

About this book . . .

- Why did the Apostle Paul write to a church he had never founded nor seen?
- What was the heresy he sought to correct?
- What were the great themes he outlined to his readers?
- How do these themes relate to us today?

Useful answers to these questions can be found in the text of this commentary on *The Epistle to the Colossians*.

Far from being merely of antique interest, this Letter is alive with the great themes of the Lordship of Christ in Creation and Redemption, the Divine Intention to bring all creation to reconciliation and harmony via the Cross, and the new life believers can live when they come under Christ who is the Head of the church.

This letter may appear to be small and even insignificant to the casual look of a reader, but it is a goldmine to be explored, and new riches are to be gathered. This little commentary is packed full, giving a running bird's eye view of the Letter, and a detailed verse-by-verse commentary.

Geoffrey Bingham is an Anglican minister. His experience as soldier, prisoner of war, farmer, writer, teacher and family man as well as theologian, has given him grounds for writing material which is Australian in tone, and relevant to the society in which we live. Some have found his books life-changing.

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The Fulness of Christ

The Epistle to the Colossians
by Geoffrey Bingham

*The Fullness
of Christ*

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The Epistle to the Colossians

by

Geoffrey Bingham

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FOREWORD

In this small book on Colossians, I have departed somewhat from the format of commentaries previously written. I have learned—if somewhat slowly—from years of exposition, both in Colleges and other places, that verse-by-verse exegesis and exposition can be tedious. It can also be so detailed and particularised that the living substance of any book may be partially lost in the detailed explanation, and even by cross-references relating to other portions of Scripture.

Whilst not rejecting this method of teaching, I believe it is good to have an overall view of the book, not only in an analysis and structure of the text, but in catching up the thrust of that text, i.e. what I have called ‘the living substance.’

This volume, then, is somewhat by way of experiment. Whilst nothing can substitute for the personal, warm and intimate exposition given in a group situation especially where that is couched in worship and devotion—the written running commentary can be of value. For this reason I have minimised the materials relating to the time, date and place of authorship, and the geographical and historical background to Colossae itself, and even the commentary text is minimal. I hope the section ‘The Epistle to the Colossians for the Church Today’ may help the text to come alive for readers.

I am firmly convinced that this small letter of the Apostle

Paul is immensely significant for the church today, and for the growth and development of each member of Christ's body. Realising, as I do, the inadequacies of this little book, I believe it can make some useful contribution to our understanding the great themes treated within the text of the Epistle.

Geoffrey Bingham
Coromandel East, 1987

CONTENTS

Foreword	(vii)
An Introduction to the Epistle	(xi)
Commentary	
—Chapter One	1
—Chapter Two	19
—Chapter Three	35
—Chapter Four	54
The Epistle to the Colossians for the Church of Today	64

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE EPISTLE

All Paul's letters were written for a purpose. Some—such as the letters to the church at Rome and at Ephesus—were written to give a fair and useful statement of Christian doctrine, doctrine being truth stated intelligibly and intended for action. Most other letters were written to correct errors of faith and practice which had somehow crept in. Certainly this was the case in Colossae. The church was faced with error, and error which was received meant also wrongness in practice.

The City of Colossae

This city was situated in the Lychus Valley, close to the other cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. No such city exists today, but the location is in modern Western Turkey. Scattered north of Colossae were the seven cities to whom the letters in the Revelation were written. Paul himself had not visited Colossae which seems to have had one of the least important churches—if indeed we can speak that way. In more ancient times the city had been large and important, but its size, population and importance diminished in the face of the growth of Laodicea and Hierapolis.

The Birth of the Church at Colossae

Paul proclaimed the Gospel and taught at Ephesus where he was active for some three years (Acts 20:31; some commentators place this at two or two and a half years, cf. Acts 19:10). The dynamic teaching of Paul must have fanned out to the whole Lychnus Valley, where there are the churches named in Revelation (chs. 2-3). It also reached the city of Colossae and Hierapolis (Col. 4:13), and undoubtedly other places. Paul generally preached at one centre, expecting the Gospel to be like quickly spreading fire. So the church at Colossae was founded. This confirms Acts 19:10, 'This continued for two years so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks'.

The Ministry at Colossae

Paul makes it clear that he never visited Colossae. Colossians 1:4 and 2:1 confirm this. It seems from Colossians 1:5--9 that Epaphras must have been the one who had heard Paul's teaching in Ephesus and had passed it on in Colossae. His links with Paul are strong. At the time of writing this epistle he is with Paul in prison (see Philemon, 'Epaphras my fellow prisoner'). Archippus (4:17) had ministry in the church at that time. Other members of the church are mentioned, such as Onesimus and Philemon. Perhaps Tychicus was also a member. Colossians 4:15, with its allusion to Laodicea and the mention of the church in Nympha's, shows that churches were in homes. There is evidence of this elsewhere in the New Testament.

The Problems at Colossae

Commentators make much of the problems. Doubtless the Christian community was faced with deep error. It is difficult to nominate this error. It may have been Gnosticism, which made intellectual knowledge to be saving truth. It also held dualistic views of creation, i.e. that all that was material was necessarily inferior, if not in fact evil, whilst all that was spirit, i.e. unseen reality, was true. Man's material properties, such as his body and his bodily motions, were to be seen as gross. The true pure spirit inhabited this vessel of clay, and at death was released, since that alone was the true self. One might either indulge the body or keep it in ascetic repression. Certainly we see passages which could be correcting Gnosticism. Gnosticism, too, opposed the thought of God directly creating the universe. Creation was effected by a course of angels who mediated creation, so that God never came into contact with created material. Angels were not only mediatorial in creation, but in the affairs of history, the maintenance of creation. Thus the teaching which sprang from angelology and angelolatry. Such a system involved the occult, and left no room for Christ as other than a docetic manifestation of God, i.e. his humanity was not real, but a dress taken on for the purposes for which God sent him into the world. There is some justification for believing that the interpretation for 'Let us make man in our own image', was that the angels had made men as gods. and that these were therefore subject to angels. In these angelic emanations from God there was little or no place for Christ.

The whole is extremely complex and involved. Rather than say dogmatically that the heresy. or heresies, which confronted the church were Gnosticism, Judaic non-

conformity, teaching of the Essenes, or other forms of angel worship, it is best to see from the text what Paul was seeking to combat. Our understanding of heresies current in Paul's day helps us to see what Paul was combating, but we cannot be sure of the actual forms these heresies took.

The Teaching of the Epistle

Ralph Martin in his commentary subtitles the epistle as 'The Church's Lord and the Christian's Liberty'.¹ This certainly covers Paul's two themes, expounded against the heresies. Even so, the letter is filled with rich practical teaching. The themes covered are thanksgiving, prayer, Christ's Lordship, churchly suffering, the mystery of glory, the fullness of man and Christ, the truth of redemption—as against false systems of salvation—the foolishness of obeying elemental spirits and angels when Christian liberation has been effected, the foundation of holiness and the way of living it, family and social relationships, proclamation of the Gospel, and living in a pagan society.

Whatever heresy there may have been which Paul sought to counter, does not really matter. Paul's teaching on the person and place of Christ is rich and useful. Likewise Christian liberty, which has been attacked by the prevalent heresy, is etched all the more clearly because of the polemic. Equally rich are his passages on Christian life and conduct, *vis-a-vis* an hostile world and a pagan society. Perhaps more than other epistles, teaching on the defeat of demonic powers is given and the contrast of this with the

pleroma—the fullness of Christ—is particularly valuable. Paul gives his readers a clear and useful world view.

Summing up, we can say that although Paul's argument against the heretics is useful and the main purpose of the letter, yet the letter itself is extremely beneficial for all generations of the Christian church.

An Outline of the Epistle

Chapter One, verses

- 1-2 The Opening Greeting.
- 3-8 Thanksgiving: faith, hope and love. The truth, the Gospel.
- 9-11 Paul's prayer for the church. Its aim—knowledge and godly conduct.
- 12-14 Paul's prayer for blessing.
- 15-20 The true nature of Christ as Lord of creation and redemption.
- 21-23 The principle and goal of reconciliation through Christ.
- 24-29 Paul's mission, and Paul's pastoral concern. Paul's mission to the Gentiles (vv. 24, 25); The message he proclaims (vv. 26-29).

Chapter Two, verses

- 1-5 Paul's exhortation and encouragement to the church.
- 6-15 Paul's attack on error. His exhortation to understand Christ and his victory over evil powers: Christ stronger than the occult powers.
- 16-23 The Cross liberates from evil powers and erroneous worship of angels. Asceticism is futile in gaining victory over the flesh.

Chapter Three, verses

- 1-4 The new freedom through death with Christ. This is the basis of freedom from legalism.
- 5-11 The life of mortification and vivification based on grace and the new life in Christ.
- 12-17 The way the new community lives in love and worship.
- 18-25 Family and societal life in the new community.

¹ *Colossians*. Ralph P. Martin, Paternoster Press, Exeter, England. 1972.

Chapter Four verses

- 1 Family and societal life in the new community (cont'd).
- 2-6 Prayers thanksgiving, intercession for proclamations and witness to the world.
- 7-18 Final words; personal greetings and news of the saints.

CHAPTER ONE

- 1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,
- 2 To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

Paul the hellenised form of **Saul**. The name which would relate to the Gentile world.

an apostle: see Galatians 1:1; I Corinthians 9:1-2. I Uses his given apostleship to divinely given authority in matters of doctrine and practice. So by **the will of God**.

Timothy our brother: Timothy's person and witness most significant. See I Thessalonians 3:2; I Corinthians 4:17; Philippians 2:19. A convert of Paul and member of his team. Note **brother** and verse 2 **brethren**.

to the saints: I Corinthians 1:2; Daniel 7:22, 27; 'holy ones' cf. I Corinthians 6:11; II Thessalonians 2:13; I Peter 1:2; Old Testament saints, Leviticus 11:44; Exodus 19:5 (cf. I Pet. 2:9-10).

faithful brethren links with **God our Father** cf. Galatians 4:4--6, Ephesians 3:14-15. Early Christians known as 'the disciples', 'the saints', 'the brethren'.

in Christ: everything is **in** Christ, i.e. all lies in union with Christ.

grace to you and peace: Pauline salutation, but not conventional. Need of grace indispensable: grace here is as a power. In Acts the word used indicates a gift which

covers all needs, thus 'great grace', 'word of his grace' etc. **peace** is the fruit of grace, cf. Romans 5:1. Titus 2:11ff. shows the dynamic grace for training in true godliness.

God our Father: the source of grace and peace, the assurance of sonship, being brethren, etc. I Thessalonians 1:1; II Thessalonians 1:1 'the church . . . in the Father'. The salutation sets the dynamic basis of Christian life, community and practice.

3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you

thank God: thanksgiving sign of spiritual health. Romans 1:21f. shows ingratitude a sign of evil. Thanksgiving must be for and *in* all things (Eph. 5:20; Col. 3:16; Phil. 4:6).

the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ: Jesus is Son by nature, not as us by adoption.

we pray for you: prayer is the power of faith addressing itself to the grace of God. Note Paul's many prayers (2:1ff; Eph. 1:16ff.; 3:14ff.). His prayers are particular, related to the basic needs.

4 because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love which you have for all the saints,

5 because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel

6 which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—so among yourselves from the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth

because: three causes, (i) **your faith**, (ii) **your love**, (iii) **the hope laid up**. This triad keeps appearing in the New Testament, cf. 1 Corinthians 13:13; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 5:8; Romans 5:1-5; Galatians 5:5, 6; Ephesians 4:2--5; Hebrews 6:10-12; 10:22--24; I Peter 1:3 8, 21 22. Their context is significant; one cannot have one without the other two.²

faith: they are 'faithful brethren' (v.2), faithfulness a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). In the Old Testament it equals integrity, truthfulness. Here **faith** is active trust and obedience because of the Gospel.

love here is **to all the saints**, i.e. unity of Jews, Gentiles, active love in needs of the saints (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32; cf. I John 3:16ff.). Note the all for love is impartial and total.

hope is a fixed certainty, faith with a future look (Heb. 11:1). It is grounded in love (Rom. 5:5), i.e. based on the prophetic promise, the word of God (Rom. 4:18-22). See especially Romans 15:13, and note Paul's prayer of Ephesians 1:18.

laid up in heaven, i.e. is from God who attests its validity: not based on human reasoning, for the heretics are seeking to undermine faith (cf. 1:27; I Pet. 3:5).

in the word of truth: this 'the word of Christ', 'the gospel of salvation' (Rom. 10:17; Eph. 1:13; James 1:18). It is dynamic evoking faith and hope because it is Christ (John 1:14; 14:6; 18:37). The Colossians are now also hearing a word which is not truth, *which cannot produce faith, hope and love*.

has come to you: the Gospel is dynamic, confronting, undeniably fruit bearing. The Colossians can make their own comparison with 'another gospel which is no gospel',

² For amplification of significance see the author's monogram

for **so among yourselves** indicates the Gospel is locally dynamic, **from the day you heard and understood**. The power sprang (and springs) from the Gospel which is **the grace of God in truth**. Again we have the mention of **grace**. The Gospel is nothing other than grace; the heretics are denuding grace. The Colossians have actually experienced grace.

grace of God means God's unmerited action of love which cannot be separated from him as a sort of commodity to be utilised by anyone. This grace covers all of life.

