

# Colossians

1:1-14

1. What did you think of the excerpt from Walsh & Keesmaat's *Colossians Remixed* (henceforth W&K)? How, if at all, does it change the way you approach the reading of Colossians?
2. Paul's letters vary widely in tone and character. He scolds the Corinthians, he is exasperated with the Galatians, and he is so delighted with the Philippians that he hardly needs an excuse to write to them.

What indications do you see in this letter the health of the Colossian fellowship? What issues, if any, is Paul intending to address?

3. {Read, from W&K, par. 2, p. 54 to par. 1, p. 55.} Paul's letters were deliberately subversive of empire, especially in his choice of terminology. In 1:5, Paul refers to the gospel (*euangelion*), a term freighted with meaning in the context of the imperial cult, as can be seen in the following letter to the Proconsul to the cities of Asia, written in 9 B.C.:

Whereas the Providence which has guided our whole existence and which has shown such care and liberality, has brought our life to the peak of perfection in giving to us Augustus Caesar, whom it (Providence) filled with virtue for the welfare of mankind, and who, being sent to us and to our descendants as a Savior (*soter*), has put an end to war and has set all things in order; and whereas, having become visible, Caesar has fulfilled the **hopes** of all earlier times . . . not only in surpassing all the benefactors who preceded him but also in leaving to his successors no hope of surpassing him; and whereas, finally, that the birthday of the God (i.e. Augustus) has been for the whole world the beginning of the **gospel** (*euangelion*) concerning him, therefore, let all reckon a new era beginning from the date of his birth, and let his birthday mark the beginning of the new year.

For Romans, Caesar was savior (*soter*) and Lord (*kyrios*), and at the worst of times Christians were put to death for naming Jesus Lord (1:3) rather than Caesar.<sup>1</sup> Where Caesar was the cause of hope in the letter above, for believers Jesus is the basis of hope (1:5). And where Caesar was the source of fertility in the empire, as in W&K's quote of Horace (p. 54, par. 2), the gospel, the word of truth, brings fertility in the Colossian church and "in the whole world" (1:5-6).

In addition to co-opting the language of empire for use in God's kingdom, Paul modifies even the basic letter form. Where letters typically began with *charein*, "greeting," Paul began his letters with *charis kai eirene*, "grace and peace," pointing to two central Christian concepts: God's free gift of salvation, and the peace, or *shalom* (which the LLX translates *eirene*) only it can bring.

How, if at all, do we subvert empire, so to speak, by directing the language or practices of our culture toward God, the Spirit, and Jesus? Is this best done for an audience of believers or unbelievers?

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<sup>1</sup> A famous example being Polycarp, disciple of John, who was martyred for this offense.

4. W&K state that

...empires are (1) built on systemic centralizations of power, (2) secured by structures of socioeconomic and military control, (3) religiously legitimated by powerful myths and (4) sustained by a proliferation of imperial images that captivate the imaginations of the population. [58]

W&K list some examples for the U.S. in particular and the West in general [58-64]:

- (1) “Most major corporations use the equivalent of slave labor to produce clothing, toys, tools and some foods. Most of this labor is done by people in Asia, Latin America or Africa” under conditions which leave little possibility for them to escape poverty.
- (2) “The World Bank and the IMF, powerful nations in the North are able to dictate the economic terms by which the South is kept firmly ensconced in the cycle of international debt and development aid.”
- (3) “Most powerful is the progress myth, which has been the driving force behind Western capitalism since the Enlightenment.”
- (4) We are immersed in corporate logos and branding, and these are exported to the far corners of the globe; think Coca-Cola and MacDonalD’s.

As we saw from the reading, these criteria are were met in spades by Rome. Do you buy W&K’s assertion that the same be said of the U.S., or more generally of the first-world West?

