like all translations, has had to opt for one particular point of view, and has in consequence made the passage seem simpler than it is.

We may begin by looking at (a) and (b) together. There are basically three options for understanding *cheirographon* (a word that occurs only rarely in literature of this time). (i) The first is taken by NIV, which, translating it as ‘the written code’, and linking it to ‘with its regulations’ (*tois dogmasin*) (cf. 2:20), sees it as referring to the Mosaic law. This can claim a parallel in Ephesians 2:15, the only other Pauline use of the root *dogma*. (ii) The more traditional interpretation was to understand *cheirographon* as a bond of debt, an IOU, signed by the debtor, referring in this case metaphorically to the debt of sin. This can be coupled with a view of ‘its regulations’ which takes it with one of the two phrases indicating that this bond was ‘against us’ (‘against us’ *because* of its regulations: there is no word for ‘with’ in the Greek, and the dative case here employed could be interpreted like this). There are grammatical difficulties with this, though, as indeed there appear to be in doing almost anything with the phrase except, like Chrysostom and one fourteenth-century manuscript, omitting it altogether. (iii) A recent interpretation draws on the use of *cheirographon* in a first-century Jewish apocalyptic work to refer to a book, kept by an angel, in which all one’s evil deeds were recorded, and couples this with the suggestion that Paul sees Christ himself as taking on the identity of this bond, nailed to the cross, in representing his sinful people.

The last suggestion seems to me forced and unlikely. If Paul really meant that Christ himself became the *cheirographon*, he would surely have made it clear sooner than at the end of the verse. And the idea of an IOU, while undoubtedly true to the usage of the word, has to import into the context the notion that this bond had been signed by all people in their consciences—which, while it may correspond to a truth about universal consciousness of guilt, reads a great deal of extraneous material into an already crowded verse. But options (ii) and (iii) may have a grain of truth in them, because they can in fact be combined with (i). It would be in keeping with the ironic tone we find at various points in this chapter that Paul should refer to the Mosaic Law as a mere IOU note, or perhaps as a book which does nothing but keep a tally of one’s sins (see, e.g., Rom. 4:15; 5:20; and Gal. 3:19–22, where the law, given by angels, has the purpose and effect of shutting people up in their sins). *Tois dogmasin* is then an almost equally ironic explanatory phrase, referring to the detailed commandments of the Law as that in which the ‘handwritten note’ consisted. The first alternative,

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properly understood, thus contains at least the overtones of the other two, neither of which is satisfactory if forced to bear the whole weight of meaning. If this suggestion is correct, the other problems in the verse may be seen in a new light.

(c) The difference between ‘against us’ and ‘opposed to us’ is slight but not altogether insignificant. The first indicates active opposition or enmity: the second, a barrier which stands in one’s way. The word-order in Greek is ‘having blotted out the against-us handwriting, with its regulations, which was opposed to us’. This may indicate that Paul added the last phrase to emphasize the effect of the detailed regulations, because of which the ‘handwriting’—i.e. the Law—kept both Jews and Gentiles locked up in sin. The Mosaic Torah did not, we should note, stand over against Jews and Gentiles in the same way. In Paul’s view, it shut *up* the Jews under sin and shut out the Gentiles from the hope and promise of membership in God’s people.

(d) God not only ‘cancelled’ this ‘written code’; he *took it away, (by) nailing it to the cross*. The images are so overlaid here that it is hard to see how they are to be related to each other. But if we follow the line of thought taken so far, and pick up the suggestion of several writers that there is a reference back to the *titulus*, ‘The King of the Jews’, which Pilate nailed to the cross as the ostensible reason for Jesus’ execution (see John 19:19), the following interpretation suggests itself. Jesus was sent to the Roman tribunal after being deemed worthy of death by a Jewish court, which had declared (whatever we make of the details) that he was guilty according to the law. Pilate, echoing that verdict but giving it a new twist, put on the cross the sign that read ‘The King of the Jews’. But Paul, looking at the cross, saw there instead the *titulus* that expressed the charge against all Jesus’ people, the written code that stood over against them, disqualifying them from the life of the new age. And it was God, not Pilate, who put it there. Underneath the different emphases required by the different arguments in which they are set, this verse states the same truth as Galatians 3:13 or 2 Corinthians 5:21. As the representative of his people, Jesus dies their death on the cross, so that, dying it with him, they need never die again. This is how God has dealt with sin, so that his people may have new life.