7 as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant.
He is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf
8 and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

as you learned it: they had been given basic teaching and absorbed it--as against the different teaching the heretics would give.

Epaphras our beloved fellow servant, i.e. his word was dependable and authentic or Paul would not have attested him. He is also an attestation of Paul.

beloved means much; teaching is a living thing, from one living in love.

servant = slave, **minister of Christ** (cf. 4:12) = deacon (*diakonos*), a lowly one, cf. Romans 15:8.

on our [your] behalf from Paul to them, for Paul to them, or just for them.

your love in the Spirit tells us two things, that the church is a loving one, and receives its love from the Spirit (Rom. 5:5; cf. 15:30; Gal. 5:22). Yet the Spirit is personal, present, related to by all believers, and active. Notice the **'in the**

The Epistle to the Colossians 5

Spirit', and see Romans 8:9--11; also II Timothy 1:7 (the kind of spirit).

9 And so, from the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

10 to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

11 May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy

12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

13 He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son,

14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

And so: Paul's prayer based on what he has heard of the church (faith, hope, love) and like prayers for other churches is most positive, the prayer being continuous. True prayer *effects* what it prays for (James 5:16--18). Paul elsewhere asks prayer for himself, so great is his faith in it (Rom. 15:30; 1 I Thess. 3:1; Eph. 6:19). Here the prayer is for others.

the knowledge of his will (cf. Eph. 5:17) is what every believer must have; we are called to work with God.

in all spiritual wisdom and understanding (cf. Eph. 1:9, 17-18). We need to know the plan and working of God in order to understand his wisdom.

spiritual must mean 'by the Spirit to us in the depths', i.e. 'to our spirits'.

wisdom is not only knowledge gained, but inner **under-**

standing. Only the Spirit can give it to us: the ‘secular man’ will never understand (I Cor. 2:14).

to lead a life: The knowing of the will relates to action, the things we are and do in the light of that comprehended will, i.e. **bearing fruit** for fruitbearing is the essence of true living (cf. John 15:1f.; Gal. 5:22-23; Gen. 1:28).

in every good work: works are what grace is all about (Eph. 2:8-10; Titus 2:11-13; Rev.14:13; cf. chs. 2-3’1 know your works’, especially 2:5, 19).

increasing: it must always be growth (in grace) having more **knowledge of God**, i.e. not *about* God, but of God, i.e. knowing him increasingly, relationally, in his will, etc.

May you be strengthened: prayers for, and commands to, be strengthened are many in the New Testament. Paul needed power continually; so they also. Noun and verb (power, empowered) from Greek *dynamis*, plus ‘might’ (*kratos*) are all from God’s *glory*, i.e. the very nature of God. Their goal (or effect) is **endurance and patience with joy**, for endurance builds character (James 1:3-4; Rom. 5:2-4), and patience issues from continual suffering. The church—because of grace, the Gospel, the offence of the Cross—was continually faced with persecution (11 Cor. 4:7-12); even so they could live in joy (Acts 13:50-52; I Thess. 1:6).

giving thanks (see verse 3): here we are seeing the great action of the Father in what he has done, namely that he has **qualified**, i.e. made us competent, or made it possible that we should join **the saints** who are **in light**. For such saints there is an **inheritance** (Acts 26:18; Dan. 7:22, 27; 1 Pet. 1:4). This is linked with hope, but hope based on something which has happened *in their experience*, i.e. God has **delivered us [you] from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of his beloved Son**. This is great

deliverance (Heb. 2:14-15; Col. 2:14-15) for all men belong to darkness by reason of sin and Satan lords it over those in sin. Deliverance is by nothing less than the Cross and Resurrection. The Son is loved of the Father because God loves the sons he will bring by his death (John 10:17; Heb. 2:9--10). Even so we see the kingdom is one of love (cf. Rom. 14:17). Man is in one kingdom (of Satan) or the other. Guilt binds him to Satan; grace to God: **forgiveness** is dynamic to release but then only forgiveness on the basis of the Cross, i.e. propitiation (Rom. 3:24; I John 4:10; cf. Jer. 31:31-34; Matt. 26:28). This constitutes **redemption**. and the false teachers were showing another way, not by the Cross and its blood (Eph. 1:7). Redemption is taking a person out of debt, imprisonment, slavery, all three of which happen by human guilt. Undoubtedly the Son effects all this.

- 15 He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation;
- 16 for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.
- 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.
- 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent.
- 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
- 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Our eyes are now turned to *the Son*. Who is *he* to effect such redemption? And *who* is he, anyway? It is believed these verses (15 to 20) constitute an early Christian hymn. Certainly they are hymnodic. If deliverance, transference, redemption and forgiveness are wrought by him then he must be as no other man has ever been. Thus follows the description of him:

the image of the invisible God: ie. similarity to, representation and manifestation of, God. See Hebrews 1:3; cf. 11 Corinthians 4:4, 6. John 1:18 says no one has seen God and that the Son manifests him (John 14:9, 'he who has seen me has seen the Father,). Idol images are deadly static, misleading. Man is a dynamic image (Gen. 1:26). Yet the Son (eternal) has always been the image of God (similarly, representatively, manifestingly). Otherwise we could know nothing of him. Incarnated he is '*the visible expression of the invisible God*'. He had always manifested God, now he manifests him in the flesh; 'Word to God', 'Son to Father', and in one sense 'creator mediator to Creator'. He is also the firstborn of all creation; this as against the heretics who saw a line of angelic creator mediators. For first born see Hebrews 1:6; Romans 8:29; Hebrews 12:23; Exodus 4:22; cf. Col . 1:18. Here in 1:18 and Psalm 89:27 the title is one of pre-eminence, rather than a statement of birth, chronologically. If we look at I Corinthians 15:20 and Acts 26:23-24, we see that he is the first in a significant way. When we look at verse 16 (here) we see he is uncreated since all things were created in him. Notice the in him: had he not been there first nothing could be created, cf. I Corinthians 8:6; Hebrews 2:10; John 1:1-3. Notice the unity of all things visible and invisible, in heaven and on earth. They are created in him, as also by him. These all **things** include thrones, lordships, prince-

doms and authorities. Elsewhere we see these are both good and bad, ie. 'become bad' (Rev. 12:1ff.). See Colossians 2:14-15; Romans 8:38; Ephesians 6:12; Daniel chapters 10-11, etc. By his eternal Sonship (Heb. 1:2) he is Lord over all. **Note: earth and heaven = visible and invisible.** Visibility or invisibility add nothing and take nothing from their objects. The **for him** must mean he is not only head, but director, and both relate to 'the will of God' being carried out. A far cry from lesser angelic beings having creation in *their* hands!

He is before all things: that is he antedates all things, thus all things follow him, and are dependent upon him.

and in him all things hold together: ie. they have their unity, their coherence, cf. Proverbs 8:12-31 where 'wisdom' is personalised and see that in the New Testament Christ is 'the Word' or 'the Wisdom of God', (John 1:1ff.; I Cor. 1:30; Col. 1:9; 2:9-10. Hebrews 1:3 says, 'he upholds the world (creation) by his powerful word'.

He is the head of the body, the church, cf. Ephesians 3:9 11, and note that creation and the church are linked together in the plan of God; apart from creation we cannot understand church. Christ is the head over both. The heretics are wrong then, for angels are not over creation and do not dominate the church.

he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead: the evidence mounts; all things and happenings in time are under his control, ie. the 'was and is and is to come' (Rev. 1:8; 4:8 etc., cf. 17:8 11 where the beast does not have this eternal nature and continuous action). **the first-born from the dead** shows that he is Lord of life and death. None other can handle sin and death which are always linked. **first-born** = first fruits (I Cor. 15:20). Thus he is a life-giving spirit (I Cor. 15:45; John 10:10, etc.).

that in everything he might be pre-eminent: ie. creation, time, redemption, the church, the plan of God. This outpaces the heretics. The Colossians (and others) must look to no-one but Christ. This has many implications.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell: this fullness—*pleroma is* in none other (cf. John 5:19-28), uniquely it indwells him. Its indwelling is permanent, not transitory. What, however, is **'the fullness'**? Colossians 2:9 shows it is the whole Deity and it dwells not simply in the pre-incarnate Christ, but in the incarnate Christ. It must mean the fullness of God, but especially as it pertains to the work of Christ which we see above and below. Thus all the attributes and powers of God (cf. Rom. 1:20) are in him. We can say the 'fullness was pleased to dwell, or 'God was pleased that the fullness should dwell in him'. In any case **the fullness** is the totality of God as seen in John 1:14 'full of grace and truth. This **fullness** is not a new thought. In the Old Testament many things are said to be full or have fullness, e.g. the sea (I Chron. 16:32; Psalm 96:11), the earth and everything in it (Psalm 24:1; cf. I Cor. 10:26; Jer. 8:16), the world and all that it contains (Psalm 50:12; 89:11), and at the same time God is said to fill all things (Jer. 23:24; Psalm 72:19). Isaiah 6:3 can be translated 'the whole earth is full of his glory, or 'the earth is the fullness of his glory'. This fullness of God is in Christ the man, and pertains to his operations regarding 'all things', a term which covers things created, redeemed and (ultimately) restored. For further material see the church as fullness in Ephesians 1:21 22; 4:10, 12. See also Ephesians 3:19 'fullness of God'.

and through him to reconcile all things: See Ephesians 1:9 10. God 's plan is to *unite* all things. Above we see the Son created **all things**, and that **all things** cohere in him.

These two are creational and providential, but it requires redemptional reconciliation (note: Eph. 4:10 'fill all things' and Col. 3:14 'love . . . holds everything together in harmony'). The fullness then is a reconciling fullness.

to himself whether on earth or in heaven: as above everything was created through him, now it is brought together to him. Cosmic and earthly powers become one with God. This does not mean the hostile and evil things (powers and authorities) but the powers already one with God, and those who through the Cross are also reconciled to God. What however of the evil powers, etc.? Are they loose somewhere, free to do what they wish? The answer is that they are defeated. They are now existentially 'the things that are not'. They are defeated and bow the knee to the Son and the Father (Phil . 2:10-11) . Theirs is 'subjection-reconciliation, as against a 'salvation-reconciliation'. Their judgement by a holy God is not His failure to reconcile but His insistence that He will judge 'righteous judgement' (Rev. 15:4; 16:7; 18:20; 19:2,21;20:9 10, 14—15).Note that all things are reconciled by God to Himself, not primarily to one another.

making peace by the blood of his cross: ie. the death of Christ centres God's reconciling action at a point in time: it is not a natural process, or even inherent in creation. The act of love redeems man from rebellion, setting him at peace with God and his loyal powers. This peace is both functional (reconciliation) and personal, ie. even emotional fulfilment. For *the* way in which this is done see 11 Corinthians 5:19-21; Ephesians 2:11-22; 4:10; Colossians 3:15. The Cross effects redemptional reconciliation of the obedient elements, ie. the elect and the whole creation (Rom. 8:18-25) as also judgement-reconciliation in the subjection of evil elements (thrones, dominions,

principalities, etc., Col. 2:14-15; Heb. 2:14-15). This reconciliation is through Christ's Lordship worked out from his Cross-victory.

- 21 And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,
 22 he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him,
 23 provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

And you, who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds: Paul is now directing the reconciliation to the local (Colossian church) scene. Man by creation was at peace with God, but through the Fall he became guilty and so alienated (Gen. 3:10; Rom. 1:21; Rom. 5:10). In particular the Gentiles are the alienated ones since Israel was the people of God (see Eph. 2:11-12; 4:17-19). The hostility to God comes from man's guilt, and is dynamically active, drawing out deeds of hostility. Note that **mind** (*dianoia*) has to be changed (*metanoia*: repentance). Man's enmity to God is typified by Babel (Gen. 11:1-9; Psalm 2:1f.; Eph. 2:1-3). Impenitence is the hallmark of darkness (Rev. 16:8-9).

he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death: God is the prime mover, Christ is the means, the Cross is the power. Note the contrast 'you were. . . but now': something radical has happened. Probably the best translation

is 'in his body of flesh' (cf. Rom. 8:3). In and by his humanity Christ effected reconciliation (Rom. 5:10-11).

in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him: The three adjectives show God's aim (cf. Eph. 1:3-4). Only the pure in heart see God, but the thought here is that the Cross effects a state in which the person cannot be accused (Rom. 8:33), ie. is **irreproachable**. This is a work God does in Christ's Cross.

provided that you continue in the faith: Galatians 3:1-3; 5:3-5; 11 Corinthians 6:1-2 show that elements can draw us away from the faith (cf. 11 Cor. 11:4). The condition is not that a work on their part will assure them of salvation, but that they rest in the salvation provided. See Romans 11:22-23.

stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard: it is the faith in which we continue (remain, dwell, proceed) that we are **stable**. Note that this is a communal thing, not just an individual matter. The community is built (1 Cor. 3:10ff.; Eph. 2:21-22; 1 Pet. 2:4ff.), and as on a rock (Matt. 7:24-27). It is **steadfast** when 'rooted and grounded in love' when 'growing up into mature manhood' (Eph. 3:17; 4:13). **Hope** figures largely in this faith-gospel (1:5; Eph. 1:18f.). Hope is the true dynamic for holy living and true expectation (1 John 3:1-3). Here the cosmic/salvation reconciliation is the dynamic hope.

which has been preached to every creature under heaven: Notice that the Colossians have **heard**. This means it has radically come to them. *hearing is* a powerful matter (cf. Luke 8:4-21; Rev. chs. 2-3--'He that has an ear to hear'). Thus they are living in the ethos of this reconciling Gospel. Others however have not truly heard (Rom. 10:16, 18; 11 Thess. 1:7-9).

of which 1, Paul, became a minister: The Gospel is of cosmic proportions, and is told to the world. To have this ministry (*diakonia*: service, servanthood) is something of which Paul speaks with gratitude and a sense of responsibility (cf. Eph. 3:11; Rom. 12:3, 6).

