

THE GUY B. DUNNING
MEMORIAL BIBLICAL LECTURESHP

*What on Earth
Do You Want –*



*When Everything
Under Heaven
Is Yours*

??

LECTURES ON THE BOOK OF COLOSSIANS

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Delivered At
NEBRASKA CHRISTIAN COLLEGE
Norfolk, Nebraska
October 3-4, 1990

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[I regret that I do not have the software to insert the diacritical markings on the Greek words, but trust that those interested in checking any of them further may consult a Greek Lexicon. If I secure the program soon, I will hurry to make the additions.]

FOREWORD

With gratitude to many I present these addresses on the rich Pauline *Letter to the Colossians*.

To Dwaine E. Dunning, who extended the initial invitation to offer these messages at the annual lectureship bearing his father's name, and without whose encouragement I would not have done the invaluable preparation...

To the Faculty and Administration of Nebraska Christian College, under whose auspices the lectureship was held...

To Charles E. McCoy, Administrator of the Guy B. Dunning Biblical Lectureship, who not only provided superb supervision of the entire event, but offered warmth and spiritual assistance at every turn...

To Evelyn, who knew I was not well, who drove roundtrip from Arkansas to Nebraska with no complaint, and dragged me to the medical clinic at a most-opportune moment.

For the text I have used my own version, made by studying the translations listed below. At times I have used none of them, but have attempted a fresh rendering of the thought.

King James Version (1611)
American Standard Version (1900)
Moffatt Translation (1922-35)
Goodspeed Translation of the NT (1931)
Williams Translation of the NT (1937)
Revised Standard Version (1953)
Phillips Translation (1952-57)
New American Standard (1960)
New English Bible (1961)
Beck Translation of the NT (1964)
Jerusalem Bible (1966))
The New Testament in 26 Translations (1967)
New International Version (1973)
Good News Bible (TEV, 1976)
New Revised Standard Version (1989)

Since the audience consisted primarily of undergraduate students, the lectures were framed more as exposition than exegesis. The attempt, therefore, was not to deal with each sentence in the text, but, rather, with the major themes of the letter.

Many questions about *Colossians* are left unanswered. I trust, though, that no one can turn from the presentations unaware of the cosmic claim, and with no effort to see the relationship of Jesus Christ to God, to Creation and to the New Creation.

-- Roy Key 11-3-90

1

“GRASPED BY GRACE AND WRAPPED IN PEACE”

Theme of the Letter

“For their tender minds he served up half a Christ.” That was the charge hurled at an over-protective preacher. You can bet his name wasn’t “Paul.” If it was, he didn’t deserve it. The letter from a “special agent” named “Paulos” (Παυλος) to a congregation he had never seen over in the Lycus River Valley is anything but emasculated. Here is a soul totally convinced that the antidote to a troubled faith is a robust Christology.

The theme of the letter to the *Colossians* is “Christ,” “The All-Sufficiency of Christ” [title of William Barclay’s little volume on *Colossians*]. Christ is our hope. Christ is our secret. Christ is our glory. Christ is our power. Christ is the meaning of all that is, everything to everyone. If the Apostle Paul had been given a breathalyzer test, results would have shown a heavy “Christ intoxication.”

Before you conclude here’s another hollow cry of a poor preacher parroting “Christ is the Answer!” when he doesn’t know the question, and when his “Christ” has no content, I ask you to look with me at one of Paul’s shortest mind-stretching bits of correspondence that has survived. Other Pauline correspondence did not survive, but we can be grateful that this little bit did. Had it not, we would be without some of our richest Christology and most-probing Christian ethics.

A Word of Explanation

I don’t come to you as a linguistic scholar. My major work has been in systematic and constructive theology. I hope, though, that it is as truly “biblical” theology. While I believe that the Christian faith must be presented in the language of those to whom we speak, I affirm that we are not free to tell just any “story” we know or like, however much it fits the culture of the age.

My purpose is always tied to the “Evangel,” therefore, “Evangelical.” It centers in the “Good News,” “the “Story.” It’s to get the Story in, to get it straight, and to get it out. That is my understanding of “evangelism.” However, when I am asked to lecture on a part of the Story Book, I try to be faithful to that particular part. This I hope to do with the Colossian letter.

First, I disclose a basic presupposition or conviction, that a letter should be studied as a letter. A letter to the family should be studied as a letter to the family, and not as case law. That does not mean that we have less regard for it. It means that we have a different regard for it. If I’m on trial, I can quickly become interested in case law, that is, in cases like my own. Otherwise, thumbing through the code can put me to sleep.

Never underestimate, though, the power of a letter to one who is eager to get it. When I was teaching down in Georgia and the girl who had taken my heart captive was

in California, letters became pretty important to me, at least those with her name on them in her handwriting. Not those that came addressed to “Occupant,” or even those that had “Roy Key” on a line left largely blank to accommodate names of real substance, like “Theodosius Higginbotham” or “Geraldine Abercrombie.”

Two years later when Evelyn and I were married and living in Juneau, helping plant a church in Alaska’s capital, waiting for the mail became a highlight of the day. Since 1945 we’ve been more than twice that distance from home, but have never felt so far away.

The questions wouldn’t hush. “Does anyone remember us today?” “Is anyone praying for us today?” “Will someone reach out to touch us even by letter today?” “The boat will bring eggs already old, the only ones we can afford, but is that all?”

We learned that we do not live by eggs alone... nor bread, but by a word, the word of remembrance, of prayer, of love. We live by God’s word with our name on it. God’s word passed through the soul of a friend, that touches us in our loneliness and our hunger for care.

If you haven’t had such a word today, then you know painfully what I’m talking about. If you have had such a word, I hope you know joyfully and gratefully what I’m talking about. Because that’s precisely the word Paul sent some folks in an as-out-of-the-way place as Juneau.

On a far off frontier loneliness is dreadfully real. No letter goes unopened. No letter goes unread.

An Introduction to the Letter

Colossians was such a letter. As soon as it was delivered, it was read... aloud to a gathered “family” of faith. Colossae was a long way from Jerusalem, or Antioch, the home church for missions. It was a long way, too, from Rome.

Had Paul’s letter been postmarked, it likely would have read “Rome,” where he was in prison. Some of his best writing was done in jail. In fact, a lot of the world’s most moving literature came from jail: Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* from Bedford gaol, Bonhoeffer’s *Letters From Prison* from a Nazi concentration camp, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s *Letter From Birmingham Jail*, John’s *Apocalypse* from Patmos Isle, to mention but a few.

There, if people have anything to say, they say it not from the top of their heads, but from the bottom of their souls. So it was with Paul. He may already have written these folks a more general letter. Or else this letter to the Colossians could have sparked the more-general letter to the Lycus Valley churches, going first to Laodicea. Later we learn that he wanted Colossae and Laodicea to exchange letters.

We have no epistle addressed to the Laodiceans. Either it did not survive, or, as some scholars suspect, the letter traditionally called “Ephesians” was a circular tract intended for all the churches of the area. The oldest manuscripts make no reference to “Ephesus,” and the content of the letter is a lyric hymn of the faith good for all Christians.

Colossians, however, is sent to a specific congregation to deal with a specific problem. Laodicea might soon face the same problem, and in pointing primarily local writings to the wider Church, the germinal idea of Scripture as globally authoritative first appears.

It's likely that about 62 A.D. from a prison cell in Rome Paul wrote three letters close together (*Colossians*, *Philemon* and *Ephesians*, or "*Laodiceans*") and sent all three to the same area. The Apostle had not planted these congregations, but had worked with a few of their leaders, whom he now greets warmly.

In Phrygia was a glen 10 miles long through which the Lycus River flowed to meet the Meander. Around the river sat three towns: Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colossae. Most important was Laodicea, a metropolis of 25 towns and a renowned banking center. Least important in the first century was Colossae, but to it came one of the greatest pieces of Christian literature ever penned.