The context safeguards this statement of what Luther called the ‘wondrous exchange’ (Christ takes our sins, we his righteousness, as in 2 Cor. 5:21) against the misunderstandings to which it has sometimes been subjected. God himself is the source of the redeeming action, not at all an unwilling angry tyrant, pacified by his Son’s pleading or, worse, by the sight of blood. And Christ dies under the ‘written code’ that stood against us (the second ‘us’ may be emphatic, in implied contrast with Christ who took it in our place) not in virtue of some arbitrary exchange of roles but because he, as Messiah, truly represents his people and can therefore appropriately stand in their place.

This verse, understood in this fashion, does two things in its wider context. First, it explains how God has made forgiveness of sins, and therefore new life, available for all. Second, it re-emphasizes the uselessness of looking to Judaism for a richer or more complete membership in the people of God. The Torah was not a help, but a hindrance; God has erased its accusing demands and removed them from the scene altogether. No longer need Jews be under its curse; no longer can it keep Gentiles out of God’s family. No longer can it bar the way to the life of the age to come. This emphasis, reinforced by the final verse (15) of the present section, is taken up again in the last sections of the chapter (2:16-19, 20-23).

15. The overall point of verse 15 is likewise clear, but the details are once more extremely tricky to unravel. Paul is asserting that, because of what Jesus did on the cross, *the powers and authorities* are a beaten, defeated lot, so that (by implication) neither the Colossians nor anyone else who belongs to Jesus need be overawed by them again. The phrase *triumphing over them* alludes metaphorically to the practice of Roman generals following a conquest. In the days before the modern news media, the most spectacular method of announcing a far-off victory to people at home was to march in triumph through the city, displaying the booty taken from conquered peoples, and leading a host of bedraggled prisoners through the streets as a *public spectacle*.

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So far, so good; but here the problems of this verse start. (a) What precisely has been done to the 'powers'? (b) By whom has it been done (God? or Christ?) and (c) where has it been done (in Christ? or on the cross?). These three questions need to be taken together. Logically and grammatically, the subject of the sentence continues to be 'God', and the final phrase, which could mean either 'in him' or 'in it' (i.e. the cross), would read more naturally as a reference to God's action 'in Christ'. (Compare 'with him' two verses earlier.) Thus RSV: 'he disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him'. But the verb translated 'disarmed' by both RSV and NIV is in a form which elsewhere—in 3:9, for instance—refers to stripping something off from oneself. This has led several writers to suggest a view composed of three elements, as follows: (i) Paul has subconsciously slipped into regarding Christ, not God, as the subject; (ii) the odd resultant idea of Christ's 'stripping off the powers and authorities' is to be explained by seeing them as the powers of evil which were using his physical body as their point of entry and attack, so that in divesting himself of his 'flesh' he got rid of that through which he was vulnerable; (iii) the final phrase should not be understood as 'in Christ' but 'in the cross'.

Of these three elements, (i) and (iii) are quite possible. But about (ii) it must be said that, first, there is nothing in the passage which warrants understanding the 'powers' as (what we think of as) 'the powers of evil', identical with Satan and his angels; second, the mixture of metaphors in the verse would be very harsh, with Christ 'celebrating a triumph over a cast off suit of clothes' (Caird); and, third, the idea that the 'powers' had their point of entry in Christ's physical body, of which he therefore divested himself, is more gnostic than Pauline. It seems better therefore (despite the apparent parallel in 3:9) to take the verb in an active sense, which in Hellenistic Greek it could quite easily have, and say that God, or possibly Christ, 'stripped' not himself, but the rulers and authorities.

It is still not obvious, however, why Paul should assert here that God has, in Christ, 'stripped' the rulers and authorities and held them up to contempt. But this may become clearer if we consider the verse within the passage as a whole.

I have suggested above that the *stoicheia* in 2:8, 20 and the 'powers and authorities' of 2:10, 15 refer primarily in this context to the hypothetical tutelary 'gods' of the different nations. Among these nations Paul includes Israel, to whom God, through his angels, had given a national charter, the Law. The point he wishes to make is that the Colossians had formerly been under the domination of these powers, (a) because they were members of pagan society and its religions, and (b) because the angels who had given the Law thus functioned as guardians, keeping Gentiles excluded from the family of God (see vv. 16-19). They have now been freely welcomed into that family (vv. 11-12), and this has been achieved through Christ's overpowering of the gaolers that had kept them locked up (see Rom. 11:32; Gal. 3:22).