24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake: Paul's servanthood works itself out in unavoidable and necessary sufferings (see 11 Cor. 6:3-10; 11:23-29). I **rejoice**, ie. in the light of the cosmic nature and power of the Gospel for reconciliation (**now** means 'concerning this matter of the reconciling Gospel'). Paul has joy when the Gospel demands suffering. Yet it is more than this. Suffering is the mark of the last age (aeon). Paul lived with an apocalyptic consciousness: he expected cosmic suffering (Mark 13; Matt. 24; the Revelation chs. 5-20, cf. Rom. 8:18-25). No one involved in the Gospel can escape the age's suffering: not merely persecution and opposition, but the judgements of God coming upon the cosmos.

in my flesh: ie. in my body, my humanity, as was the case with Christ (Rom. 8:3).

what is lacking in Christ's afflictions: obviously nothing was lacking in Christ's redemptive suffering. Paul means that *all* believers must share in the present personal and apocalyptic suffering which is necessary for the proclamation of the Gospel in this time (cf. 11 Cor. 4:7-15). For 'lacking' see I Thessalonians 3:10: 'may supply what is lacking in your faith'. This is what the body does.

for the sake of his body, that is, the church: without this suffering, in some way, the church cannot be complete, functioning wholly. See 1:18—the church is universal, related to the world suffering, the cosmic reconciliation. Suffering seen this way is significant but does not demand pity for Paul (cf. Eph. 3:13). Nor should the church be embarrassed by such suffering; it is part of being members of the body.

25 of which 1 became a minister according to the divine office which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known

of which I became a minister according to the divine office which was given to me for you: 'given' is the key word. Elsewhere he calls the gift of ministry *a grace* (Gal. 2:9; I Cor. 3:10; 15:10; Rom. 1:5; 12:3, 6; 15:15). He said, 'I have been entrusted with an office' (I Cor. 9:17). He has been commanded: it is not for him to withdraw. Paul received commands from Christ (Acts 9:5; 22:14-15; 26:15-20). Paul is commissioned to a '**divine office**' ie. that of an apostle. The office was not for status or Paul's ego, but **for you**.

to make the word of God fully known: literally 'to complete the word of God'. As he 'completed', suffering so he 'completes' the word, cf. Romans 15:19, 'I have fully preached the gospel'. See Acts 20:27, 'I did not shrink from declaring the whole counsel of God'.

26 the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints.

the mystery hidden for ages and generations: What is the **mystery**? Paul's immediate answer is 'Christ in you, the hope of glory'. In Ephesians 3:1-11 it is unity of Jew and Gentile, the inheritance common to both, ie. that they are the one people of God, and the mystery has been hidden from angels and men, hitherto (see RSV margin for 'ages and generations'), but is now disclosed. The Colossians now know that (a) the Gentiles are one (body) with the Jews in the Messianic community, and (b) that Christ is *in* them, as well as *among* them. This is the assurance of the eschatological glory, the summation of each, and of the people of God.

(*Glory* is a basic theme of Scripture from man's creation as the glory of God—1 Corinthians 11:7—access into grace with the hope of glory—Romans 5:1-2—present transformation in glory—11 Corinthians 3:18; cf. 4:16f.—to the hope of glory by the Spirit—Romans 8:18-25—to this passage of Colossians 1:27 where Christ's indwelling assures the ultimate glory.)

27 To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles is the glory of the mystery: ie. by Paul and others so that they immediately recognise 'the glory of the mystery'. Man must see *now* what God has done and is doing, and how it will climax. This is necessary for developing faith and life. This mystery (known by the initiated, but not by others) is expounded in Ephesians 3:1-11; Romans 16:25, 26; 1 Corinthians 2:6-10.

Christ in you the hope of glory means that Christ's habitation *now* is an encouragement and seal of the *then* of glory.

28 Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ.

Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom: Note '**him**' (whom) is primary, 'we' in the case of the Colossians, not Paul, but Epaphras (see v. 7-8) who came from Paul. The apostolic band (**we**) proclaims Christ.

proclaim is an official pronouncement (of 'Christ', Phil. 1:17; 'gospel', I Cor. 9:14; 'word of God', Acts 13:5; 17:13; cf. I Cor. 1:17, 18, 21, 23). Such '**warning and teaching**' issues from the life lived by the proclaimers, and related to the life lived by the hearers. It was immediately related to the new community of believers.

teaching is necessary because of **false** teaching (cf: I Tim. 1:10; 11 Tim. 4:3; I Tim. 2:12; 4:11, etc.). Teaching important, so note how many times the writers say 'You know . . . ' Only by teaching can they guard against false notions and practice.

all wisdom is not intellectual brilliance but practical sagacity, applying the truth in life. It is wisdom which is against (and other than) the Colossian false teachers.

that we may present every man mature in Christ = 'that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God' (Col. 4:12). Maturity or completeness is the goal of teaching, obedience and life.

29 For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me.

For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me: God is at work in Paul for the purposes of this ministry to the Colossians. See Paul's claim of Acts 20:28-32 especially. Paul can make such claims (cf. I Cor. 15:10-11; Phil. 4:13; 2:13). The message he has carries its own dynamic and motivation. Love is the spur, but love which sees the eschatological.

CHAPTER TWO

1 For I want you to know how greatly I strive for you, and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not seen my face,

I want you to know how greatly I strive for you: He repeats what is said above, but has insistence that this is personal and genuine. He is not speaking tongue-in-cheek but heart-in-action.

and for those at Laodicea: this church is linked with Colossae and would read it and its warnings against false teaching for doubtless this is danger that compels Paul to write

and for all who have not seen my face: It is difficult to believe that someone like Paul could be concerned for churches he had not directly founded. However the energy which energises Paul is God, Christ, the Spirit and the Gospel in its present reality. Hence he is concerned for them. In a secondary sense they have come to the Gospel via his servant Epaphras.

2 that their hearts may be encouraged as they are knit together in love, to have all the riches of assured understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, of Christ,

their hearts may be encouraged: Paul's 'striving' or 'struggling' is, in fact, prayer. *the heart is* really the whole man in Hebraic thinking.

encouraged (*paraklesis*, cf. Col.4:11) can mean admonished. The Holy Spirit is the *paraklete* (John 14:16) but comfort is not merely emotional/sentimental. It speaks to the whole being.

as they are knit together in love: **knit** = united, joined together: a strong bond.

to have must mean that if not one in love then they will not (together) come to know and to have **all the riches of assured understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, of Christ**. We need to have 'all the riches of the fullness of insight', not as the gnostics or others, but from the proclaimed word, ie. 'complete fullness,, 'complete understanding'. Note that such fullness comes from 'full proclamation', cf. I Thessalonians 1:5, ie. full word, full power, full conviction and assurance, cf. 11 Corinthians 2:4-5. Weak proclamation produces weak understanding and action. (Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1:16ff. asks for personal and corporate insight into God's will for them: it needs to be personal to fortify and energise the believer and the community who can see the end in sight and be 'eschatologically' encouraged.)

God's mystery here is Christ (in apposition). Ephesians 3:11 says the mystery (the plan of God) is *realised* in Christ. Christ is the full content of the divine mystery (secret). This is what the church needs to know. To know the person and his work is to know God and His mystery.

3 in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge: Wisdom and knowledge must be God Himself, His being and actions, the mystery of God, not only His plan, but His Being. John 1:18 (cf. Col. 1:15) speaks of the Son 'explaining' (exegeting) Him. These treasures are not hidden in the sense of covered from understanding, but in the sense of 'deposited'. They are a treasure we know is there, but unexposed. See I Corinthians 1:24, 30. This **wisdom and knowledge** is not merely *data*, but is God 's nature and being in Christ, by whom it is communicated. The treasure is God's largesse to His people, and this *against* the heretics and false teachers.

4 I say this in order that no one may delude you with beguiling speech.

I say this in order that no one may delude you with beguiling speech: Paul refused to use such words (I Cor. 1:17; 2:4; 11 Cor. 4:1-2), but in any case he was speaking the truth (ie. truthfully). The false teachers at Colossae. High sounding words impress the gullible. If they have 'all the riches of the fullness of insight' they will not be deceived. Even so they must be alerted to the danger.

5 For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

For though I am absent from you in body, yet I am with you in spirit: Paul cannot be there to warn them and discern for them what is false, but distance does not separ-

ate them. In spirit (his self, being) he is with them. He is one with them: they can rest in that assurance. Absent in body does not mean absent in concern and their defence, cf. I Corinthians 5:3-5.

rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ: It is not a ragged community, but one well-formed. All things are done 'decently and in order, (I Cor. 14:40). Their firmness comes from faith in Christ. (See Philippians 1:27-28 where the phalanx-like church presents itself to the enemy and causes it fear.) The Corinthian church seemed to lack that good order (cf. I Cor. 3:1 4; 11 Cor. 12:20-21). For contrast see Colossians 1:3, 8. See also the 'unfirmness' of Ephesians 4:14 and its remedy of 4:15-16.

6 As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him,

7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord: Paul is continuing his theme of firmness. It lies in what they have received.

received here is the same as in I Corinthians 15 3 (cf. Gal. 1:15), that is what they were taught they received (cf. I Cor. 1:17f.). See also I Thessalonians 4:1; I Corinthians 11:2; 11 Thessalonians 3:6. Christ's lordship is the great theme of the New Testament as seen in Acts 2:36; 3:19; 10:36; Romans 10:9; I Corinthians 8:6; I Corinthians 12:3; II Corinthians 4:5; I Peter 3:15; Revelation 1:5; 17:14; 19:16. The Gospel is achieved by his Lordship, his Lordship by the Gospel (Cross and Resurrection). They must

view all things (teaching, moral action, obedient understanding of the truth) in the light of that understanding they had received.

so live in him: live = 'walk' (ie. walk around everywhere). Their manner of life depends on how they see him and understand him, his salvation, deliverance, etc. (Col. 1:10)

rooted and built up in him: See parallel in Ephesians 3:17 and Colossians 1:23. 'Easy come, easy go, is the opposite of deliberately putting down roots, building true foundations (cf. Heb. 5:12-13; I Cor. 3:1f.; Gal. 3:3-S; Phil. 3:10 14). Christ, of course, is the true foundation, so **in him** (I Cor. 3:10 and Eph. 3:17) *'in love'*.

and established in the faith: the community is **established** in the faith (ie. in Christ) by receiving the truth, living in it, being rooted and grounded. Thus establishment emerges (see I John 3:16 22 where *doing* the truth *assures* the heart).

just as you were taught, ie. in and by the things received, by receiving Christ as Lord.

abounding in thanksgiving: Thanksgiving is the heart of true faith and Christian living. It is the opposite of Romans 1:21, 'did not give thanks to him,, and is the sign of rich faithful living (Col. 3:17; Eph. 5:20; I Thess. 5:18). This thanksgiving will issue from the received truth. its practice and the awareness of God in Christ.

8 See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.

See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit: This is an alerting cry, a warning against danger. The suggestion is that they can be violently carried away. F. F. Bruce suggests it is *a person (no one)*. Note that **philosophy** ('love of wisdom') is here paralleled with **empty deceit**. We have to keep alert, continuously, for the enemy seeks to capture us. Philosophy as human thinking is always open to error as it seeks to impress. This **philosophy** was based on **tradition** and was linked with religion and its rituals. See also 'tradition of men, (Mark 7:8).

human tradition is linked with **elemental spirits**, ie. astral powers, cf. Colossians 2:14-15, 20ff.; Galatians 4:8ff. These are the principalities and powers (cf. Eph. 6:12; Rom. 8:37f.). They affect the affairs of men in the way they can do this (cf. Dan. chs. 10, 11; John 1:51).

not according to Christ (as above in vv. 2-7; 1:15-17; cf. I Cor. 8:6).