While the Apostle had never been to this "River City," he had met and shared the "Good News" with a man named "Epaphras," probably while Paul was in another jail... in Ephesus. Epaphras became a missionary and took the Gospel to Colossae, gathering there a band of disciples. The immediate occasion for the Colossian letter was a visit by Epaphras to Paul in prison.

With what eagerness Paul would ask, "How is the church doing? Tell me about Philemon. I'm particularly concerned about him, for I must return to him a runaway slave, 'Onesimus,' now a brother in Christ and my son in the Gospel. I'm writing a note to send with him that I hope will help Philemon see him with new eyes. Maybe, he can look beyond the slave and see a new brother. Too, I'm sending a more general letter to Laodicea that I hope will help the Valley churches glimpse God's cosmic plan for healing this rifled universe. It's a staggering vision!

"And tell me about Archippus. Has he gotten over his timidity well enough to throw himself with abandon into the leadership? And Nympha, dear Nympha, who opened up her home for the meetings -- is she all right? Give her my love. Are the sisters and brothers growing in the faith? They've had so much to contend with in both the paganism of outsiders and legalism of insiders. Tell me all about it. I get so little news here, you know."

Something like this must have happened as soon as the first embrace was over and Epaphras sat down on a spare stool in Paul's cell. Then the news came tumbling. "There's so much that is good and encouraging. I want to tell you all about that. The church is really hospitable. It has helped many a traveling evangelist who has gone on to spread the News way beyond the Valley. The folks are living joyfully in the hope you gave me, and you would praise God for their faith in the living Lord."

The Crucial Problem

Then Epaphras had to pause and add, "But I'm concerned, quite concerned. There's a "new-age" group in the metropolitan area that is trying to infiltrate our study groups. That's my chief reason for wanting to see you right now. I need your counsel."

So the news spilled out that prompted Paul to write a separate letter to the Colossians. In many ways it's like the general one we know as "Ephesians," that would circulate throughout the Lycus glen and at length become part of the church library at Ephesus. Only *Colossians*, though, would zero in on this "new age" thought.

Christians simply must know that Jesus Christ is not one teacher among many, one savior among a host, and a subordinate one at that. The truth must be as clear as a fire bell at midnight... Christ is sufficient! Christ is all-sufficient. In fact, Christ is the beginning and end of creation.

Paul's Proclamation-Prayer

How Paul's mind raced. How his heart sang. How his theology soared into doxology. Here are his opening words in 1:1-2:

From Paul, God's special agent by God's appointment, and our colleague, Brother Timothy: greetings to all our fellow Christians at Colossae. May you be grasped by grace and wrapped in peace by God our Father.

It's as if God's arms form a parenthesis of love around all God's people. Paul rejoices in that wonder and longs for souls to know. Here is a Gospel announcement, as well as a fervent prayer, "Grace to you and peace."

Climbing up on my lap one day, my little girl put her arms around my neck. Some of you know how that can melt a father right down into his socks, making him vulnerable to most any request. The child, though, asked for nothing but a glimpse of the light we all so desperately seek. "Is God someone I would like to sit on His lap and put my arms around His neck?" For a moment I was silent. Must I tell her, "Dear, God has no lap, nor arms, nor neck. We must not be anthropomorphic?" Not on your life. The truest response I knew to give was a simple, quiet, thankful "Yes." Then, holding each other, we nestled close together, held in the lap of God. Grasped by grace and wrapped in peace we were enclosed in the parenthesis of God's love.

That's what Paul wanted the Colossians to know, to feel, and in that security to live. If only they knew that, really knew it, it would be enough. Those two little words ("grace" and "peace") are among the biggest in the world, and the most-thrilling. "Grace" meant *forgiveness* and *power*. "Peace" meant nestling in the lap of God with all fighting past and the soul at rest. How much content, though, is still to be poured into the words and pictures. It seems that Paul created a new greeting all his own, taking the "grace" of the Greeks and "peace" of the Hebrews and joining them in holy wedlock.

"Grasped By Grace"

"Grace," Paul could whisper and then sit and watch it stream past him -- God calling a little slave girl out of bondage and making of her "a light to the nations;" a teacher named "Gamaliel" leading a young Jewish student into an adventure of learning

that took his breath away; a Voice calling, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” then adding, “I will now send you far away to the Gentiles.”

“Grace” and “peace,” the greatest chapters in Paul’s autobiography. Only God knew how tortured was his soul as he tried desperately to keep the Law. Only God knew how desperately he yearned for happy accord, that “shalom” promised by the prophets that would rest the soul in God and wrap the whole world in peace. Now it’s God’s gift to him in Jesus Christ! Little wonder that his passion is that everyone know, that all feel flung around them the arms of a loving Father, the parenthesis of “amazing grace,”

The Greeks’ “grace” as “beauty” is recreated as wonder. Not the wonder of brilliant architecture and breathtaking sculpture, the wonder of human genius pointing beyond itself .to divinity. But, the wonder of a seeking Love, stalking barefoot across the snows and deserts of our lives, blood splashes all the way. Self-giving Love, stretched out to Calvary, that will not let us go. “Grace” that is a measureless forgiveness and limitless power. “Grace” to heal every wound in a broken and bleeding Universe. “Grace” to reshape life, to break the tyranny of all the Dark Powers, to put to death... Death! “Grace” as the heartbeat of God.

“...And Wrapped in Peace”

“Grace,” he said, “to you and peace!” For “peace” Paul; wrote the Greek *eirene* (*ειρηνη*), but he poured into it all the content of the Hebrew *shalom*. “Shalom” was the word of greeting and parting. It was “Good morning” (“God’s morning to you”) on meeting and “Goodbye” (“God be with you”) on parting. Only, it was more. “Shalom” was not only the prayer of the people, but the promise off the prophets. “The time will come...!” they cried in the name of the Lord.”

“The time will come” when prophets will speak truly; priests will serve faithfully; judges will judge justly; kings will rule righteously. “Each will sit under his own vine and fig tree, and nothing shall make them afraid.” “The wolf and the lamb shall lie down together... The child shall play over the viper’s den... Nothing shall hurt in all God’s holy mountain.” “They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more.” “The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

The vision of “shalom” was one in which “peace,” “harmony,” “health,” “wholeness,” pervaded all creation. It lived in individual hearts. It embraced families, communities, nations. It surged through nature. All nature and human nature were enfolded in universal peace. It was the age of gold.

“Grace” as forgiveness and power, “Peace” as God’s Rule on earth as it is in heaven -- this is the promise and the prayer of the Apostle Paul, because it is first the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That Gospel grasps us at our deepest need and highest hope. The assurance that the Almighty-who-is-the-All-Loving will bathe nature and human nature in the wonder of “Shalom,” today fills me with ecstasy. It is incredibly glorious to contemplate a day in which harmony comes to the family, the community, the nation, the social orders of our planet, and surges through all this fragile, wounded world of nature.

Personal, social, ecological reconciliation and redemption... cosmic “shalom.” What breathless wonder to contemplate!

Lure of Love..., Lash of Law..., Grasp of Grace

It is this “Good News” that stops some souls and turns them around, that makes their biggest dreams look small and challenges them to a nobler cause than has ever called to them yet. Mine was a smaller dream, though, and a more selfish need. Yet, by God’s grace I was allowed into the vestibule of joy in much the same way that Paul found welcome there.

I know the legalism against which Paul fought almost to the death. Those for whom I cared most in this world nurtured me in it. With loving hands they locked me behind its bars. Nevertheless, God broke through the prison to speak that Word-of-Love-stretched-out-to-Calvary, and in the midst of a doctrine of salvation by law I knew myself grasped by grace.