At this point there is, I suggest, a further note of heavy and striking irony. The 'rulers and authorities' of Rome and of Israel—as Caird points out, the best government and the highest religion the world of that time had ever known—conspired to place Jesus on the cross. These powers, angry at his challenge to their sovereignty, stripped *him* naked, held *him* up to public contempt, and celebrated a triumph over him. In one of his most dramatic statements of the paradox of the cross, and one moreover which shows in what physical detail Paul could envisage the horrible death that Jesus had died, he declares that, on the contrary, on the cross God was stripping *them* naked, was holding *them* up to public contempt, and leading them in his own triumphal procession—in Christ, the crucified Messiah. When the 'powers' had done their worst, crucifying the Lord of glory *incognito* on the charge of blasphemy and rebellion, they had overreached themselves. He, neither blasphemer nor rebel, was in fact their rightful sovereign. They thereby exposed themselves for what they were—usurpers of the authority which was properly his. The cross therefore becomes the source of hope for all who had been held captive under their rule, enslaved in fear and mutual suspicion. Christ breaks the last hold that the 'powers' had over his people, by dying on their behalf. He now welcomes them into a new family in which the ways of the old world—its behaviour, its distinctions of race and class and sex, its blind obedience to the 'forces' of politics, economics, prejudice and superstition—have become quite simply out of date, a ragged and defeated rabble. Verse 15 thus draws out the effect of verse 14.

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This passage raises sharply the question: how can Paul, who said earlier that ‘all things’ were *reconciled* to God through the cross (1:19–20; see the commentary there), declare here that on the cross the powers have been *defeated*? The missing clue, unstated but understood, is the doctrine of the fall. When God looked at his creation, made in and for Christ (1:15–17), he knew it to be very good. As it stood it did not need ‘reconciling’. The intervention of sin produced a triple estrangement—between God and humanity, humanity and the world (including estrangements between individuals and races), and (consequently) God and the world (see Rom. 8:19ff.). God’s response to this situation was one of sovereign love. Wanting the very best for his world, he determined to rid it entirely of the evil which has corrupted it at its very heart. The cross is therefore, at the same time, *both* the affirmation of God’s hatred of sin and its foul consequences (especially the defacing of his image in his human creatures) and the affirmation of his steadfast determination to save humanity and the world. The ambiguity between the ‘defeat’ of 2:15 and the ‘reconciliation’ of 1:19 is therefore analogous to the similar double truth of God’s attitude towards sinful human beings. As sinners, they need to die to sin; as human beings made in God’s image, they need to have their true humanity reaffirmed and recreated in the resurrection. This is what Paul will work out in 2:20–3:4.

Though the ‘rulers and authorities’, then, had come to embody the rebellion of the world, they are not evil in themselves. God has made his world in such a way that corporate human life at any level will structure itself and order its affairs in particular ways. Different parts of the natural order, however, (e.g. the sun or moon) can be, and often have been, idolized, so that human beings offer to them that worship which belongs to God alone (see Rom. 1:25), and thus wrongly give them power in the world. The same can be true of the ‘power structures’ of the different nations (e.g. the goddess Roma in the ancient world, or, more recently, Britannia) or the ‘laws’ governing social or economic life (e.g. the profit motive). Such things, like the sun and moon, are in themselves part of the good creation. Even a secular or pagan state can be regarded as bringing God’s intended order into the world of human affairs (Rom. 13:1ff.). If worshipped, however, they attain to the rank, and power, of idols.

In what way, then, are they ‘reconciled’ (1:18)? This is certainly not something that has been put into automatic effect at the time of the crucifixion. It remains a programme to be fulfilled: ‘that in everything he might become pre-eminent’ (1:18; see 1 Cor. 15:20–28). It is to be effected through the work, and proclamation, of the church (Eph. 3:10). The reconciling mission of the church in the world therefore includes the task of proclaiming to the present ‘power structures’ that God is God, that Jesus is Lord, and summoning them to climb down from his throne and take up their proper responsibilities in looking after his world. Having been defeated as rebels, they now can be reconciled as subjects. They do not own the world. They do not hold the keys of death and hell. They (the Law included), being essentially of ‘this age’, do not hold final authority over those who belong already to the ‘age to come’.²

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, NIVAC
Douglas Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, Pillar NT Commentary
David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT
Robert Bratcher and Eugene Nida, *A Handbook of Paul’s Letter to the Colossians*, UBSH
Robert W. Wall, *Colossians and Philemon*, IVP New Testament Commentary
Richard R. Melick, Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*, New Application Commentary
James D. G. Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, NIGTC
Dick Lucas, *The Message of Colossians and Philemon*, The Bible Speaks Today
Clinton Arnold, *Colossians*, Word Biblical Commentary

² N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 105–123.