9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily = 1:19. Note that so much is 'in him'. The fullness of God came to dwell in a human being. Contrast this with rebellious spirits, empty human traditions, man-made philosophy and the latter seems tawdry, without substance. That the fullness (*pleroma*) should inhabit a human is stunning. Note **dwells**, ie. now.

10 and you have come to fullness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

you have come to fullness of life in him, that is the system of philosophy and its accompanying traditions have no objective reality: you had a false life in them. Now all that it means to be truly human has been brought to you in/by Christ. What seemed life in 'traditions' and *emanations* is not so. No real basis in them, no ontological reality. (Note in vv. 8--13 the constant 'in him', 'with him'.) The **fullness** must be seen as only **in Christ**.

fullness of life is a powerful statement. This is what everything is about.

in him: man, even redeemed man, has no life autonomously; it must be **in him**. This is not merely subjective: it is where and how a man must be full.

who is the head: the other powers, etc. promised fullness. They cannot give it. Even if some mediatorial system existed it would all have to stand (be dependent) upon Christ. His is direct mediatorial authority (I Tim. 2:5).

the head of all rule and authority: (i) by creation (Col. 1:15-17), (ii) by redemption. See Ephesians 1:19f.; Colossians 2:15, 17. His authority certifies our life in him and demolishes any life outside him.

11 In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ;

In him also you were circumcised: circumcision not used this way by Paul elsewhere. It may have been a taking of the term used wrongly in the 'philosophy' and 'deceit'. **made without hands** must mean nothing at all human; 'the work of their hands' refers to idols, building Babel, etc. Here is a direct action of Christ, unseen but real (cf. Gal.

1:11-12) so that nothing mars its quality (ie. no human intervention).

by putting off the body of flesh, ie. as the baptismal candidate took off the old clothes and put on new, so we put off 'the old man' (Rom. 6:6) or 'the body of death' (Rom. 7:24), ie. 'the old humanity' (Col. 3:9-10).

in the circumcision of Christ can mean (a) Christ has circumcised us (for 'spiritual' circumcision see Deut. 30:6; Rom. 2:28-29), ie. stripped from us the old life with its penal, personal doom, or (b) Christ himself has had a circumcision, cf. Colossians 2:15 'stripped off the principalities and powers'. In any case circumcision has been effected.

12 and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

and you were buried with him in baptism: See Romans 6:4. Burial is to bring death to the old humanity, rising to bring life (resurrection). Note these things happened in the baptism, but **all in Christ**. Faith did not make them die or rise—baptism did that, but faith was in God who raised him (in the past to the view of the person now believing). This faith comes by seeing Christ raised (cf. Rom. 6:4; 1:5; Acts 2:24, 36; 3:14-15). The *fact* of the resurrection is dynamic for submission to baptism, since faith is in the God who works.

13 And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,

And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh: See Ephesians 2:1, 5; Hebrews 6:1; 9:14. 11 Corinthians 5:14-15 shows the new life, cf. Romans 6:2-10. Colossian people as former Gentiles were outside the covenant. They were not alive to God, nor did they have a place in the covenant-people by circumcision. Spiritually, all (Jews and Gentiles) are dead, needing life.

God made alive together with him: baptism confirms the death in the act of immersion. It is death with a view to life. God is the initiator of the new life and entrance into it. Yet it is all in Christ, ie. **together with him**. We must keep remembering Christ over and against the false teachers, traditions, emanations, etc. There is no other way but Christ, yet Christ with God working.

having forgiven us all our trespasses: note that none of this is apart from verses 14, 15, ie. the Cross. Note also that the forgiveness of sins is not a term greatly used (cf. Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 10:43).

14 having cancelled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

having cancelled the bond which stood against us: in one way a sort of IOU. In the demand of the law (cf. Gal. 3:13; 11 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 3:24f.), Paul is not seeing the law as an enemy and wrong, but simply its demands (cf. Rom. 10:3f.). These, too, are not wrong, but the condemnation of the law faces us. (There is also a thought that the evil powers make their demands, ie. they have something 'on us' because of our sin—even our sin against the law—as we see in John 14:30-31; Jude 9; John 10:10.) In some way, his

becoming sin (II Cor. 5:21) sets us from this law demand. This then explains **with its legal demands**. Note that the principle of **demands** can be seen in Colossians 2:20f., and Galatians 4:8f. **this he set aside, nailing it to the cross**: if viewed as an IOU, or a bill for payment, then on the Cross the debt is paid, the bill cancelled, the law satisfied.

When Satan tempts me to despair. And tells
me of the guilt within, Upward I look and
see him there. Who made an end to all my
sin.

In fact the debt is with God and His holy law, but He pays it in the death of His Son. ('Faith sees it there, and faith leaves it there.')

15 He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him.

He disarmed the principalities and powers, ie. the basis on which they had power over man was destroyed, cf. Hebrews 2:14-15, Jude 9. The guilt of the law having been taken, their hold on man was destroyed (cf. Rev. 12:10 for principle of accusation defeated). The word **disarmed** can mean 'stripped off' either the possessions the powers had acquired, or the weapons they had, or even Christ stripped off the evil powers which had taken possession *of* him.

made a public example of them = 'paraded them around the ring, or 'led them as defeated' (cf. 11 Cor. 2:14).

16 Therefore let no one pass judgement on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath.

therefore: ie. 'on the basis of what I have said in this letter, especially v.8—"See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit—and because all your fullness is in Christ and not in such foolish things, I now say, "**Let no one**, etc.'"

pass judgement on you in questions of food and drink: these matters (or questions) are tied up with the philosophical system of the 'wise' opponents of the Gospel. This is their way of 'becoming or remaining full' (cf. w. 9-10). Since we do not know their system, but only that they 'do not hold fast to the Head' (v. 19) then their sarcastic scorn is to be ignored. This, too, **with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath**, for these things also belong to their system. Whilst we cannot actually be sure what the five things here nominated are, we can gather they constitute a form of legalism which is probably more pagan than Jewish, though it may be a mixture of both, but in any case is occultic, since in verse 20 Paul points to occultic powers (**the elemental spirits of the universe**). Paul's true principle is seen in the next verse (v. 17), ie. that all in Christ is substantial and now just 'shadows'. These heretics are insisting on forms of asceticism, e.g. '**Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch**' (v. 21). Such negative forms are not found in the law, since nothing is said about drinking. Certainly this 'philosophy' is complicated and non-Christian. This passage of verses 16-23 is a defence of Christian liberty, a critique of smothering legalism.

17 These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

the substance belongs to Christ: our minds naturally go to Hebrews 9:1f., where the writer of the Epistle insists that

the law—especially the rituals of sacrifice—were only a shadow cast before Israel of the reality to come, ie. the true and substantial sacrifice of Calvary. Paul is saying in this present verse that the principle of the five things—nominated above—ie. asceticism cannot have substance.

the substance belongs to Christ, because only Christ is substantial—whether or not these five things are pagan or Jewish—for he has set man free from all the things of legalism, and has broken the grip of evil powers (cf. vv. 14-15, 20). The things of ‘philosophy and empty deceit’ are insubstantial: they can accomplish nothing.

18 Let no one disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, taking his stand on visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind,

disqualify, ie. ‘rob you of your prize’, the outcome of their faith. These false teachers by their religious-legal system would lead the faithful astray from the prize of grace and true Christian works by substituting a mystical and ascetic religious system. In the word **disqualify** there is also the idea of *condemnation*, for such a sense of condemnation comes when one feels one is lacking in the practice of a thing. In this case the practice was related to **self-abasement, worship of angels, visions and being puffed up without reason**. **Self-abasement** would relate to self-denying legalisms such as fastings, and self-denial of what was, anyway, legitimate for a Christian believer (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1-4).

worship of angels would relate to the gnostic heresy of creation and courses of angels, and in any case would be attractive in its occultic forms. **Worship** in Israel and the

church is a solemn exercise and undertaking, one either worships God or idolatrous forms (cf. Rom. 1:21-25).

taking his stands ie. claiming to enter—perhaps by trances, these being induced by fasting and the like—into hidden truth by various **visions**. **Visions** have always been a problem since they constitute on true occasions, communications by God to the prophets (Num. 12:6; cf. Acts 2:14ff. with Joel 2:28ff.).

Whilst **worship of angels** was found in later Judaism as also in the days of the early church—it is strictly prohibited in Revelation 19:10 and 22:9. If the **angels** here mean ‘principalities and powers’ then 2:10 shows they are under Christ, since he is Head of them all.

puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind is somewhat ironical since the subject here seeks self-abasement. **Sensuous mind** is really ‘the mind of the flesh’ (cf. Rom. 8:5-8) and shows the pride engendered by religious-ascetic practices. The whole state described in this verse is so far from what we call ‘the fruit of the Spirit’ (Gal. 5:22,23) that it is ludicrous, and also most dangerous.

19 and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

not holding fast to the Head: this verb **holding fast** is interesting and important. In the New Testament it has the sense of ‘clinging to’ as in Acts 3:11 (the healed lame man clinging to the apostles). As a tight garment clings to the body, yet is dependent upon the body to be upheld, so here the false teachers refuse to ‘cling to the Head’, Christ. By

not holding fast to Christ, they hold fast to angels and the philosophy they espouse. Paul is now teaching the reality of Christ and the members of his body. A body dare not be headless, any more than a head bodiless! The natural principle of the head body oneness is the same in the spiritual realm. All things proceed from Christ as is seen by **from whom**, since Christ is a person.

nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments denotes a system which is far from, and other than, the system the heretics propose, for the church is not like a body, but the very body of its Head—Christ—and works according to natural principles. **grows with a growth is** opposed to the means the false teachers have for their system, from which nothing grows, for true growth is **a growth that is from God**. Ephesians 4:11--16 is a good commentary on this passage.

growth could mean increase of numbers but generally refers to the increasing maturity of the various members of the body.

20 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations?

If really means 'since' (cf. 3:1 for a similar question). Paul is assuming, rightly, that his readers have all died. This is (a) a death with Christ on the Cross, but effected personally in baptism, and (b) a relational death **to the elemental spirits** which once held their devotees in chains by laws (whether pagan or Jewish), since they now—because of the Cross—hold no power over their former victims (2:14-15). The former victims have been freed

from all the ordinances of law, and from the guilt which ensured—formerly—when they broke such laws. It is worth noting that all references to believers' death at the Cross (Rom.6:6; Gal.2:20; 5:24; 6:14; Col.3:5) have a past and once-for-all connotation. On this basis Paul asks, '**Why do you live as if you still belonged to the world?**'. Paul does not tell us what the **world** is here, but it is the same word for *universe* (some translations) and so amounts to that system of evil which is contrary to the Gospel and is not subject to God by reason of its rebellion, and is pitted against the truth. Thus **the elemental spirits** are the dominating powers of this world, seeking to hold their victims by quasi-religious philosophy such as gnosticism. The principle of domination is to order the world-devotees to **submit to regulations**. This keeps them in a constant guilt-and-guilt-expiation system, from which—by nature of the case—they cannot extricate themselves.

21 'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch'

22 (referring to things which all perish as they are used), according to human precepts and doctrines?

Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch means that perishable things are to be disdained, and this is in line with ascetic gnosticism, or other religions which have their origin in dualism, ie. that things material are evil and things unseen are '...spiritual' (I Tim. 4:1-4). These things perish with use. The legalistic regulations are according to human precepts and doctrines. Whilst the Pharisees had such regulations purporting to be the outworking of true law when in fact they were not (Matt. 15:1-20), yet these rules imposed by the principalities and

powers were pagan, even though thought up and imposed by men, for Paul describes them as **human precepts and doctrines**. This means they have no ontological reality, ie. nothing related to the truth.

23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigour of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, but they are of w value in checking the indulgence of the flesh.

These have indeed an appearance of wisdom: in this whole verse Paul is really saying that on the surface it would appear that things such as **rigour of devotion, self-abasement and severity to the body** are means by which true spirituality is enhanced. Instead of this they promote 'will-worship', ie. the worship of a man of his will when he can use it to do the things which will build up his spirituality. The control of such exercises are in his—man's-hand. In this sense he does not need God, but is doing his exercises before God, doubtless as a self-justifying operation. This, then, leads to gratification of the flesh, and not to its mortification--a subject which he takes up in 3:5ff. Far from promoting spirituality it destroys it, for it says that the defeat of the flesh lies in human precepts and doctrines. In Romans 8:11-13 Paul gives the true view and act of mortification of the flesh. He says, 'If you, by the Spirit, do put to death the deeds of the body, you shall live., ie. only by the power of the Spirit can the death of the Cross bring release from the flesh in any given occasion. In the chapter following, we see Paul's practical doctrine of carrying out true mortification of the flesh and vivification within the new man.