Right now I ask you to listen half-way to me and with the rest of your heart search your own story to see where you have been “surprised by joy” and “grasped by grace.” That’s not part of Paul’s story nor of the Colossians, but if you are ever to understand theirs, you must somehow let your own break through.

As a lad, sitting on a hard, straight-back church bench, as my uncle led the singing, I noticed tears running down his cheeks and wondered, “What’s the matter with Uncle Pink?” My eyes fell on the page before me, and for the first time I was aware of the words of the song:

O to grace, how great a debtor
Daily I’m constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wand’ring heart to Thee.
Never let me wander from Thee,
Never leave the God I love.
Here’s my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.

I was too young to grasp “grace,” but I know now that I was not too young to be grasped by it. I knew that whatever it was, it touched the heart of an uncle for whom I cared.

When I finished high school, I wanted to go to college and become a minister. But, I had no money... none. There was simply no way I could go. For months I wrote to a school, until finally I received no replies. In desperation I wrote the president, saying, “I want to come to your school, but I can’t get in. I wish I could play on your football or basketball team, for then I could get in. But, I can’t. I just want to preach the Gospel, and I can’t get in your school.”

At the beginning of this address I said that letters are terribly important. I say that from the depths of my soul, for I got a letter from the President of David Lipscomb

College, saying, "Come up and talk with us." By the grace of a neighbor I was able to get to the school.

Standing in the president's office, scared to death, unable to sit, I tried to respond to a series of questions about what I could do. I'd never done anything but work on the farm and in the house, where my mother for months was critically ill. I cannot remember a single question as it came: "Can you do this?" "Can you do that?" "Can you do the other?" I can remember only my quick, frantic "No, Sir," to each one. Sensing my panic, the president leaned across his desk, smiled and said, "Well, son, maybe we can teach you something up here."

I cannot tell you how my heart leaped. I was going to be allowed in school! With no money there was no way, and yet, I could enter. I couldn't promise anything, but that I would work my head off. I couldn't express it then. My theology would never have let me put it like this, but I know it now. I was accepted by nothing but sheer grace.

Was I willing to work? I would have dropped dead working. In fact, I almost did, and another gracious teacher put me in a job I could handle. As much as I wanted to pay my own way, I couldn't. I could show my gratitude, and I have spent the rest of my life trying to do that.

Nor after entering that school did the president forget me. One day I was using a scythe, something we didn't have on our little Alabama farm. As I flailed away, using up energy like our nation, here came the president ("Brother Ijams"), asking for my scythe. From his pocket he pulled a hone, sharpened the blade, and then added, "Let me show you something." Like a razor he drew it, grass falling effortlessly before it.

Handing both the scythe and hone to me, he said, "Periodically stop and use the hone. Keep your instrument sharp. You will think you are wasting time, but you are not." Somehow, that statement, "Keep your instrument sharp," stuck in my mind like a feather on a tar bucket and seemed to apply to everything I had and was.

Not only that, but I puzzled over the entire experience. "Do presidents of colleges go around with hones in their pockets?" "That man was watching me!" I knew God watched me, and that was a fearful thought. Not yet did I understand, but my spiritual curriculum included an experience in "watching" that did not mean judgment, but meant care. In a strange city, in a strange school, far from home, God threw around me in the arms of others His parenthesis of love. It undoes me now to recall how I was grasped by God's "amazing grace,"

Remembered In Prayer

If only the Colossians could know of a certainty such grasp, how effectively they could share the Good News over there in their little corner of the Kingdom! So Paul tells Timothy, or another of their number who acted as scribe, to write (1:3-6):

We're always praying for you, and continually thanking God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, because we've heard of your faith and love for all of God's people, springing from the hope stored up in heaven for you. This is the hope you heard through the glad Good News. As it spread all over

the world it came to you. As it everywhere produces fruit and flourishes, so it does among you since the day you first heard of God's incredible care.

Here is the word "grace" (*Καρις*) again, though I have rendered it as "incredible care."

Paul goes on to say (1:6-7):

It was from Epaphras you learned it, our loving and loved colleague, who loyally serves Christ in our place. He is the one who told us of your love in the fellowship of the Spirit.

Epaphras—This is all we know of him, except his greeting to Philemon in a note Paul sent to a slave owner there in the Colossian church. But, he was a carrier of God's grace to the Colossians and a carrier of good news to Paul about them. I remember and bless those who have been "Epaphras" to me, as I hope you now bless those who brought the Gospel to you.

Does it matter whether or not we're remembered? When you're in Juneau, Alaska, or Valdosta, Georgia, it matters. And, I suspect that it does in Norfolk, Nebraska. I can tell you this, one day I was stopped in the administration building by a coach from whom I had never had a class. His words were quick, "You have a great responsibility, and I pray for you every day." Then he was gone. I stood stunned. I still cannot say that I understand that incident, but I never forgot, and there has come in hours of discouragement the thought, "Bob Neil says, 'I pray for you every day.'"

What would it mean to have the Apostle Paul say? as he does in 1:9-10:

This is why since the day we heard it, we've not missed praying for you. We ask God to help you see from God's perspective and fill you with every kind of spiritual wisdom and understanding, that you may lead lives that honor the Lord, entirely pleasing to Him, bearing every kind of good fruit and growing more and more in the knowledge of God.

Then the thought hits us, "Why Jesus Himself is praying for us... praying for all us 'Peters' that our faith won't fail! My name is being spoken before the throne of God, maybe by Paul, maybe by dozens who have blessed my life and whose arms around me have been the parenthesis of God's love, maybe... but, most certainly, by Him. Jesus is breathing my name in prayer."

Christ's prayer cannot be less than that of Paul, who prayed in 1:11-14:

As you live your new life, we pray for you the power of God's limitless resources, that you may meet whatever comes with courage, persistence and joy, thanking God in the midst of it all that you are privileged to share the lot of those who live in the Light. For He has rescued us from the Realm of Darkness and resettled us in the Realm of His dear Son, in whom our release is secured, our sins forgiven.

How desperately Paul yearned for full forgiveness. How he suffered in darkness looking for the Light. Then it broke full-force in the Face of the crucified, risen, reigning

Lord whom he had hated as “Jesus.” Now darkness has fled. “Morning has broken.” Paul belongs to the People of the Dawn, the Easter People... and, so do the Colossians.

It’s hard to accept forgiveness. I know. It’s harder still to accept the power. I know that, too. It is relatively easy to believe that the power is there for another, but not for me. But, that’s the Gospel-Gift -- Power, the Power of the Presence that brings noonday at midnight and makes an alien country “home.”

On the way ahead we are “surprised by joy,” but we are battered by trouble, too. We can’t take it, unless there are those deep springs of God from which to draw refreshing. Then we can take whatever comes. So, Paul prays for power to persevere, no matter what. And, God is answering that prayer in part by a short letter from one who says, “I care, and I pray for you every day.”

That’s “grace,” ”amazing grace.” My prayer for you tonight, Paul’s prayer, Christ’s prayer, is:

*“May you be grasped by grace
and wrapped in the peace of God.”*

2

CHRIST AS COSMIC CLUE

A Faith That Sings

Had Paul been in the pulpit of First Church (Colossae) one Sunday morning, following the greetings and pastoral prayer, he would have said, "Let's all stand and sing the first song in the book, 'Christ, Creator and Redeemer.' We'll sing both stanzas."

Of course, it wouldn't have been quite like that, since Colossae didn't have the new hymnal, and the old one was the Psalms. Furthermore, the order of worship would have been more like our fellowship dinners than our 11:00 Sunday morning ritual.

No matter, Paul couldn't be there. He was in jail. So, he did the next best thing he could; he wrote a letter in which he quoted the song. At least, that's what a number of biblical scholars conclude. They view this lyric outburst as the Apostle, while never having visited this church, turning to a well-known, dearly loved hymn that could draw them close across the miles and lift up the message he yearned to give.