5. Paul thanks God for the Colossians’ faith and mutual love, both based on hope “laid up for you in heaven” (1:3). Again in 1:9, we learn that it is because of Epaphras’ report of their mutual love that Paul says they have not ceased to pray for the Colossians. About this, Carson writes,

Once again we observe that Paul’s petitions are in some ways linked to his thanksgivings (vv. 3-7). These links between Paul’s thanks to God and his intercession before God drive us to an extremely important conclusion: although we are inclined to pray for people and situations where they have fallen into desperate need, Paul’s common practice is to pray for going concerns.

Consider, first, our own practice. We may of course pray when things are going well. But is it not true that we are inclined to pray with a great deal more urgency when things are going badly? When there is illness, financial pressure, moral failure, dissension in the church, a difficult decision, tensions in the family—those are the times when we are driven to prayer. In itself, that is not bad. It is always encouraging to find Christians instantly taking their needs and fears to God.

But if we pray only at those times, we are overlooking a great lesson from the apostle’s prayer life. The frequency with which he links his thanksgiving for signs of grace in the lives of this or that group of believers, with his petitions for more signs of grace in the lives of the same believers, cannot be accidental. When Paul learns of the work of God in some church, he gives thanks; then he prays for more of the

same, shaped, perhaps, by his knowledge of the special needs and propensities of this particular body of believers. The good news he hears of them does not inspire thanks alone...

Doubtless Paul intercedes when there are barriers to be hurdled; the point here is that he also intercedes when there are signs of life and power and grace, for his concern is that such signs should be protected and increased. [*A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 99-100.]

What were the “signs of life and power and grace” among the Colossians reported to Paul by Epaphras? What are the signs of the working of the Spirit in our church, or small group? Do you ever pray for “going concerns” as Paul does?

6. Paul prays in 1:9 that that the Colossians might be “filled with the knowledge of God’s will.”
  - a. What is Paul’s motivation for this prayer—the antecedent of “for this reason” at the start of the verse—and what is the intended effect (“so that” in 1:10)?
  - b. For comparison, the following are some other verses about God’s will:
    - “Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground” (Ps 143:10)
    - “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom 12:2)
    - “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is” (Eph 5:15-17)<sup>2</sup>

Carson observes that

Very frequently we are inclined to use the expression *the will of God* to refer to God’s will for my vocation or for some aspect of my future that is determined by an impending choice... None of this is intrinsically bad... Nevertheless this focus is often quite misleading, perhaps even dangerous, for it encourages me to think of “the Lord’s will” primarily in terms of my future, my vocation, my needs—and that is often another form of self-centeredness, no matter how piously put. [101]

Is this really fair of Carson? After all, we *do* need to discern God’s will when it comes to personal decisions, right?

7. A striking aspect of Colossians is that it is written to a church planted by someone else, and was a church Paul had never even met. As the apostle most closely connected to them, Paul felt responsibility to shepherd them. Yet his letter is much more than a bishop’s note to a church in the boonies correcting poor doctrine. It is warm and affirming and at the same time thoughtfully speaks to areas where they were in need of guidance.

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<sup>2</sup>We could also add 1 Thess 4:3—it’s God’s will that we be sanctified—and 1 Thess 5:16-18—it’s God’s will that we are joyful, thankful, and prayerful.

It has been years since our church planted another church in Webster, but in the meantime we have reached out to a communities in Haiti and another in the D.R., and the love of God in our church has been felt in larger and smaller ways throughout the world, especially through our missionaries.

Though our church need not take the place of the apostle, it is always appropriate for us to think and minister outside of ourselves. How might we encourage other, perhaps younger, bodies of believers?

8. Paul, in v. 11, prays, “may you be made strong with all the strength that comes **from his glorious power...**” What “power” is referred to may be discerned by taking advantage of the close parallels between Colossians and Ephesians and particular between the prayer for the Colossians and that for the Ephesians. Based on Eph 3:16, what “power” is Paul invoking?

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*Fun fact:* In 4:17 Paul writes, “Say to Archippus, ‘See that you complete the task you received in the Lord.’” “It has become a bit of a joke in NT studies: what was Archippus’ unfinished task? ...This was, and remains, a private matter, but interpreters throughout the ages have taken the word to Archippus as a directive for all procrastinators.” [Mark Allen Powell, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 367]