

# Colossians

1:15+

1. Paul's opening prayer in 1:3-14 has a remarkable element which may be easy to miss: Paul says nothing of his being in jail. Even later in 4:2-4, when Paul does mention his incarceration, it isn't to ask them to pray for release, or to pray for it himself, but to pray that he will be able to share the gospel. We may compare this to our prayers. We tend first and foremost to address the ways in which ourselves and those in our church deviate from whatever we consider *normal*. We pray for the sick, the unemployed, those in danger, and if we had anyone in prison, we be praying hard for his or her release.

In a sense, Paul is doing the same thing. But in Christ he has a new "normal," centered on the kingdom and its growth. In Paul's "normal" the church is growing in knowledge of the Lord and is spreading the gospel, and his prayers are directed toward these ends. So Paul prays for the spiritual growth of the Colossians and for him to have opportunity to spread the gospel. This is typical of Paul's prayers. And it's not that Paul is neutral about prison, or the sick or the hungry. It's that, as we will read in 3:2, he has "set his mind on the things above."

Allowing that we *are* called to pray for those who are sick, or unemployed, or have some other need, what sort of "normal" do your prayers, or those of our church point to?

2. Having just finished his greeting and opening prayer, Paul abruptly changes style: Colossians 1:15-20 has enough poetic parallelism and repetition, obscured in English, that many believe Paul was quoting an early Christian hymn. Its structure is *AB-B'A'* ("chiastic" for its similarity to the Greek letter chi,  $\chi$ ),

*A*: 15-16: The creation and the pre-incarnate Lord

*B*: 17: He is before all things and in him all things hold together

*B'*: 18a: He is the head of the body, the Church

*A'*: 18b-20: The new creation and the risen Lord

- a. Parallelism of this sort may function allegorically; if readers are familiar with *AB*, it may illumine their understanding of *B'A'*, or vice-versa. Alternately, repetition may serve to emphasize both *AB* and *B'A'*.

Given Paul's language about their sinful past (1:21), the Colossians were largely Gentile converts. From Paul's arguments against deception by "plausible arguments" (2:4, 8), and the references to sabbaths, "new moons" and circumcision, we can infer that Jews or Jewish Christians were trying to draw the young church into ascetic practices.

Given this context, would the Colossians be more familiar with *AB* (Jesus' supremacy over creation) or *B'A'* (Jesus as agent of new creation and reconciliation)? Is Paul arguing by analogy or simply using parallel structure for emphasis?

- b. The rich parallelism invites us to explore the parallels and try to understand Jesus' relation to creation in light of his reconciliation of creation (and vice-versa). For instance, Jesus holds all creation together (17) just as he holds the church together (18a). Would you characterize Jesus' role as passive or active? What does Jesus' maintenance of all creation have to say about his

role in maintaining the Church? Are there any other interesting parallels between the stanzas which catch your eye?

- c. In Jesus everything was created (16a), and in the parallel stanza, in Jesus all fullness (*pleroma*) is pleased to dwell (19a). What does it mean for all “fullness” to dwell in Jesus? What then does it mean for believers to “come to fullness [*pleroo*] in him” (2:9)?
3. Paul calls Jesus the image (*eikon*) of the invisible God (1:15). The image of the divine had some history in the Hellenistic world<sup>1</sup>: Plato referred to the world as the visible image of God; another ancient document refers to humans as being “made in the image of the cosmos,” and yet another says that humans are to render

...praise and thanks in full measure to God, and revering God’s image (the Cosmos), not unaware that he himself is a second image of God. For three are two images of God; the Cosmos is one, and man is another...

Similar concepts are found in the Bible, particular in Genesis, where man is made in the image of God (1:26), and Seth is the image of Adam (5:3). Hellenistic Judaism from the period between the testaments expands on this, making *wisdom* the image of God:

For she is a reflection of eternal light,  
a spotless mirror of the working of God,  
and an image of his goodness. (Wisdom 7:26)<sup>2</sup>

The New Testament also refers in several places to the image of God:

- “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.” (Rom 8:29)
- “...just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man” (1 Cor 15:49)
- “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” (2 Cor 3:18)
- “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” (2 Cor 4:4)
- “you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” (Col 3:10)<sup>3</sup>

If we are already made in the image of God, why is our image being transformed? And if we are already image-bearers, why is it noteworthy that Jesus is the image of God? What does it mean that Jesus himself is the image of someone who is invisible (Col 1:15)—especially given that Jesus himself is currently unseen (by us)?

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<sup>1</sup>Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup>In fact, there are several parallels between the hymn of 1:15-20 and the attributes of Wisdom in the OT and Jewish literature, indicating that Paul is deliberately emphasizing that Jesus properly occupies the lofty position which Wisdom had been granted in Jewish lore.

<sup>3</sup>You may notice this list doesn’t include 1 Cor 11:7, which says that man “is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man.” This wasn’t to avoid a tough passage, but because it appears this hangs on a different issue than we are focusing on here.