It was as if our leader tonight had burst into singing "How Great Thou Art!" Then, after a moment's surprise, when we all joined him, we would in awe-full joy begin by praising God as the world's Creator and end by falling in worship before Him whom we confess as Savior.

Whether this is an ancient Christian hymn or a sudden burst of lyric light from a Roman prison, it's among the greatest bits of Christological writing in existence.

Colossians 1:15-20 rivals *John* 1:1-18; and surpasses *Phil.* 2:5-12; *Heb.* 1:1-3; and *1 Pet.* 2:21-25. In six verses Paul pens two strophes that go to the heart of Christian faith as in Jesus Christ it sees God as Source, Meaning, and Hope of creation. Pointing to Christ in His relation to God, to creation, and to the New Creation, these verses affirm that He is Clue to the nature of all three.

If this was not already a baptismal hymn, it surely became one as the Church gathered for the sacred rite. Who is this "Christ" whom you have confessed as "Savior" and "Lord?" Lord and Savior of what? and whom? At times our faith is better sung than preached, and it is in the hymns that many of us have seen afresh the Face of God.

Let's read this confession now (1:15-17):

- 15 He is the visible expression
of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation.
- 16 Through Him everything came to be
in heaven and on earth,
everything we can see,
and everything we cannot see,
whether thrones or authorities,
principalities or powers;
through Him and for Him
the whole universe has been created.
- 17 He exists before everything,
and in Him it all holds together.

That's the first strophe or stanza. Christ and God... Christ and creation... Christ and the unseen powers... Christ and the purpose of existence... all this is packed tight in these three verses. Like the atomic power squeezed into a drop of water or grain of sand, the power and light of God for creation as focused in Christ is squeezed into *Col.* 1:15-17.

The second stanza points to the rifted and unfinished nature of creation as it reveals how God intends to heal its wounds and bring it Home. Let's look to the end of the song (1:18-20).

- 18 He is, also, Head of the Body, the Church.
He is the beginning,
the firstborn from the dead,
so that in everything He might be first.
- 19 In Him God chose to be fully present
20 and through Him to embrace the universe
with His welcome Home.
This He is doing through Christ's death
on the Cross,
reconciling to Himself
everything in heaven and on earth.

Christ And Creation

In the first line of the hymn there is an echo of the creation story (*Gen. 1:26*), "Let us make 'Adam' ('Humanity') in our own image." Here is the creative intent for humanity:-- "Adam" is to be the "icon" of God. Humanity is created to share in divinity. "Image" and "likeness" are not to be translated as "resemblance," suggesting some outward similarity, but inward dissimilarity. "Adam" is created to share the nature of God.

In Scripture God comes to us as Artist and Lover. Artist because He creates, Lover because in His own "image" he creates little artist/lovers. God was not content to create redwoods and robins, Kilimanjoros and Crystal Caverns. He wants "sons" and "daughters," little replicas of Godself, who can respond in love and share with Him the Creative Adventure.

The Christological hymn affirms that the supreme Artist/Lover who breathed His own breath into human clay was none other than the Spirit that lived in and reached out through Jesus Christ. It was this full and complete "Icon" (as Second "Adam") who came to help make us (first "Adams") truly "human."

God yearns for His creation to see Him, to know Him, to trust Him, and to share with Him His creative joy. That yearning is not simply a sort of divine day dream. It is a creative outgoing of the Eternal Spirit. It is God's nature to thrust outward, not to remain Self-enclosed. That is the Logos doctrine in the prelude to John's gospel. "In the beginning was the Word (the Logos, the Self-expression of God)... and the Word became flesh and lived among us."

The God of Scripture is not some Zeus resting on Mt. Olympus in undisturbed bliss. This God is Creator of a turbulent, unfinished creation and of a company of co-creators who are to share in the creative task.

God created co-partners to become co-creators. The biblical word for that relationship is "covenant." Creation is in order to covenant. Every father or mother worthy of the name knows that the greatest joy of parenthood is not in being able to tell someone smaller what to do, but in seeing the child mature into creative companionship.

The covenant, though, has been broken and creation marred. "Adam" (or "Humanity") is our name. We were created in freedom to choose our co-partnership, created to embrace the covenant. Yet, we have used that freedom to renounce the covenant and to take creation into our own hands.

The shocking consequence is that as we have risen up against our Creator, we have seen creation rise up against us. Unleashing the power of the atom in indescribable destruction, we have boosted our technical knowledge far beyond our creative care. Eden is lost, and the flaming sword bars our return. Unless some care greater than our own comes to us, some knowledge beyond our clever technicianship, some power to begin a new creation, we're doomed.

The cry, "Is there such care, such knowledge, such power, available for us?" is hardly an academic question. It's the question, though, this Christological hymn addresses. There is no such care, knowledge, or power in "Adam," only in God. And,

however much we try to play God, we can't bring it off. Despising that care, we tried to seize that knowledge and power... and failed. We broke the covenant that made us "Human," and now in sex, pseudo communities, cults, fraternal orders, nation states, esoteric lore, churches that are in fact the Elks Club on its knees, we search for the care we spurned, as well as the knowledge, and power we crave.

The nature of our search is determined by our view of creation. Our shaping of that view is far from a classroom exercise. It is, in fact, the shaping of that which in turn shapes us. An irony of history is that during periods of political calm, economic prosperity, and scientific progress, creation comes to be taken for granted. The popular view tends toward a closed system rooted in scientific and philosophical positivism. The tendency is to say of God, "We have no need of that hypothesis."

When, however, the world caves in, when "Adam" loses control and his science threatens him with annihilation, when his neat little systems, like stepped-on egg shells, lie in bits about his feet, the familiar creation looks on him with a strange face. It will no longer be taken for granted. Refusing any more to be neutral, it is now friend or foe.

No wonder a philosopher said, "If I had but one question I could ask the sphinx, it would be, 'Is the universe friendly?'" Today's overwhelming response in the academic world, in the artistic community, in literary circles, is a sad, but decisive, "No!" As in *J. B. Archibald McLeish* put it, "God does not care; he exists." The prevailing philosophical view of our time is that of Existentialism's meaninglessness and despair. God's existence is irrelevant, for life is absurd, a comedy to those who think and a tragedy to those who feel.

[Here I distinguish between the existentialist concern for personal involvement, which as Christians we embrace, and the Existentialist philosophy of meaninglessness, which in the name of Christ we reject.]

The implicit faith that gave rise to science was that of "the uniformity of nature," a belief that the term "universe" was both meaningful and realistic, that "laws" of cause and effect were operative throughout the universe, that definite powers and principles beyond our control governed the universe for our good.

An unexamined assumption of the Christian doctrine of creation had given birth to the rosy optimism that a proud "Adam" used to make God irrelevant. That shallow, optimistic faith is now shattered. The god of Scientism is now dying or dead, and new gods hurry to seize the vacant throne. The silent sphinx cannot tell us whether the universe is friend or foe. Nor can the atom. Some new crypto-theology masquerading as philosophy, or a newer "divine revelation," will tell the unwary what they want to hear.

The Christological faith of *Colossians*, therefore, becomes crucial. While the scientific world of Paul is not that of today, the psychological worlds look much more alike. Competing world views battle for supremacy. The Christian faith uncontested does not hold the field. Pseudo-intellectuals hawk their gnostic wares, and whatever "safe" world powerless people once knew, is threatened by "the powers and principalities" of the age.

The Christian claim voiced by Paul is that the clue to creation is not found in creation, but beyond it. It cannot be found in nature, only in history, one particular and special event of history, Jesus Christ. The Christian claim is stupendous – Christ is the Cosmic Clue, creation’s Key.