CHAPTER THREE

1 If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

If then you have been raised with Christ: The 'if', is not really conditional but corresponds to our English 'since'.

you have been raised with Christ: a statement of extraordinary power and significance. To be raised means not only that we died (2:20), with all its dynamic, and were buried (2:12), but in union with Christ are risen, thus fulfilling the larger statement of Romans 6:1-10. If the question of spiritual circumcision is finished and with it servitude to principalities, angels, and all its bondage, now a whole new panorama opens up, the heavenly things themselves. This is the believer's new situation. (For *raised*, cf. Rom. 6:4, 5, 11; Gal. 2:20.)

seek the things that are above: The question of our identity settled in 2:11-15, we can now live to Christ.

seek, ie. here the will is involved, wanting something.

the things are those of Christ, already pointed out in the letter, but now necessary for the new heaven-oriented living.

where Christ is seated at the right hand of God: this indicates Christ's Lordship in keeping with Psalm 110:1 'sit thou at my right hand'. The Psalm (with Psalm 2) is most important Messianically. In Ephesians 1:20 it shows

his authority and dignity 'for the church'. He is now ruler over all celestial and terrestrial powers. Christ is in session, ruling.

2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth: The verb, **set** = 'have concern for', ie. 'let your thoughts dwell above'. Everything will come from this new focal point. What is below is not irrelevant but understanding of it must start from above. That is the true source for considering. The heavens represent the source of power and life, God being sovereign over all.

3 For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God.

For you have died and your life is hid with Christ in God. The thrilling thing is that we have died to the old life. This is a strong Pauline thought: the links have been cut: we are emancipated into a new life. Having died, we are not dead for 'God made you alive together with him' (2:12-13). Life only exists with and in Christ; we have no independent life. Christ's life is in the Father. Both lives are hidden. The world did not know him, and does not know us, and anyway judges 'in a human kind of way' (I John 3:2-3; 1I Cor. 5:16). We must not think it is not there because hidden. The believer goes on sharing this hidden life.

4 When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory: He is our life (I John 5:12; Rom. 6:23). We are filled full in him (Col. 1:19; 2:9). God has made him this to us (cf. I Cor. 1:30). What is hidden now will one day be manifest. It is not unreal because hidden. It may not be acknowledged, but the **in glory** is at once a vindication of the past and the achieved goal for eternity. The whole theme of man's glorification is extensive in the New Testament (I Cor. 2:6ff; Rom. 5:2; 8:21ff.) but the glory revealing us will be Christ's glory. We will 'share in the glory of God'. That is when the people of God will come into their own.

Note: **[who]** will appear is '[who] will be manifested', ie. 'revealed', cf. I Cor. 4:5, 'disclose the counsels of the heart'. Everything will be made known of us when he appears.

5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry: We need to see that the believer is occupied only with God; that he is in Christ, that his goal is glory, his present concentration upon the things of Christ. Hence the therefore, because in this context all that is evil is unacceptable.

put to death, because you died, be as dead men to evil.

We died (Rom. 6:11) but we also came alive (Rom. 6:13). As alive people we reject all that evil. We put it to death so that our death and life will be a consistent whole. Christ's 'If your eye offend you pluck it out', ie. the equivalent to slaying the members which offend. In practical action mortification means opposing the flesh principle which would use the body and bring the person into sin. 'How can we who have died to sin live any longer in it?' In 2:20--23 we have been warned against 'fleshly legalism'. Here we can only mortify what has been mortified once for all in the Cross. According to Romans 8:13 we 'extirpate' the body's deeds and do it only by the Holy Spirit. The 'old man', 'sin' and 'the flesh' are not eradicated but they have no part in the 'new man'. Hence they can be dealt with.

what is earthly = 'your members on the earth'. They are **fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry**. On *the earth* is the opposite to *the things that are above*. Romans 1:21--32 shows how these evil operations came into being--by the rejection of God. In Christ that order has been reversed. These evil things do not comport with the new man. It is interesting that they are attempts to find joy without God.

fornication = illicit sexuality (I Thess. 4:3; I Cor. 5:10f.; 6:9; II Cor. 12:21; Eph. 5:3; I Tim. 1:9).

impurity = uncleanness which is much the same thing (Gal. 5:19) and includes fornication.

passion = over-riding intensity of feeling in which control is lost, and is shameful, including even sexual perversions.

evil desire = strong desire that is evil, ie. the desire of the flesh (Gal. 5:16) which places them in conflict with God.

covetousness = desire to possess another's goods, wife, etc. (Luke 12:15; Exod. 20:17). Paul lists it as the most

dynamic (Rom. 7:7-8), and in the commandments it is the least definable, but sensed as powerful. It is really avarice, the passion for possessions.

which is idolatry: idolatry is giving that worth to anything which belongs to God. It is not other than the same drive for sexual and emotional fulfilment, for it is seeking joy without God. Security is a drive born outside of God's protection. The idols become providence to the worshipper. So see Matthew 6:24f., Luke 16:13, Ephesians 5:5, and note that idolatry began with rejection of God (Rom. 1:21f.). We must not forget these are things *we can put to death*—and must.

6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming.

On account of these the wrath of God is coming: Some translations add 'on the children of disobedience'. (God's wrath must not be compared with man's. God's wrath is His unchanging opposition to evil and His ruthless insistence on punishing and destroying it, cf. Ephesians 2:1--3; Romans 1:18ff—present wrath; there is coming wrath, Romans 2:3-11, 16; I Corinthians 4:5; Ephesians 5:6; II Corinthians 5:10.) The New Testament continually warns against lapsing into such things, for such sinning prevents entering the Kingdom (I Cor. 6:9; Eph. 5:6; Gal. 5:19-20). Keeping from these things does not justify us but justification keeps us from them. Since we are *dead* we will not live to them. God is giving us up to these things but a full reckoning is coming.

7 In these you once walked, when you lived in them.

In these you once walked, when you lived in them: ‘This was your mode of life’, so that they would be tempted to walk in old habit tracks. Paul seems particularly to be speaking of Gentiles (cf. Eph. 4:17f.) or to Jews who lived along with Gentiles and shared their immorality.

8 But now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth.

But now, ie. ‘by contrast’ since they are incongruous to heaven-oriented believers. The evil things have been put to death, but now **put them all away**, ie. you are competent to do so (in Christ and the Spirit). Note then ‘put to death’ (v.5), ‘put away’ (v.8), ‘put off’ (v.9), ‘put on’ (vv.10,12,14). The point is that believers must live congruously with their new situation and life.

anger: (cf. Matthew 5:22) to be angry with the brother is to be ‘liable to judgement’. Anger against man must really be against God in whose image man is made. See the story of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:6f.; cf. I John 3:10f.). Anger (Gk. *thamos*) is linked with wrath (*orge*). In that anger is a settled attitude, wrath the outburst that comes from it, cf. Cain’s anger against Abel then his (wrathful) murder of him. The first is found in the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:20). ‘Wrath’ is a strong word, differing little from anger. The principle of anger/ wrath is dealt with in Ephesians 4:26-27, 31. Anger is virtually uncontrollable.

malice: (Gk. *kakia*) (cf. I Cor. 5:8; 14:20; Rom. 1:29; Eph. 4:31). It is vindictive and brings sorrow and division within human relationships (see I Pet. 2:1 and James 1:21). It is evil speaking of others and links with **slander** (Gk. *blasphemia*) which is deliberately speaking falsehoods

concerning both man and God (cf. Eph. 4:31; James 3:9). In Titus 3:2 it is ‘to speak evil’.

foul talk: (Gk. *aischrologia*) is really abusive language, ie. the talking of spitefulness, but also with these is obscenity and impure innuendoes. None of these things is to proceed **from your mouth**. James tells us that bitter and sweet do not emerge from the same fountain (James 3:10-12).

9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature [humanity] with its practices

Do not lie relates to the whole subject of truth. To lie is to go counter to the truth. See Ephesians 4:25 where we not only do not lie but speak the truth. The truth is not just the facts: it is God—who He is, what He does, etc.—and His word is as good as Himself, ie. God is one with his word. Lying subverts the truth and truth is the way of life. (*N. B.* Eph. 4:15, ‘truthing it in love’.) Lying breaks down trust between people. The end of liars is seen in Revelation 21:8. For origins of lying see Romans 1:25, John 8:44f.

seeing that you have put off the old nature [humanity]: The Greek aorist tense shows this was done in one act, with finality. This makes present involvement in anger, wrath, malice, slander For amplification of significance see the author's monogram and foul talk incongruous. You do not belong to the old humanity, ie. ‘the old man’ (Rom. 6:6). This old humanity is a corporate thing, and one’s participation in it personal. We should study Ephesians 4:22-24 as parallel to verses 9 10 here. In Ephesians it seems to be in the imperative, although strictly it is (three) infinitives which have an imperative sense. There is doubt that the event has happened to the Colossians.

Some say in water-baptism, others simply at the complex of conversion.

with its practices relates to vv. S-8 above. See also Ephesians 4:17-20, Romans 1:21ff. What is meant by 'the old nature (humanity)'? It is all men in Adam, generally, and the participation in Adam by each man, particularly. The 'old humanity' (Adam) is contrasted to the 'new humanity' (Christ). As new creatures in Christ (11 Cor. 5:17) it is incongruent for us to have anything to do with the old, even though it is possible to do so.

10 and [you] have put on the new nature [humanity], which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

have put on—another aorist tense, a definitive happening in the past. The old humanity with its old way of life must give way to the new. The new humanity (cf. I Cor. 15:20-22, 45--40, Rom. 5:12-21, Eph. 2:15) is **being renewed in knowledge**. This means that man originally created in the image of God, and having dulled or defamed that image is now knowing the processes of renewal into fullness. The renewal is constantly happening, and yet is eschatological, ie. perfect in the ultimate, but not yet in the penultimate. For practical purposes the renewal is a practical work of God which commences with the old man being put off and the new man being put on.

in knowledge must mean knowledge of God, man, creation etc., but it is primarily relational knowledge, ie. man **knowing** God directly, and then learning from and through this relationship.

after the image of its creator: James 1:18 tells the miracle

that the word of truth effects. The Christian believer is a new kind of first fruits of God 's creation. Paul is interested in the practical outworking of this—the actional response to the renewal.

11 Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all.

Here, ie. in the new humanity: Ephesians 2:15 speaks of 'one new man', ie. the new humanity which is neither Jewish nor Gentile, nor an amalgam of the two, but a newly minted humanity. In this humanity **there cannot be Greek and Jew**, etc. This humanity is being made, trained and taught, learning not to reproduce the mores and qualities of the old humanity. Galatians 3:28-29 and I Corinthians 12:13 speak of the new unity, where the old racial, social and economic categories do not divide the new people in them. Nor are they barriers against entering or living the Christian life. The difference between Jew and Gentile had seemed immutable, but the revelation of Jew and Gentile as one (Eph. 2:11-3:7) has altered everything. They are 'the Israel of God ' (Gal. 6:16), ie. 'the third race'. Whilst in fact there are Jews, Gentiles, males, females, slaves and free persons, yet these categories do not act as divisive or obtrusive elements. Something quite radical has happened in history. A new era has come, and a new system of humanity which will be flawless in the eschaton. This radical happening demands the radical change of life-style 'with all its practices' in the fellowship of the new community.

Christ is all, and in all: I Corinthians 15:28, 'that God

may be everything to every one', and Ephesians 1:23, 'the fullness of him that filleth all in all', for 'all things were created through him and for him' (Col. 1:16), and 'hold together' in him, and are reconciled through him (Col. 1:22). The church is the new unity, linked in some way with creation and Gospel (together). Everything has been done in Christ to bring the unity spoken of here in verse 11. He is the church's initial death and then life ('born crucified') and now its everything (I Cor. 1:30-31). In Christ everything is done; dying, rising, putting to death, putting off, putting on, etc., so that apart from him this new unity is nothing.