4. In 1:16, we read that for and through Christ all things were created, visible or invisible, including thrones (*thronos*), lordships (*kurios*), rulers (*arche*) and authorities (*exousia*). The second pair of these appear to be spiritual powers, as suggested by Eph 6:12:

For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers (*arche*), against the authorities (*exousia*), against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

The word translated “rulers” in 1:16 is challenging to translate. It is the plural of the word translated “the beginning” in 1:18. “The beginning” in 1:18 “is too thin a word to do justice to *arche*, which means ‘first principle’, ‘source’, ‘creative initiative’”<sup>4</sup>, and “rulers” (*archai*) in 1:16 refers to an authority figure who puts things in motion: in a sense, a ruler who is a mover and shaker. Paul later makes it clear that these are sinister powers (2:10, 15).

Wright writes of these,

...In our modern age it has often been taken for granted that Paul’s language about supernatural power structures needs to be demythologized, to be turned into language about (say) international power politics or economic ‘structures.’ This is quite legitimate, since for Paul spiritual and earthly rulers were not sharply distinguished. In his view, earthly rulers held authority (in the sense intended by Jn 19:11; Rom 13:1-7) only as a trust from the creator. At the same time, we should not ignore the supernatural or ‘demonic’ element in these ‘powers.’

Anything to which human being offer the allegiance proper only to God is capable of assuming, and exerting, a sinister borrowed power. For Paul, the ‘powers’ were unseen forces working in the world through pagan religion, astrology, or magic, or through the oppressive systems that enslaved or tyrannized human beings. (72)

Paul reassures the Colossians that Jesus has already achieved victory over the rulers and authorities: “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it” (2:15). He also tells them that these rulers and authorities were not only made through and for Jesus, but have been reconciled to him through the cross (1:20).

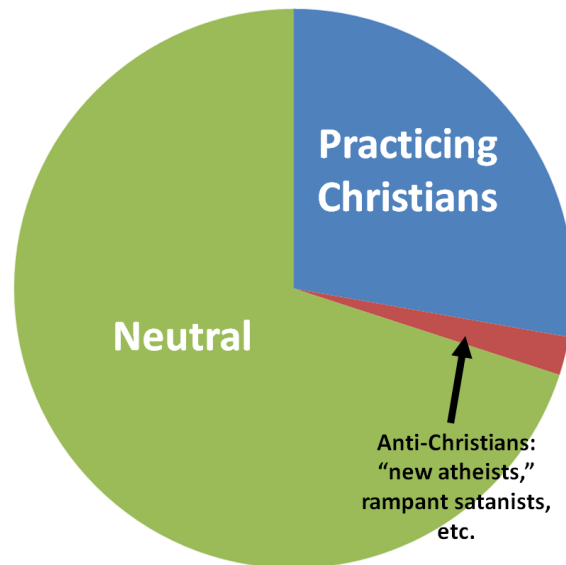
What does it mean that the powers and authorities, or even the thrones and dominions, not only were made through and for Jesus, but have been reconciled to him?

5. Read the attached excerpt from Wright’s *Following Jesus*. Do you agree with his description of the rulers and authorities?
- Paul is addressing in 1:15-20 the things which most frighten and manipulate the Colossians. What “forces” haunt you in the middle of the night? Climate change, unemployment, the moral decay or our culture, cancer, Alzheimer’s, another economic crash, etc.?
  - What would it mean to live as if these were created for Jesus (1:16), and they have not only been reconciled to him (1:20), but he has disarmed them and made a public example of them (2:15)?
6. In 1:21 Paul says the Colossians were “once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.” The phrase “hostile in mind” refers not just to what a person thinks, but the very way her or she thinks. In this view, if you aren’t following Christ, your very way of thinking is opposed to him.

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<sup>4</sup>N. T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon* (IVP), 74.

We may tend to think somewhat differently about those around us, and even Americans in general, that most Americans are neither for Jesus or against him, but ignorant of the gospel or indifferent to its claims:



Paul lived in a different cultural climate from modern America. Is the view in Colossians, that people are for or against Jesus, still valid?

7. In 1:24, Paul rejoices “in my sufferings for your sake.” While this at first may seem strange, Wright reads it as follows:

Here is an old, weathered and seasoned oak tree, talking to the small sapling that’s just started to grow up nearby.

“Soon it will be autumn, and the winds will start to blow hard and cold. But you’ll be safe. I’ll take care of you. The wind can do its worst to me. I don’t mind of a lose a few branches here and there in the process. What matters is that while you’re young and weak I should take the full force of the wintry wind on myself and let you grow in safety.” (158)

Wright is envisioning Paul, in prison, attracting the attention of the authorities while, quietly and unnoticed, the young churches in Asia minor grow.

How do you observe older Christians in our church giving of themselves for younger? How have you seen this in your own life?

## Ω

*Fun fact:* One of the central early Reformers died in battle: “[Zwingli] persuaded the Zürich city council to mount an economic blockade against the Catholic cantons that prohibited Protestant preachers in their territories. The Catholic cantons refused to accept passively the blockade and launched a surprise attack on an unsuspecting and unprepared Zürich in October 1531. This so-called second Battle of Kappel ended with a decisive defeat of the Zürichers. Discovered among the wounded in the battle, Zwingli was dealt a deathblow. Then . . . his body was quartered and burned, his ashes mingled with dung.” (Woodbridge and James, *Church History*, Vol. 2, p. 157)