The claim comes clear in the prepositions of our Christological hymn. Look at them in the first stanza: “*through* Him” and “*for* Him” and “*in* Him.” “Through Him” everything has been made. It was not through some demigod, some lesser deity who could deal in this dirty stuff called “matter,” as the self-proclaimed Gnostic declared. It was through One in whom the fullness of God dwelled bodily. Here is an exceedingly high view of creation, the artistry of Almighty God that He could call “good.”

As the artist’s work bears witness to the nature of its creator, so creation bears witness to the nature of God. Yet, it is not an unambiguous witness. So Paul does not cry, “Look at creation and see what God is like.” Rather, he calls, “Look at Jesus Christ and see what God is like and what creation is intended to be.”

Christ is the “icon” of God, and creation is “through Him.” To say that it is “through Him” is to say that it shares in His nature and likeness. It speaks not only of Christ’s power, but of Creation’s Ground, of its Source and its nature. Nor is Christ’s creative work limited to one aspect of nature or to some single corner of the cosmos. Everything that is seen and everything that is not seen has its origin in Him. And we speak not of “origin” as “first cause,” as if creation is completed in a single act, and now Humanity exists on its own.

The Creative Cause is not a pool cue that launches a chain reaction where the originating cause is no longer needed. It is not a finger-flick that flips over the first in a long serpentine line of dominoes we carefully set up. “First Cause” when applied to God means originating cause, in that it is that Power which gives it existence. It is the Power that brings into being and sustains that which it brings. It responds to the age-old question, “Why is there *something*?” Why is there not *nothing*? What power makes *something*, instead of *nothing*? What power keeps *something*, instead of allowing it to lapse into *nothing*?

The Christological answer in *Colossians* is “God-in-Christ” and “God-through-Christ.” God is the reason there is something, instead of nothing. It is the kind of God that God is that explains the kind of something we have, instead of nothing. It is “God-through-Christ” who is the Power that both brings into existence and sustains that which He brings. It is “God-through-Christ” who not only creates and sustains, but discloses the meaning and destiny of that creation.

Creation “through” Christ” is destined “for” Christ. Do you want to know the meaning of creation? Do you want to know the end of creation? Here is the Clue! Jesus Christ through whom it came to be, who sustains it in its being, and to whom it shall ultimately return.

Will you see what that affirmation has to say about all other theories of creation? About creation by some lesser god or gods? About creation as essentially bad? About

creation's final destiny? Can you see why the Christian herald can say that Paul is not another poor preaching crying, "Christ is the Answer!" when he hasn't a clue as to what is the question? Christ not only answers the question, "Is the universe friendly?" but discloses *how* friendly. He exposes the falsity of *J. B.'s* cynical cry, "God does not care, he exists."

In that disclosure "through Christ" there is, also, the revelation of judgment. If creation is "through *Him*," then it will not consent to be through "Adam." If creation exists for covenant, it will not be friend to those who despise and violate the covenant. God's grace is expressed in Christ's sustaining power, for He is that Energy that holds it all together. Everything coheres in Him. When, however, its nature and destiny are violated, it rises up in wrath. It begins to fly to pieces and destroy the violators.

To acknowledge Christ as the meaning of creation is to confess that we cannot change that meaning and get away with it. E. Stanley Jones, coming upon a little girl playing the slot machine, asked, "Little Lady, don't you know that thing is made to beat you?" Will we learn that creation when abused "is made to beat [us]?"

What if the Creator created the impersonal part of nature to serve His creative purpose with and for the personal? What if that which matters most is not at the mercy of that which matters least?... unless it chooses to make that which matters least into his/her god? Or, choosing to ignore its purpose, tries to make it serve her/his private goals?

When "Adam" ("Humanity") breaks covenant with the Creator, the covenant with creation is broken. That which was created to be our blessing becomes our curse. In our rebellion "that thing is made to beat [us]." It cannot serve a rebel purpose and the Creator's purpose at the same time. Paul is eager that the brothers and sisters at Colossae know this truth beyond a doubt. Then they will not fall prey to the "new age" propaganda now beating on their church doors.

Christ is Creator and Sustainer. In Him all things hang together. He created even "the powers and principalities" that coerce and oppress. They were not created evil. God creates only that which is "good." Evil emerges in its abuse and misuse. That which has become our oppressor was created as our servant. And, in scorn of appearances, such "powers" are not the absolute rulers of this world. There are no exceptions to the affirmation, "All things have been created through Him and for Him." In the breaking of the covenant they have been turned into tyrants, but they, too, will some day stand before Him to be recognized for what they are and what they have come to be.

Christ and the New Creation

The second stanza of our hymn moves from Christ as Creator to Christ as Redeemer. In Him not only does the first creation exist, but also as truly, the second. The New Creation has its beginning in Him. We are told that in Hebrew and other Semitic languages the words for "head" and "beginning" have the same root. "[Christ] is, also, Head of the Body, the Church." The Colossians had better make no mistake about that. He is not an interesting subject for debate, to be taken or left as they choose. He is their "Head," their Master and Lord. But, He is Head not in an authoritarian sense. "He

is the(ir) beginning.” This is not a reaffirmation of the line in stanza 1: “He exists before everything.” It is not simply a reaffirmation of the declaration that brackets most of that strophe: “Through Him everything came to be in heaven and on earth..., and in Him it all hangs together.”

The Apostle speaks now of another “beginning,” a “new creation” at the heart of which is a new Covenant Community. In the old “Adam” the covenant is broken. In the new “Adam” the covenant is created afresh. While it is created in the death of Christ, it is demonstrated in His Resurrection. “He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead.” “[He is] the alpha and the omega, the first and the last and the living one” (*Rev.* 1:8; 17-18).

The word “first” keeps appearing and reappearing: “firstborn of all creation” and “firstborn from the dead, so that in everything He might be first.” Again, “first” does not have reference to *chronos* (clock time). It points, rather, to position. That is why many translators render this verse, “That in everything He might be preeminent (foremost or supreme).”

Christ will not be one among many. God has seen to that and will see to it. Paul says in effect to the “new thought” devotees at Colossae, “If you say, ‘We belong to the Church,’ then realize you belong to ‘Christ,’ for the Church is His ‘Body.’ If you say, ‘We recognize and honor Christ, but we recognize, too, that God has many “saviors,” many “mediators,” and with more spiritual light we turn to embrace them, as well,’ then realize that your ‘light’ has become darkness, for Christ is not one link in the chain either of the old creation or the new. He is the ‘beginning’ of both, ‘the beginning and the end.’”

Paul makes clear that the human problem is not mere ignorance. Salvation does not consist of additional information. The problem is one of relationships. It is rooted in willfulness. We broke the covenant and left Home. What God has done in Christ, like Francis Thompson’s “Hound of Heaven,” is to follow us into every haunt of our self-chosen darkness, to every bed of loneliness and pain. With a “love that will not let us go” He heals our wounds, restores the rifted relation, and in Christ woos and wins us Home.

So the Apostle says, “In Him God chose to be fully present and through Him to embrace the universe with His welcome Home.” The *New English Bible* reads:

For in him the complete being of God, by God’s own choice, came to dwell. Through him God chose to reconcile the whole universe to himself, making peace through the shedding of his blood upon the cross – to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, in him alone.

Most versions use the word “reconcile,” which literally means “to bind back,” “to unite again,” “to make friends once more.” Knox puts it, “to win back all things... into union with himself.” Taylor translates, “It was through his Son that cleared a path for everything to come to him.” The *Good New Bible* reads, “Through the Son, then, to bring the whole universe back to himself.”

A mighty trilogy of truths tremble here: 1) It is no less than the eternal God who stooped to us in Christ. 2) It is God in full, and not in part, who has come to us in His Son, for He has held back nothing of His nature and no piece of His heart; and 3) God’s coming

will be unimaginably productive and incredibly complete, in that He will wrap the entire universe in grace and peace, reconciling everything in heaven and on earth!