12 Put on then, as God 's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience

In baptism, conversion, they had **put** off one puts off old clothes or old styles. Now they must **put on** things contrary to the old but consonant with the new. In Ephesians 4:21 Paul speaks of having been taught in Christ's school 'as the truth is in Jesus,. Truth is a way of life, the way of doing things in the light of God the truth and His word the truth. The new person does not have to speculate whether he has power to **put on**: he just does it. It is all in Christ where his life is hidden, and by whom it exists and is dynamic.

as God 's chosen ones: chosen (Gk. *eklektōi*) = 'elect'. Men do not become God's people by their own choice or initiative (Rom. 8:33; 11 Tim. 2:10). God has chosen His people prior to time not by some 'foreseeing, into time, but by His choice for people *in* time. If man is left to his own

sinfulness and the slavery of sin (John 8:34), then he will always be locked away from God. God's grace comes to him in Jesus Christ and releases him. If God does not do this then the entire human race (in Adam) is lost forever ('none seeks after God'). God's choosing is a mystery. We must place His choice above ours in rationality. Choice is not only to salvation but to holiness, sonship, glorification and inheritance. It carries responsibility for full obedience to God.

holy: this raises the vast question of God's holiness, man's sinfulness. God's elective holiness which brings man to be holy (I Pet. 1:2; I Cor. 1:2; Rom. 1:7; I Cor. 6:11; 11 Thess. 2:13; Eph. 1:4). This holiness is (a) purification (Heb. 9:14; Titus 3:5; Acts 15:9; 22:16; I Cor. 6:11), (b) sanctification, ie. the setting apart from the world and inclusion in to the people of God (I Cor. 6:11; I Pet. 2:9-10), and (c) practical holiness of life which the believer must exercise (I Pet. 1:14-15; I Thess. 4:3, 7; Eph. 5:3ff.). All of this relates to the sanctifying action of the Cross (Heb. 2:11; 10:10-14; 13:12).

and beloved, ie. 'loved of God'. See Ephesians 5:1 (beloved children) and I John 3:2 (beloved) for being beloved and loving. Here it points towards election as with Israel who was beloved of God (Exod. 4:22; Deut. 7:6--7; Mal. 1:2). Being loved is a constraint to living as the new community in the 'putting off' and 'putting on'. The rich things of the new humanity are consciously to be **put** on—another way of saying, 'do them'. As with the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) they are part of being 'in Christ', for they stem from him.

compassion: Literally 'bowels of compassion', ie. affection and compassion' as in Philippians 2:1. Can be translated 'a heart of pity'.

kindness is care and concern for another, not obligatory but doing something (cf. Rom. 2:4; 11:22; Eph. 2:7; Titus 3:4).

lowliness, ie. self humbling (Phil. 2:8) but not humiliation, for the poor in heart have no heady view of themselves.

meekness is a gentle spirit, not harsh towards another. It is the word used of Jesus in Matthew 11:29; in his meekness, being obedient to God—a sane estimate of oneself (cf. Gal. 5:23; I Cor. 4:21; Eph. 4:2; 11 Tim. 2:25; Titus 3:2; Gal. 6:1).

patience, ie. long-suffering, putting up with opposition (etc.) without reacting (cf. Gal. 5:22; 11 Cor. 6:6; Eph. 4:2; 11 Tim. 3:10; 4:2). These elements are from God, are Christ in action, are by the Holy Spirit, for they equal in fact the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). They are the way in which relationships are worked out in the community.

13 forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

The imperatives (five above) are continued, ie. **forbearing and forgiving**. **forbearing** = ‘to bear with’, ie. even when it is not reasonable (linking with patience).

if one has a complaint, ie. a grievance or a grudge, seemingly legitimate.

forgiving each other, ie. the matter is mutual. Forgiveness is a comprehensive subject in the New Testament. We forgive **as** the Lord **has forgiven [us]**. Out of forgiveness we forgive and *in no other way!* Forgiveness from God motivates forgiveness towards man (Matt. 18:21f; Eph. 1:7;

Col. 1:13-14; Rom. 4:7; Ps. 32:1-2; cf. 11 Cor. 2:5-11). Forgiveness (with justification) is the basis of the life of the community, and should flow naturally.

14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

above all these [things]: love and forgiveness are linked (cf. *Luke 7:47, passim*). It is the highest of all things (2 Cor. 12:31; Rom. 13:8, 10). It is equivalent to putting on Christ (Gal. 3:27; cf. Rom. 13:12). In Galatians 5:6 love is the prime-mover of faith.

above all can mean ‘above all other garments’ or love is above all the other virtues mentioned in verses 12-13.

which binds everything together in perfect harmony could possibly mean ‘binds all virtues’ but must mean ‘binds everyone and everything’. Only love can unify but not merely disparate elements, but everything in Christ. This could mean ‘within a person’ and ‘within the community, and even ‘within the creation’.

15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

In Philippians 4:7 it is the peace of God which passes understanding keeping them *through Christ*. Here it is the peace **of Christ**. So see John 14:27, ‘my peace’. Ephesians 2:14, ‘he is our peace’; 11 Thessalonians 3:16, ‘Lord of peace’. **hearts**, ie. in each heart, and so in the whole community.

rule = 'hold sway' even 'arbitrate'. The Old Testament idea of peace (*shalom*) = wholeness and integrity. This peace is related to love and the virtues (above) as they also to it. That peace is serenity, security, assuredness.

called seals the fact that it is a state and gift provided by God, and a responsibility for the believers to be this way.

And be thankful: This new society of serene (protected) people is the basis for thanksgiving. Note that in verses I S, 16 and 17 the idea of thankfulness is present. See also 1:12ff.--much cause for thankfulness.

16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

Peace rules, the word dwells; 'the word, the mystery of Christ'(4:3). Elsewhere it is 'the gospel of Christ'(Gal. 1:7; I Cor. 9:12; 11 Cor. 2:12). Colossians 1:5, 'the word of truth, the gospel which has come to you', shows us what the word means. This Gospel is 'to dwell richly'. It is to be the source of all *teaching* and *admonition* (*nouthetountes*), ie. exhortation, correction, encouragement. All of these are given with, and arise from wisdom, ie. true perception and knowledge. They are done by means of 'psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,.

psalms could be the Old Testament psalms or their modern equivalent.

hymns probably were hymns that had developed or happened spontaneously. Such songs are often used in new Christian areas to settle teaching in the mind and heart.

spiritual songs as against secular songs. They would be inspired by the Holy Spirit. These might be even more free and unstructured than psalms and hymns. In any case (cf. a parallel in Eph. 5:19 20) it was teaching in the midst of worship with the peace of God holding sway.

with thankfulness in your hearts to God: gratitude in fellowship and worship rise from an immediate knowledge of God through the Gospel, and His presence at the point of worship. The Gospel is not taken for granted, and warning, exhortation, correction, encouragement and peace stimulate to thanksgiving.

17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

whatever, ie. all above in mortification, vivification, putting away, putting off, putting on, the virtues, love and teaching, worship and unity must be **in the name of the Lord Jesus**, ie. in obedience to him, under his Lordship, especially as the community speaks and acts.

giving thanks to God the Father through him: God is here seen as Father (see 1:2; 1:3; 1:12). Of the four direct mentions of the Father, three are linked with thanksgiving. Ephesians 5:20 is a thanksgiving to the Father. I Thessalonians 5:18 speaks of giving thanks in all circumstances, whilst Ephesians 5:20 is 'for all things'.

through him, ie. through Christ as mediator, the one who presents our prayers to the Father. The Colossians are in 'the kingdom of the Son of His love'. If any Colossian reader is still thinking of course of angels between man and God, then Paul dispels this idea by the direct

approach man has through the Son. He is ‘the Lord Jesus’, ie. over all things.

18 Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord

as is fitting in the Lord sets the principle for obedience to the husband. It makes the matter not merely social (ie. something which may differ from age to age) but principial. It places it within the Lord, and so in the functional order. It is not merely subjection but the kind that is **fitting in the Lord** (cf. Eph. 5:22; I Pet. 3:5; Titus 2:5). The verb ‘be subject, (*hupertasso*) is used some forty times in the New Testament and carries the idea of ‘to accept/recognise the authority of another,. Paul is raising this question.

in the Lord is the same as in *Christ*, ie. the sphere of relationship, submission and **operation which relates** to Christ, and relates us to him as our Lord.

19 Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.

love your wives is as positive a command as the one to wives to be subject to their husbands. Love is a vast subject but the husband’s love is from Christ.

do not be harsh with them: technically it means ‘do not be embittered with your wife,. Embitterment can spring from many things. The husband is to be positive and to be tender. Notice, wives are not called to take any initiative in love, but see Titus 2:4 where they are to be taught to love their husbands. Paul does not speak about the causes of

harshness.

20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

The children are *subject* to both parents (*upertasso*, same verb for ‘be subject’, ‘be obedient’). If it **pleases the Lord**, then the children are understood to be in the Lord, and obedience *is fitting*. The whole family is in the Lord: to please the Lord is a joyous thing. not mere fear of what follows disobedience.

21 Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

Both parents are to be obeyed, but the father is to take the basic discipline.

provoke has the idea of ‘to irritate’, and even ‘to make angry’. Sometimes translated as ‘overcorrect’, ‘scold’, ‘exasperate’. Whatever the verb may be, it carries here the idea that is in Ephesians 6:4, namely to so deal with the children that instead of being helpful, the action is harmful. It seems that excessive strictness on the part of parents causes the children to lose heart. Since all relationships are to be ‘in the Lord’, then this is not *fitting*.

22 Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not with eyeservice, as men pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord.

The exhortation is to Christian slaves. True obedience must be more difficult for slaves since slavery is not a true creational way of life. Even so, **fearing the Lord** is to be the motivation for the Lord since this, positively, is pleasing the Lord. Pleasing man is not the prime-mover. This obedience is **in everything**, since it is all serving the Lord. It should be looked upon as their ministry to the Lord, and so to men. Note that **fearing the Lord** is not slavish fear.

23 Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men,

This all underlines verse 22 since it directs all serving to the Lord.

24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you are serving the Lord Christ.

The New Testament does not hesitate to speak of the **reward**. The word here often carries a negative idea of repayment (as in v. 25 'the wrongdoer') but here **reward** means **the inheritance** (Col. 1:5, 27; 3:1-4). This is a glorious thing (Eph. 1:18; I Pet. 1:4) but it seems here the slaves get what they put into their work both in motive and manner (integrity). They are working for Christ in every detail they execute. Their masters may greatly neglect giving them anything, but **the Lord Christ** will not fail to reward them.

25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

The wrongdoers could be the masters, but Paul is not yet addressing them. It must mean that slaves can exercise wrongdoing. It may even mean that to have been brought into slavery is wrongdoing on the part of others: very well they will be punished. The slave must keep the Lord Christ in view.

CHAPTER FOUR

1 Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

The Lord (the *Kurios*) is Christ, and he is Lord over wives, husbands, children, slaves, and now, masters. In one way the principal obedience involved is for the functional living of the community of the Kingdom (1:13).

treat your slaves justly and fairly: to be a master is like being a wife, husband, parent, child, servant. It is a category within the social structure of the day. In Israel, being masters of slaves carried stringent demands from God. (These are seen in Lev. 25:39; Exod. 22:3; 21:4--6; 21:2; Deut. 15:12-18; Jer. 34:13-17; Lev. 25:10; 19:20.) There must be treatment given **justly and fairly** within the Kingdom of the Son of His love, because grace transcended even the old rules of having slaves. Again there was the **Master in heaven**, ie. *Lord in heaven*, under whom and for whom they were working.

We can, then, sum up this section, not only from 2:18 to 4:1, but from 3:12 to 4:1. In this portion of the letter, Paul is saying that the virtues which we deliberately put on are God's grace gifts to enable us to live together in the unity which is intrinsic to God Himself, and which works out in the life of the community. Love is the foundation, the unifying factor and the sum and substance of life and

action in the church. It is indispensable to true relationships, to true worship, and to the authentic life of the domestic and community household. It is not given primarily as a blueprint for the world (although were there genuine spirituality and faith it would not go amiss, but it is for the new community, Christ's people, and the Father's family, living as they do, in and for the Kingdom of God).

2 Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving;

Prayer has to be the way of life of the community, since so much is required of them paraenetically (from Gk. *paraenesis*, exhortation, advice, so advisory). Christ taught his disciples much about prayer (Luke 18:1-8), especially the prayer which has faith that God hears, and this in the face of His seeming tardiness of reply and action. Most Epistles exhort to prayer with persistence (e.g. Eph. 6:18-20). We have seen in Colossians 1:9f. and 2:1f. that Paul is untiring in prayer: that is why they must **continue steadfastly in prayer**.

being watchful in it with thanksgiving: **watchful** = 'being vigilant', 'being sober', 'being on the *qui vive*', ie. aware of the need for carefulness in the face of evil, bright attention to the business of life. The theme of **thanksgiving** (in prayer) presents itself again (cf. Phil. 4:5-7), thus 1:3; 2:7; 3:15; 3:17 and 4:2 mention it. It must be important to the mode of life and prayer.

3 and pray for us also, 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,

The apostle begs part of their prayer for him. He prays for them; let them do so for him. Paul time and again makes requests for prayer, knowing its power (e.g. Eph. 6:18--20; Rom. 15:30--32; 11 Cor. 1:11; Phil. 1:19; 1 Thess. 5:25).

God may open a door: Paul wishes only to go through doors God has opened (cf. I Cor. 16:9; 11 Cor. 2:12; Acts 14:27). God as the door-opener is seen in Revelation 3:8.

for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ: Paul is always aware of the special commission Christ has given him, e.g. Acts 26:12-23. His claim is, 'I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision'. He is possessed by 'the word, the mystery of Christ, ie. that which is the content of his preaching, the gospel of salvation (see 1:26; 2:2). The secret is open to the enlightened, closed off to the resistant.

On account of which I am in prison: Paul's imprisonments are always on account of the Gospel. He uses the fact here not to trade on his readers' sympathy but to further demand their prayer. It is in imprisonment that he seeks opportunity for his beloved Gospel.

4 that I may make it clear, as I ought to speak.

Paul does not treat the Gospel matter-of-factly. It is a heavy responsibility for him (cf. I Cor. 1:17; 2:3-4; 11 Cor. 2:17; 4:2). Paul is aware of the problem of communication which every proclaimer knows: the unwillingness to hear what is said, as well as the very substance of the mystery calling upon all the spiritual resources of him who teaches. The **ought** here makes it mandatory to proclaim fully.

5 Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time.

wisely = 'in wisdom'. Wisdom is an essential element to true *walking* (conduct). It has to do with knowing God's will (1:9; cf. 1:28; 2:3; 3:16). Paul assumes their wisdom. It is to be used **toward outsiders** (cf. Phil. 2:15) so that they may be wrought upon for the Gospel, Christ's witness given (Acts 1:8; Rev. 1:2, 9; 12:17).

making the most of the time simply means not being frivolous but using every opportunity to live in true witness. Proclamatory life must be lived to the full.

6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer every one.

Paul is still thinking of 'the outsiders' (I Cor. 5:12, 13; 14:1).

speech (conversation and proclamation) must be **gracious** (cf. Luke 4:22 where gracious reading is nevertheless followed by direct exhortation).

A parallel thought is in Ephesians 4:2—'Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear'.

seasoned with salt reminds of the Lord's sayings that we are the salt of the earth, and so are both tasteful and tasty, preserving from corruption (cf. Matt. 5:13; Mark 9:49, 50). Ephesians 5:4 calls for pure speech.

that you may know how you ought to answer every one is linked with making the most of the time (v.5), for it is

linked with II Timothy 4:2, ie. 'be urgent in season and out of season', for one must grasp every opportunity. Here alone Paul speaks of giving an answer. See I Peter 3:15 where it is not simply answering random or perverse questions—a thing Christ always refused to do—but is giving a reason for the hope that lies within us, seeing we have sanctified Christ in our hearts. The whole Colossian letter is aimed at refuting heresy and setting forth Christ as the wisdom of God.

7 Tychicus will tell you all about my affairs; he is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow .servant in the Lord.

8 I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts,

9 and with him Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of yourselves. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.

Verses 7 to 17 tell the Colossian church what they would wish to know, ie. how things are with Paul, who are his companions and helpers. Six names are given of those who are with Paul, and Paul, who was always concerned with persons, wished to give special and personal greetings to his friends at Colossae, along with a few instructions.

Tychicus will tell you all about my affairs, for Tychicus in Acts 20:4 was one of a team with Paul in Asia. He accompanied him to Jerusalem along with the collection for the needy saints of that city. 11 Timothy 4:12 records that Tychicus was sent to Ephesus, and in Titus 3:12 Paul proposed to send him—with Artemus—to Crete. It

appears Tychicus was with Paul to the end . Tychicus lived close to Paul and could tell his **affairs**, ie. what was happening, and how Paul was faring.

beloved brother is a term indicating the family of God (cf. Gal. 4:5--6; I Tim. 3:15), and so the warm domestic relationship of believers.

faithful minister means one who has personally served Paul. The term **minister** (*diakonos*) is not an office. All believers were in the diaconate of the church (see Eph. 4:12). Paul would have been grateful for a **faithful** person who met his needs. **fellow servant** is not *diakonos* but *syndoulos*, ie. fellow slave. That is they both worked together as servants of God in the Gospel, hence the term **in the Lord**.

I have sent him means that Tychicus carried the letter-, but will also give extra bits of news, ie. **that you may know how we are**, for Paul was in prison and anything might have happened to him. The church was under opposition and stress and all were concerned for Paul and the Gospel.

that he may encourage your hearts, ie. by hearing Paul is well, and that the cause of the Gospel was flourishing.

and with him Onesimus who may well be identified with the runaway slave of Philemon (see the Epistle) and who-having been converted--was to be restored to his master. Here Paul simply speaks of him as the **faithful and beloved brother**. not mentioning his return as a slave.

who is one of yourselves places him as a member of the church at Colossae. He would be welcomed as such.

they will tell you of everything that has taken place here, for doubtless the imprisonment of Paul had also brought a powerful proclamation of the Gospel. The context shows that Paul is by no means on his own.

10 Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, receive him),

11 and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.

Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you may mean that Aristarchus was literally a prisoner with Paul, or Paul was simply speaking of him as a sort of prisoner-of-war. although he was not jailed. Probably it was the former, and it may have been voluntary on his part. He was an old companion of Paul. A native of Thessalonica and a travelling companion of Paul to Jerusalem (Acts 19:29; 20:4) and later to Rome (Acts 27:2), he must have had his Christian origins from the ministry of Paul at Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9). He was certainly close to Paul, and had warmth for the church at Colossae.

Mark the cousin of Barnabas tells a story. Mark had been rejected by Paul after the first missionary journey into Asia Minor, and Paul's refusal to take him on the second journey caused a 'provocation' and split between him and Barnabas, Barnabas taking Mark with him to Cyprus whilst Paul took Silas elsewhere. See Acts 12:12, 25; 13:13; 15:36--40, and also 1 I Timothy 4:11 where Paul warmly commends Mark.

Barnabas must have been known to the church at Colossae.

The **instructions** of which Paul speaks are not stated but probably they were to receive Mark as a full and rehabilitated brother, useful for ministry.

and Jesus who is called Justus: Justus is not known to us.

These are the only men of the circumcision, ie. the latter three are Jewish Christians. Paul would seem to indicate that the major group of fellow workers was composed of Gentile believers.

They are **my fellow workers for the kingdom of God**, which is a phrase Paul rarely uses (cf. II Thess. 1:5). It may be they concentrated on their own people the Jews, but probably they worked with Paul amongst all.

they have been a comfort to me, ie. a personal and warm ministry of consolation to Paul came from them. The burdened apostle would appreciate this.

12 Epaphras, who is one of yourselves, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always remembering you earnestly in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.

13 For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.

Epaphras who is one of yourselves shows that this **servant of Christ Jesus** was a member of the congregation at Colossae. In Colossians 1:3-7 it appears Epaphras was the one who brought the Gospel to Colossae, and who had continued to minister to the people. Through him they had heard 'the grace of God in truth', hence he can well be called the slave of Jesus Christ (*doulos* = slave or servant). At the moment he is with Paul but the church is on his heart and in his mind. His prayer for them **that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God**—is really the substance taught in this very Epistle. If they listen to the heretics then this will not be so.

For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you

and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis shows how Epaphras worked in the cities of the Lychus Valley. This bears witness to Paul's original teaching of Epaphras.

14 Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you.

15 Give my greetings to the brethren at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

Luke the beloved physician shows Paul's estimate of the 'dear doctor'. This writer of a Gospel and the book of the Acts had accompanied with Paul. From Acts 27:1 we find a number of 'we' passages which **confirm this**. In 11 Timothy 4:10, 11 and Philemon 24 he is again mentioned with Demas. Some see him as a Gentile, but others as a Hellenistic Jew. It is to be noted that Paul shows no aversion to a doctor.

Demas: this person is briefly mentioned in Philemon 24, but in II Timothy 4:10 Paul says that out of love for this present world he had deserted him (Paul) and gone to Thessalonica. It seems strange that one who was for so long with Paul should do this, and this teaches us a lesson.

Give my greetings to the brethren at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house shows that churches met in houses. We know this from other parts of the New Testament as in Philemon's house (Philemon 2), Lydia's house (Acts 16:15, 40, cf. I Corinthians 16:19, Romans 16:5). There seems to be doubt whether Nympha is intended to refer to a man or a woman. It appears a little strange that Paul sends greetings to brethren at Laodicea when he has sent them a letter by the same bearer.

16 And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea.

17 And say to Archippus, 'See that you fulfil the ministry which you have received in the Lord'.

And when this letter has been read among you indicates that Paul wanted both letters to be read by both churches, doubtless because both contained helpful teaching.

And say to Archippus does not tell us what the ministry was, but we have seen that all service is ministry. Doubtless the ministry given to Archippus was unmistakable. In Philemon 2 we see Paul calls Archippus 'our fellow soldier'. Some surmise that he was Philemon's son, but we cannot be certain.

18 I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my feters. Grace be with you.

this greeting with my own hand: Paul's letters were usually written by a scribe (cf. Rom. 16:22). Also Paul suggests that letters had been received in his name which were forgeries (11 Thess. 3:17). Thus Paul signed letters personally.

Grace be with you is an unusually brief closing salutation. Even so he has spoken much of grace in the Epistle, and amplification was not needed.

THE EPISTLE OF THE COLOSSIANS FOR THE CHURCH OF TODAY

Is the Epistle Relevant for Today?

Whilst the relevancy of anything seems to be almost an obsession in today's society, yet Paul's Letter to the Colossians becomes more significant for us when we see parallels in today's churches. Such parallels make the Letter quite relevant. Under the headings, 'The Problems at Colossae', and 'The Teaching of the Epistle', we have gathered Paul's main reasons for writing the Letter, namely an inadequate view of Christ's Lordship, of creation and redemption because of the dominance of Gnosticism and even Docetism.

The 'Then' Problems and Also the Now' Problems

We might think our church doctrine and practice situations have changed so much that there are few, if any, parallels. To the contrary: we have the whole matter of Christ's Lordship brought into question, we face Gnosticism no less today than then—though it be in somewhat different garb—and in addition we have the mushrooming of secular humanism which has in fact become a religion. It has so penetrated our modern thinking that we cannot

recognise it is now deeply seated in the church itself.

The terms 'Gnosticism' and 'Docetism' are not words with which all readers of the New Testament are conversant. Commentators speak of these heresies but at this point we will not pause here to describe them in detail. Briefly we can say that Gnosticism in Paul's day was a form of knowledge of spiritual mysteries by which a man could obtain salvation. that it had as its basis an assumption of the grossness of that which was material, thus positing a dualism, ie. matter as evil, and only that which was insubstantial as spiritual. Because of this dualism the gnostic would view with abhorrence the idea of the incarnation of God. The only way out of gross incarnation would be to claim that Christ came in the *appearance* of man, but was not actually *as* man. This was (and is) the doctrine of the Docetists.

Today Gnosticism is reappearing in many forms, some of them linked with supernaturalism. Many church members would be surprised—if not shocked—to know they have gnostic ideas. Likewise many do not think that Christ really became man—forever. They somehow think he was 'God in a skin', ie. his taking of humanity was a temporary cover for His deity, so that when the man Jesus was resurrected and glorified, his humanity—somehow— became dissolved back into his deity, so that now he is God and only God. If this were the case then the incarnation and redemption were only a charade. By nature of the case they cannot be effective in man's salvation.

Faith and Practice in the Epistle

The simplest way of seeing the present relevance of the Epistle is to go through it from beginning to end, listening

to what Paul teaches. This bird's eye view of the letter will help us to grasp what Paul was saying. What we believe determines what we do, so that if we believe correctly then we will have correct practice.

The Salutation

In 1:1-2 Paul opens his Letter by the salutation which invokes the grace and peace of God upon the readers. These two words—grace and peace—are not invoked formally. Both are inseparable, one never being present without the other. Thus in 1:6 Paul says that through Epaphras they 'understood the grace of God in truth'. At the end of the Letter (4:18) he again invokes grace, but his whole letter is a setting out of grace in redemption, by which all things—hitherto hostile to God—are reconciled (1:19-22). He speaks of the peace of God as being umpire in the heart (3:15). Reconciliation is, of course, man's coming to peace with God.

The Prayer

From 1:3-14 Paul prays for the Colossian church, showing they are a community of love, faith and hope. Such elements are not only indispensable to true Christian living, but they spring essentially from the Gospel, ie. 'the grace of God in truth'. We happen to know that grace and truth (cf. John 1:14) are as inseparable as the duo of grace and peace, and the triad of faith, hope and love. Paul affirms that the church at Colossae is authentic. He points to one of the true hallmarks of genuine spirituality and

practical living, ie. 'your love in the Spirit' (1:8), your love for all the saints' (1:4).

In 1:9-14 his prayer gathers momentum. Against the foolishness of Gnosticism, Docetism, and the local forms of heresy he prays for them to be 'filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding'. Later he will show that Christ is the very wisdom of God, and salvation the outworking of that wisdom. Thus the seeming wisdom of the esoteric gnostics must be seen to be false. His prayer for their maturity relates to 'all power . . . for all endurance, and patience with joy'. This is most practical.

The Basis of Paul's Petition

1:13-14 states categorically the whole basis of their salvation and place in God's Kingdom. God has acted sovereignly in Christ for, 'He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins'. In this statement, simply but categorically and brilliantly, Paul not only states the radical act of redemption but wholly undercuts the heresies which seek to diminish the Lordship of Christ and keep men in subjection to occult powers.

The Hymn of Affirmation

Commentators often differ as to whether 1:15-18 was a well-known early hymn. That it is a hymn is not in doubts even if it was immediately and directly from Paul's pen. It is what the hymn affirms that matters, namely that Christ,

the beloved Son (1:13) is Lord of all both by creation and redemption. In verse 15 he is the image of the invisible God in a way that man by creation is not. He is unique in that he is the first-born of all creation. The first-born of the family is the one who rules and to whom comes the pre-eminence. He is the heir. Paul is not explaining 'first-birth', but setting forward Christ's pre-eminence. If he is not pre-eminent, then other powers—thrones, dominions, principalities and authorities—may well equal him. No! For he has created these very things, whether they be in the heavens above or the earth below, or anywhere! He cannot have been created because he is 'before all things'. Again 'in him all things hold together'! They are all upheld by him, having their life and sustained being in him (cf. Heb. 1:2-3).