Here is truth too big for me, news most too good to be true. I struggle with this “Gospel,” half-believing it, half explaining it away. Is it really true that Christ’s sacrifice will be totally efficacious, that the Cross will not go for nothing anywhere, for anybody or anything? Is it true that God does not intend to give up until the creative purpose is fully realized?

That’s what Paul declares here, even though elsewhere he speaks of God’s judgment and the destruction of all evil. Does he now get carried away and forget all that? Or, is he affirming that through the Cross evil will be destroyed without the destruction of God’s creation? Here appears a joyous inclusiveness (universalism?) that I can’t fully fit in with my other views of “heaven” and “hell.” However, I am not ready to say that Paul contradicts himself. I will simply say that I have a great deal of study to do about the “New Creation” and God’s ultimate redemption.

I have read the bible from childhood, but in an atmosphere of harsh judgment. Until after I was in public ministry for years, my view of “redemption” or “salvation” was simply what we called “soul salvation.” It meant that one went to heaven, rather than to hell. With a completely individualistic and spiritualistic notion of the salvation of the soul, I suffered major shock the day I saw that the bible teaches us something else.

It was not in *Colossians* that I saw Paul’s teaching about the redemption of the entire universe. It was in *Ephesians*. I was reading the first chapter and got down to verses 9 and 10. I read on to have my eyes flip back as if a rubber band were attached to the left corners. Did that really say what I thought I had read? Then, no matter how many times I went over it, it said the same thing:

For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to unit all things in heaven and things on earth.

The hair stood up on the back of my neck, and chill bumps raced along my spine. I had never dreamed the plan of God was so big or the mystery of his will so wonderful. It sure seemed to me to be a well kept secret. I had never heard it mentioned in all my years in church. In fact, such a mention would have seemed gross heresy.

For a moment I wondered if doxology had replaced theology and Paul simply gave way to praise. As he looked at the Christ he had denied, the Savior he had persecuted, and saw him hanging on Calvary, did he not melt into an ecstatic mass of emotion that cried, “He will do it! He will win victory! The love of God is stronger than all the hatred of humankind! The whole creation shall one day be radiant with the glory of God, and everything in heaven and on earth shall be captive to the spell of Jesus!?”

“Maybe, Paul said this kind of thing only once,” I surmised, “And it never became a major theme in his thought.” Then, I remembered something from *Romans* 8:19-22:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.

The New English Bible reads:

For the created universe waits with eager expectation for God's sons to be revealed... because the universe itself is to be freed from the shackles of mortality and enter upon the liberty and splendor of the children of God.

I like J. B. Phillips' way of translating best:

The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the sons of God coming into their own. The world of creation cannot as yet see reality, not because it chooses to be blind, but because in God's purpose it has been so limited – yet it has been given hope. And the hope is that in the end the whole of created life will be rescued from the tyranny of change and decay, and have its share in that magnificent liberty which can only belong to the children of God

Last of all I remembered our passage in *Colossians*, which speaks of God-in-Christ embracing the whole creation with His welcome Home... uniting in one with Himself “everything in heaven and on earth.” I gasped, “How can there be a bigger dream than that?” There is the ultimate solution to the problem of the one and the many, of individual and corporate redemption, of so-called “personal” and “social” salvation. There is the resolution of cosmic discord. There is God's Dream in Christ making all nature and human nature transparent to God, finding their proper place and peace in that unity which He alone creates.

However one handles this “magnificent obsession,” it cannot be dismissed out of hand as a Pauline outburst of emotion or a aberrant thought on a single occasion. In his three most profound theological works this hope is lifted high. Nor does it come as an intruder. As the climax of Christ's creative/redemptive work, it is the climax of Paul's message. The Apostle lifts up Jesus Christ as the Creator of both old and new creation, and it is through Him that they shall be brought together in that beauty and peace, harmony and unity, God has destined for them.

The Church – Beginning the New Creation

It is at this point that the nature and mission of the Church loom large. Christ is the beginning of the Church, and the Church is the beginning of the New Creation. It is made up of flesh and blood folks, those who by virtue of their existence in this world share in the first creation. By means of the Cross they are brought together, barriers of race and class, sex and age, color and national origin, broken down. The uniting is begun. By means of their sharing in the Spirit of Christ, they have become the Body of Christ and the first fruits of the New Creation.

It is in the Church that God's creative purpose for "Adam" ("Humanity") begins to be achieved. *Creation is for the sake of covenant and incarnation.* God wills union with us. That union is a free relationship of love, *koinonia* ("fellowship"), companionship, the sharing of selves. God, however, cannot share Godself truly and fully with those who are hostile, unfaithful or indifferent. The old self-centered, self-willed self must go and let the Spirit of the New "Adam" come in.

Acceptance of the New Covenant brings the new relationship. In that new relationship the Spirit of Christ is received, caught, drunk in, embraced, absorbed. The New Covenant Community (the Church) is that Body in which the Spirit of Jesus Christ is being incarnated. This sharing in covenant and incarnation does not happen in isolation, but is the experience of the Body.

There is an exceeding high doctrine of the Church in *Colossians*. For Paul the Church is not an option. It is far from a voluntary association of people who could very well be "Christian" alone, but who for the sake of doing good deeds band together to pool resources.

The Church is not simply the sum of the "saved." It is both the locus and instrument of salvation. It is the beginning of the New Creation. As the Body of Christ it is the new Humanity. Here is the early harvest of God's creative intent for humanity – *covenant and incarnation in community.*

It is important to stop and realize that God's full intent is not fulfilled in Jesus Christ alone. In so far as creation can be completed in a single person, it was. But God is more than a one-dimensional personality. God is a Social Reality, and creation is ultimately completed in nothing less than a counterpart, a social reality.

We must be careful to distinguish between the Society created in Christ and the collectivism of any dying order, such as "Communism." At the same time we must recognize that the Western ideal of "rugged individualism" is not the end of creation, either. It is not God's ideal, and it is not a collection of such "individuals" that make up the Body of Christ.

A popular religious myth must be exploded. If we could get every soul on earth to raise a hand and say, "I take Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord," and go on daily to have a private tryst with Jesus, such action alone could never bring in the Kingdom. God in Christ has begun a Community of faith and hope and love. He is creating a "Household" or "Family" with whom He is at "Home," and who joyfully share the Great Creative Adventure.

The Christ of the Church is a Christ of cosmic dimensions, and the Church of Christ is a Church of cosmic dimensions. In this larger "Body of Christ" God chooses "to be fully present and through Him to embrace the universe with His welcome Home. This He is doing through Christ's death on the Cross, reconciling to Himself everything in heaven and on earth."

The Christological hymn does not tell how the “welcome Home” (reconciliation) occurs. It presents no theory of the Atonement. It heralds the fact. Then the Apostle proceeds to illustrate it. Here are the words that immediately follow stanza 2 (1:21-23):

You yourselves who at one time were far away from God, enemies in heart and mind, doers of evil, Christ has brought Home through the sacrifice of His flesh and blood, that He might welcome you to His presence pure and innocent in His sight, provided that you keep firm on the foundation of your faith, never shifting from your hope in the Good News you heard, which the whole world has had opportunity to hear, and of which I, Paul, have been made a minister.

The Family of God-in-Christ has begun with them right there in Colossae! They know the breadth and depth of the chasms that once divided them. They know how bitter was the enmity in their souls. They know, too, that it was no “plan of unity” that somebody or other brought to them, which they looked over and decided to buy, that bridged the chasm and wiped out the bitterness.

It was nothing less than the Cross of Jesus Christ that melted their hard hearts. It was nothing less than the-Love-of-God-stretched-out-to-Calvary that convinced them of God’s forgiveness and acceptance. It was nothing less than One hanging from a blood-splotched tree, crying, “Father, forgive them...” that created in their hearts the forgiveness of one another. They did not know how it happened, but they certainly knew that it did.