If this were not enough Paul enhances this pre-eminence by showing that Christ is the head of the church which is his body. He is Lord of the church, and by rising first from the dead, may lead others out *of* death thus being in both creation and redemption—as also in providence—pre-eminent. Everything is under his rule. As Lord of the universe all things derive from him, are redeemed and sustained by him. This is because in the man Jesus, God's fullness was pleased to dwell. Through Christ and the given fullness, God set out to effect a cosmic reconciliation of all things disparate making them one, ie. 'making peace by the blood of his cross'. Again Paul undercuts the heretics who would make esoteric knowledge and concatenations of angels the means of a gnostic salvation.

The Goal of Salvation

In verses 21 to 23 Paul—whilst not passing from dynamic

cosmic salvation—shows the Colossians their personal salvation, ie. that coming to peace with God, stating that its goal is 'to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him'. This eschatological goal and intention is based upon God's grace but demands the practical obedience of experimental holiness (1:23). The resources for such lie within the Gospel, but they demand the response of the believer.

Suffering, 'Glory and Maturation

It is difficult for us, after almost 2000 years to understand the mindset of the Colossian believer. Given the 'grace of God in truth', ie. the Gospel, this person was beset on all sides by tempting theories and theologies. None of those had any demand for suffering, or free promise of glory! As we shall see they represented forms of religious legalism. Paul is not drawing upon Hellenistic (Greek) or oriental sources for exotic doctrines and theories. He is pointing back to the solid history of Israel, God's acts within and for Israel, and the prophetic promises which constitute the substantial basis of truth. As in Ephesians 3:1-11 he is asserting that God's plan—His 'mystery' is that the Gentiles (the non-God nations) will all participate in, ie. inherit, all the promises made to Israel through covenant. The 'riches of the glory of this mystery' are 'Christ in you, the hope of glory'. If we choose to make 'Christ in you' something subjective, or something of inner emotional experience, we may miss the wider sweep of the sin' (Gk. *en*) which can be translated 'Christ *among* you the hope of glory'. By this Paul would mean, 'Christ is not only in Israel as their hope of glory (Isa. 43:6-7, cf. Eph.

1:11-14) but in you Gentiles, you pagan nations to bring you all to glory, and so to glorify himself’.

Paul is amazed and gratified that God should choose him to ‘make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery’, and sees the necessity for suffering of the church in this process. Each member— so to speak has a portion of this suffering which in another letter Paul calls ‘the fellowship of his sufferings’ (Phil. 3:10). Whilst Paul sees no lack of Christ’s suffering he seems to see a lack of filling up those sufferings within the body, and gladly takes—so to speak—more than his apportioned share.

This whole passage must not only have been devastating to those whose ‘gospel’ was so different (cf. Gal. 1:6-9), but wonderfully encouraging to those of Gentile background who may have seen those of Jewish origins as having an edge on other Christian believers. The goal and outcome of suffering and ‘the plan of the mystery’ is full maturation, the glorification of each believer and the whole people of God .

The Pauline Persistence

In 2:1-5, Paul now becomes a paradigm for those of us who have not founded a church directly. If Epaphras was the agent through whom the church was formed, then Paul was the one who kept this assembly in heart and mind, striving in prayer for them. It was not the interest of a founder once removed, but an apostle who knows (knew) the dangers of onslaught which new (and old) churches know. He sees their stability and integrity in the action of God’s love, and not love that is merely notional but love

that binds them together in practice, and leads them further into ‘all the riches of assured understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, of Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’. Such knowledge, also, is not simply notional, but personal and experimental, and fortifies them against those who ‘delude with beguiling speech’.

The Apostle’s Warning and Tuition

Paul, then, has come to the heart of the matter, namely the deceitfulness of human ‘wisdom’, which is no true wisdom. In 2:6-15 he first points back to their initial experience of Christ— ‘as you received him so live in him’ -for this is no new rule for going on in Christ (v.6). Rooted and built up in him they must let their roots go deeper and make their foundations stronger. One of the central verses is 2:8, ‘See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ’. There is then one system which is wholly in Christ, and others which are not. We cannot fully discover what was taught which was wrong, but we can see that it was against Christ and his fullness. All that is not truth (cf. Rom. 1:21-25) is deceitful, for men have ‘exchanged the truth of God for a lie’, and so do not know the truth. Hence they worship the wisdom of their own minds, be it secular or religious wisdom. All this against the riches of Christ. If we would measure what is truth and not deceit, what is full and not empty, then we must measure by the reality of Christ.

The Fullness of Christ

The reason for this kind of measuring lies in Christ (v.9, cf. I:9) for 'in him the whole fullness (Gk. *pleroma*) of deity dwells bodily, hence (v.10) 'we are filled full in him,, ie. Our supply is from him alone. Anything that is not Christ or from him is 'empty' whilst all from him is 'fullness'. This is because he is head over all rule and authority. Nothing is greater than him, or can give us other than what he gives.

The fruits of this fullness are the very actions of Christ (2:11-15). The Cross and the Resurrection have effected God's radical change in both Jew and Gentile. Through the circumcision of the flesh at the Cross, the burial that came in his death and effective in baptism, has brought the dead person to true life, because the heart of the matter has been dealt with, ie. the believer has received radical forgiveness of all his sins because 'the bond which stood against us with its legal demands' has been lawfully set aside through his suffering its judgement in the Cross. This taking of human guilt and dissolving it has disarmed evil principalities and powers. Helpless, they are now driven in a show-ring, shown to be shorn of their hold over man which was tragic human guilt, and tear of death and judgement (cf. Heb. 2:14-15).

No Power for the Disarmed

In 2:16-23, Paul presses in to show the futility of the occult and esoteric teachings the purveyors of human wisdom and philosophy have sought to bring to the believers at Colossae. In this passage we can gather some of the elements which have been propounded. In 2:8, Paul

used the phrase 'the elemental spirits of the universe', and this has been variously interpreted. Some see these elemental spirits (*Gk. stoicheia*) as the evil (fallen) powers which use men to teach falsely, and so keep them in bondage. Some simply see these as elements of fallen men trying to adduce a philosophy or religion which will rationalise the matters of God, man, and creation, and keep their subjects in bondage.

No Head But Christ

Whatever the part of spirits or men in such teaching, the practical outcome is bondage to religious traditions, angelology and angelolatry, shown in the use of visions, foolish intellectual pride, and self-abasement. The root of such activity is 'not holding fast to the head ', for 'holding fast' is clinging, as does a tight garment to the body. Not to have Christ as head is to have no true head, for the true Head gives life to the body, fullness to the members, and direction to the true people of God. To refuse this Headship is to have one's own, or the headship of another. It is in fact to be apart from the whole body of Christ. It is not to derive its headship from Christ. Thus in 2:16 23, Paul unmasks the bondage which holds man outside of Christ. He will have no mixing of Christ and these other false elements.

We saw that the 'elemental spirits' whatever they were had been defeated at the Cross. Esoteric and occultic laws are mysterious, binding, and even frightening. Those who are under them suffer deeply from guilt if they do not obey (cf. Gal. 4:8-10). Man is always in guilt; guilt is dynamic and false regulations keep man in perpetual

binding guilt. Paul may be referring to asceticism—one element of gnostic practice or to some false forms of Judaistic practice, but whatever they are, they do not liberate man but increase his bondage and his fleshliness. Only in Christ is there freedom and authentic life.

The Practices of the Gospel

In 3:1 4, 5, Paul indicates the new life in Christ. In 2:6 he has advised believers to walk in accordance with the way they received Christ, ie. by faith, love and hope, being rooted and founded in his Lordship, rejecting the lordships of other creatures and the so-called wisdom of false teachers. Now he enters on the way in which believers live.

He first tells them their position. In 2:11-12 he has spoken of their death in Christ, and their being raised with him. Assuming they are raised, he shows them that their object of worship and attention is Christ seated at the right hand of God (v.1). This implicit quote from Psalm 110:1 is affirming Christ's Lordship over all other 'lords' and powers. As he has said, Christ is the source of their life, now he shows their life is presently hidden with Christ in God (v.3). The time will come when the hiddenness of Christ will be revealed, and so will believers appear with him in glory—the outcome of 1:27.

The New Man, Mortification and Holiness

In the light of what they will be they must now live. In 3:5-11 Paul is calling for holy action. He is not concerned with ability or inability to carry out his injunctions. Any-

thing that belongs to the old life must be 'put to death', ie. what Christ has defeated, they must recognise as defeated, and so kill them dead. These things include 'fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry' (v.5). The point is that these things can be slain.

Likewise there are things the believer can 'put away' (3:8--11). He has the power and the obligation to do this. These things are 'anger, wrath, malice, slander and foul talk'. Such things are incongruous with the new life, hid with Christ in God. Indeed believers have put off the old humanity, ie. the sinful fallen humanity they once had in Adam, and they have put on the new humanity (doubtless Christ himself) and this humanity (ie. their participation in it) is 'being renewed after the image of its creator'. Doubtless Paul means that the lost knowledge and truth which itself determined practice and character is being restored (renewed) and so there is growth in genuine knowledge and correct practice. In the new humanity. things are different, for here all are one and not divided by race or social status (slave or free man, cf. Gal. 3:28) where these sinful or functional differences cannot deny the essential unity that is the new humanity.

The New Man and the New Life of Love

In 3:12-17, Paul shows how the new life works out in unity and love. Back in 1:19-22 he talked about the reconciliation of all things. Here, in the church, it is working out into the interrelationships of love. Having put *off* things that are evil and offensive, those sharing in the new humanity put *on* 'compassion, lowliness, meekness and self-abasement'. The outworking of such is a life lived in

forgiveness of others in Christ's forgiveness, *the putting* on of love thus effecting harmony. The very peace which Paul has invoked now gives serenity within the heart, and in the same heart the word of Christ dwells richly. The heresies and their teachers are far away. The true wisdom has come and is dispersed amongst them through worship, praise and thanksgiving. Thanksgiving, by the way, is a continuing theme in this Letter (see 1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:16, 17; 4:2). The source of all saying and doing is Christ the Lord.

The New Love in the Family of the Church

The behaviour of wives, husbands, fathers, children, slaves and masters (3:18-4:1) is all under the regimen of love. In the new humanity there are functional ways of living in true relationships. Doubtless the false teachers taught things which led to false practice. The Lordship of Christ determines the new relationships, hence the phrases 'in the Lord', 'pleases the Lord', 'fearing the Lord', 'serving the Lord', 'serving the Lord Christ', and 'you also have a Master in heaven'.

Closing Thoughts, Greetings and Injunctions

From 4:2 to 4:18, Paul, having discharged his artillery against the heresiarchs, taught positively the believers, and opened up the mystery of the plan of God which is worked out in Christ's fullness, now enters into quieter waters. He enjoins prayer for himself and his team, especially for the opportunity to share the mystery of Christ with those who as yet do not know it. He also exhorts those at Colossae to

buy up the opportunities for proclamation. Finally he opens up the domestic nature of the body of Christ. He speaks of those with him where he is in prison, and perhaps one or two of them are fellow-prisoners. His comments on persons such as Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Luke and Epaphras show his keen discernment of his brethren and his love for them. Some of them are linked with the churches at Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis—as churches in the Lychus valley, none of which Paul has directly founded or personally visited but for which he has a ministry of prayer and teaching by letter. So ends the Epistle, and this with the brief invocation, 'Grace be with you', which in short sums up the substance of the Epistle.

The Value of the Letter to the Colossians

We asked ourselves, previously, whether it was fair to say that this Colossian Letter has relevancy for us today. We will not here speak of current Gnosticism and Docetism, but even a cursory reading of the New Testament Letters (including the seven in Revelation chapters 2 and 3), will show us that the church was always attacked by false teachers, false doctrine and so false practice. The reading of Church history will verify this fact.

Even if our primary concern is not to expose and defeat heresy, this Letter is of prime importance. It has a Christology (study of the person and work of Christ) which is rich. It shows, too, that in creation, redemption and the ultimate reconciliation of all things, Christ is the Father's mediator and agent. This process of reconciliation will not simply be an act in the end time, but must be a process in

the continuing 'now' time. Hence we are involved in reconciliation.

As moderns living at the end of the second millennium, we may be intrigued by Paul's plain injunctions as to our ways of living as the people of God, but if we can only offer more modern terms in which to couch our teaching, then that is little enough. It is doubtful whether any one of us can fully grasp the nature of God, of His Son, of the mystery of the plan, of creation, providence, redemption and the ultimate reconciliation of those 'all things' as fully as has Saint Paul.

For this reason we must continually open up the riches of Christ from this Letter. My only regret is that in spending decades on many other books of the Bible, I have only in later years begun to mine the riches of the little, but a powerful, Epistle to the Colossians.