Warning Against Apostasy

That acceptance, however, must not be presumed upon. God-in-Christ will be taken, but will not be taken for granted. The old “Adam” must not reappear, the covenant-despising “Adam.” Consequently, Paul adds a proviso to their welcome Home. They must be willing to live in the Family. Their acceptance of God’s acceptance of them is called “faith,” so Paul says, “provided that you keep firm on the foundation of your faith.”

Here is a clear warning against apostasy. They must not surrender to the false “gospel” others have brought to them. The Gospel they received from Epaphras is the true Gospel. It is the universal Gospel that alone can bring the world into the unity and peace of God. It is the Gospel Paul preaches and to which he has given his life.

The Creative Cost of Care

Here is how he puts it (1:24-27):

Now it is my joy to suffer for you, and in my own poor flesh to complete the sufferings of Christ yet to be endured for His Body’s sake, the Church. For your good, God made me servant of the Church for this task, to bring to you the Good News in all its fullness. It’s been a secret hidden

through all ages, but now disclosed to God's people, to whom God wanted to tell how golden is the glory of this secret – Christ the hope of glory is in you.

Paul makes no bones of his own suffering. Let the Colossians realize that to stand for the Gospel is not cheap. It can make enemies in high places. It can mean stripes on your back at midnight. It can land you behind bars. But, Paul makes no complaint. Rather, he sees even his sufferings as Christ's creative action in bringing the Church to maturity and making it the incarnation of God in human flesh.

I have thought of these words as the Apostle's "holy blasphemy." He dares to say that Christ's sufferings on Calvary are to be completed by Christ's sufferings in His larger Body, the Church. Does he remember the words of Jesus at high noon on the Damascus way, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?" Now it's his turn happily to bear stripes for his Lord."

An agnostic cried, "I could stand the suffering, if I could see any meaning in it!" Ah, that is a crucial matter for us all. The question is not, "If suffering comes, how will you handle it?" Life erases that "if." The question becomes, "When pain strikes, what then?" For, it shall surely come. The shallow optimist says, "Deny it," The noble stoic says, "Bear it." The defiant agnostic cries, "Rage against it!" The defiant believer shrieks, "Curse God and die!" The grateful herald of the Gospel calls, "Offer it in sacrifice." "Hold it up to Christ and let it bind you more firmly to the suffering Savior and all who suffer with Him."

Of course, there is suffering that is difficult to relate to Christ. It appears brutish and brutal and blind. But is not the Cross all of that, unless we make something else of it? In a world of Hiroshimas, Buchenwalds, Chernobles, and Baghdads, it takes the creative gift of spiritual insight to say, "I offer this up as a part of the world's travail as it moves toward its birth in God's New Creation."

Suffering that we recklessly bring on ourselves is the penalty of our stupidity and sin. Yet, even the meaning of that pain can be transformed. It can make Paul a more grateful, dedicated servant of the One he formerly persecuted, and humble before an ocean of unending Love. He would have said "Amen" to Peter's emphasis on suffering that permeates his first letter. "God will bless you for this, if you endure the pain of undeserved suffering, because you are conscious of his presence" (2:19).

Again:

My dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful test you are suffering, as though something unusual were happening to you. Rather, be glad that you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may be full of joy when his glory is revealed. Happy are you, if you are insulted because you are Christ's followers; this means that the glorious spirit, the Spirit of God, is resting on you (4:12, *Good News Bible*).

As Christians are faithful to their covenant in the midst of pain, they incarnate the suffering of their Self-giving Lord and complete God's creative purpose in and for them. They move into their own co-partnership in creation and share in the reconciliation of the universe. They share in the incredible work of Him "by whose stripes we are healed."

Open Secret – Hidden Hope

There is, however, a secret to it all, and that is what Paul is commissioned to tell. It's been a secret kept hidden in all ages past, but is now made known to God's people. It's a *mysterion* (μυστηριον) a mystery, that God yearned to share, "to tell how golden is the glory of this secret – Christ, the hope of glory is in you."

The hope of glory is not Christ in the individual alone, the soul in isolation, but Christ in the Covenant Community, Christ in God's "Family," in the firstfruits of the New Creation, giving promise of the completed creation in which God and all His People together are at Home, sharing in work, worship and play. The ideal is made plain: God, self and neighbor in a Community of Love, living in a world made free from every form of death.

That is why the Apostle is on fire to preach "Christ," and not some theosophy, knowledge of which puffs up the pride of pseudo-intellectuals and brings division into the Community of Care. Listen to Paul again (1:28—2:3):

Him we preach, warning everybody, teaching everybody. Using all the wisdom we have to help everybody grow up together in Christ. It is for this I work, training like an Olympian, straining with all the strength Christ gives me.

I want you to know how fiercely I fight for you, for the folks at Laodicea, and for all those who have never seen my face, that they may be filled with courage, as they are knit together in love, filled with that wealth of assurance that true understanding brings, God's open secret – Christ Himself! He is the key that opens all the hidden treasures of God's wisdom and knowledge.

Paul is hardly ignorant of the knowledge of the culture. He has been to college and done graduate work, but all he knows is now made servant to God's creative purpose for humanity: "to help everybody grow up together in Christ." This is a very simple way of answering the question, "What in the world is God trying to do with everybody?" The divine purpose is distilled into two words: "unity" and "maturity," "help[ing] everybody to *grow up together* in Christ."

How hard is Paul working for their unity and maturity? He says, "I work as an athlete trains for the games, giving all the energy I have not only for you, but for the folks at Laodicea, and all those others I have never met, who've never seen my face." He uses the word for "conflict" or "struggle," *agonizomenos* (αγωνιζομενος). Listen to it: *agonizomenos*. Can you not hear the sound of "agony" echoing through it?

Paul, speaking of his agonizing struggle, alludes to the fact that this letter is to go to the Church in Laodicea, as well as Colossae. Remember that it appears to be intended for the Lycus Valley congregations of Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colossae. It may be going to Colossae first and Laodicea second because of the danger of false teaching there.

Possibly, Hierapolis is not mentioned, because over there the heresy has not made significant inroads.

Christ As the Key

At any rate, Paul's hope is that the Colossians may be filled with courage, knit together in love, "and filled with that wealth of assurance that true understanding brings, God's open secret – Christ Himself!" He contrasts "true understanding" with the false understanding now vying for their hearts. They should know assuredly that "He (Christ) is the key that opens all the hidden treasures of God's wisdom and knowledge."

When the Apostle warns the Corinthians about the "wisdom" of the age, he contrasts their hunger for "power" and "wisdom" with the "power" and "wisdom" of God in Christ crucified. In 1:18-24 he writes:

For the word of the Cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... For since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs, and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

We must beware, because we are part "Jew" *and* "Greek." We seek power as a nation and build our global policy on its possession and exercise. We seek power personally and feel that it brings both security and happiness. We talk about the power of the Cross in its self-giving, its vulnerability and its defeat, but that view is not operational in our day-to-day action. Our policy is plainly stated in the affirmation, "We will negotiate only from a position of strength." The Cross is Sunday talk. During the rest of the week it is "foolishness." We are "Jews," all right. We seek "signs" of "power."

We are, also, "Greeks." Our Western educational system is thoroughly "Greek." We are saved by knowledge. "Sin" is essentially ignorance, rather than self-will. In the last analysis "knowledge is power." The good life is the reasonable life. The key to it is the understanding of the rational structures of the universe and the general principles by which it operates. A mere historical event cannot possibly be such a key. It becomes "the scandal of particularity."

The Cross, therefore, becomes the greatest "scandal" of all. The very idea that a crucified Jew in some God-forsaken corner of the Empire should be regarded as the Clue to Reality and Savior of the world is ludicrous. It is an "offense" to the morality of the "good" and "foolishness" to the rationality of the "wise."

The plain facts are that Jews in their own "power" and "goodness" could find only a God they could fit into their ritualistic, legalistic system. Greeks could find a God that ordered the universe, but could not be bothered about them. Pascal wrote, "The God of the philosophers is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Paul would have put it, "The God of the philosophers is not 'the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ.'"

To contend that Jesus Christ is the Clue to creation is to affirm that what we confront on Calvary is not an isolated historical event, but a fantastic revelation of what God always is, of what Reality is at its heart, of the pattern of nature and human nature. The warp and woof of creation is a Self-giving vulnerability, an outgoingness that wills to create subjects and objects of love, that seeks companionship and will pay any price for it, that purposes a co-partnership in creation that is beyond any power that we can dream and any knowledge we can fathom.

To contend that Jesus Christ is Cosmic Clue is to affirm that creation is not only structured by His Spirit, but structured in such a way as to operate by His Spirit. It is to contend that in so far as creation has opposed and obstructed His Spirit, it has opposed and violated its own nature. In consequence it has suffered disorder, derangement and agony.

To contend that Jesus Christ is Cosmic Clue is to affirm that the wounded creation is being healed by that Self-same Love that brought it into being. The rebellious creation is being pursued in its rebellion and given no rest until it rests in Him. The prodigal creation is being wooed Home, where one day all rebuffs, all self-centeredness, all blows, all tears, are gone. The Cosmic Family will be complete, and the Spirit of Christ will truly reign everywhere in everything. It has begun in the Church, His Body, the living embodiment of the His New Covenant and His contemporary Incarnation. Walls fall, and love blooms. The world is far from what it shall be, and members of Christ's Body still find earth's allurements hypnotic, but the first blossoms of Springtime herald the autumn harvest. This is God's world, created *through* Christ, *in* Christ, *for* Christ.

The Critical Choice

The Joyous News is that He is in you – the Hope of glory. He is not simply the Hope of glory *for* you, but *in* you, *for* Creation. How the world needs that assurance in a time of meaninglessness and despair. How much it needs the “secret,” which is now an “open secret” to you. How much we need to know that “He is the Key that opens all the treasures of God's wisdom and knowledge.” How much we need to grasp that “Key” gratefully as we take a few years out of our lives, as you are doing here, to give completely to study.

You are now trying on all kinds of ideas, new and old. Some of you are window-shopping in the academic showplaces, searching for what you may call “a philosophy of life.” Wouldn't it be ironic, if you never understood that such a philosophy is not an abstract truth, but a personal one? That you can never fully grasp it, but that It can fully grasp you? That it will not leave you an arm-chair spectator, but will pull you down into the arena where you decide not with your reason alone, but with your hands and feet, your guts, your genitals, your money, the days and hours and minutes of your existence,

The Cosmic Christ will not merely be contemplated, but accepted or rejected. He will not even consent to be admired. There is no way to live without getting into His flow of things and going with the grain of the universe. Otherwise, my friend, “this thing is made to beat you.”

3

"PHILOSOPHISTRY'S" SIREN SONG

In the preceding lecture we pointed to the main theological argument of the book of *Colossians*. It is no less than the hope of the Church and the heart of the Gospel.

A Targeted Gospel

The Gospel, we need to note, comes to a particular people in a particular place at a particular time. It's always the same News, but it's presented in ways that take into account the situation. It deals with the current circumstance. Therefore, Paul's preaching and his correspondence (which makes up most of our New Testament) is situational or circumstantial. It has about it the quality of particularity, addressing people where they live and breathe. where they struggle, where they dream.

It does little good to answer questions nobody is asking, no matter how eloquent the statement. It does no good, unless one can convince folks that emotionally, non-verbally, subconsciously, they really are asking them, but have not come openly to grapple with them. Our contemporaries may have just such a problem, but Paul's readers did not.

The Colossians knew that they had questions, tough ones that could tear them apart. Till now they had enjoyed good fellowship, warm and creative relations, but all that was threatened. Into their midst had come a kind of "new age" thought. We will note a few of its main features as we see how Paul critiques it.

Look, then, at what he writes, remembering that he has just said, "I want you to be 'knit together in love.' I want you to be 'filled with that assurance that true understanding brings, God's open secret -- Christ Himself. He is the key that opens all the treasures of God's wisdom and knowledge.'" Those are his final words preceding the following in 2:4-10:

A Not-So-Subtle Warning

I say this to save you from being led astray by some body's high-sounding argument. For, even though I'm not bodily present with you, in spirit I'm right there, delighted to see how firm is your faith in Christ.

Therefore, as you accepted Jesus as Christ, live your lives in Him. Let your roots go down deep in Him, and grow up strong in the faith you were taught, overflowing with grateful joy.

Take care that nobody captures you by the foolish fancies of some so-called 'philosophy,' following human traditions, and the world's presuppositions, rather than Christ. For, it is in Christ that the full expression of God lives embodied, and you have been made complete in Him, who is the Head over every power and authority in the universe.

Here it becomes clear that somebody has come into the Colossian faith-community with a different message from the one they first heard and accepted; the one taught them by Epaphras; that drew them together in the fellowship of love; that centered their thought, their commitment, their common life, in Jesus Christ and in Him alone.

Somebody or bodies have come into the congregation saying that Christ is not enough, and they are arguing with such eloquence, with such reasonable reference to and support from the common culture, that they are attracting a puzzled, but interested, hearing. This distraction interferes with the Christian goal of "growing up together in Christ." Both the unity and maturity of these believers are threatened.

Like a father informed of a charming deceiver working to draw away his children, Paul lashes out. He warns disciples not to be "led astray by somebody's high-sounding argument." The phrase is variously translated as "delude you with beguiling speech," "fool you with false arguments," "capture you by his philosophy, tricking you with meaningless words," or "being talked into error by specious arguments."

We are tempted at times to make too little of the power of speech. While we live in a time of hucksterism and the devaluing of the linguistic coin, we see the successful use of both economic and political sloganeering. It can sell anything from deodorant to stealth bombers and win elections from townships up to the presidency. Dazzled by imagery, we surrender substance.

Paul didn't want that to happen in Colossae and Laodicea. So, he cried out his warning. Greek scholars tell us that the verb *paralogizetai* (*παραλογιζηται*) means "to lead astray by false reasoning." Classical writers employed the word in the sense of a chain of argument that, though not resulting in mathematical proof, offered reasonable grounds for a given conclusion. By Paul's time, the word had the unsavory connotation of "a fast pitch" or "smooth line," which are not relegated to circus pitch-men and media salespersons. They, also, make their hypnotic way into the pulpit and classroom.

You well know that when your teachers are in the room, your behavior is more considered than when they are away. Authority figures who we know care deeply for us, wield considerable influence over us. Knowing that to them our future is at stake, we listen even more carefully and gratefully.

So, Paul reminds his readers that though he is not bodily with them, he is, nevertheless, right there. He, also, lets them, know that he doesn't think they have really rejected Jesus Christ. Not for a moment does he believe they have repudiated their faith and embraced a new Lord. He is confident about the genuineness of their commitment, but he knows, too, the rhetorical skill of those self-styled intellectuals in their midst.

A Sketch Of The Troublers

A goodly number of biblical exegetes have seen these false teachers as "Gnostics." The text itself indicates that whoever they were, they were influenced by Gnosticism or views prominent among the Gnostics of the time. It as surely indicates that they were influenced by Judaizing tendencies prevalent in the early Church. It's not

as important to give a name to this school of thought or otherwise label the teaching as to describe it and ask, "What is its contemporary equivalent?"

Whatever it is, the antidote to it is a robust Christology in the soul of a dedicated disciple. "Continue your life in Christ," the Apostle urged. "Sink deep your roots in Him. Remember your beginning, and grow up strong in the faith you were taught, overflowing with grateful joy." "Keep your eyes on the Cross," he says in effect, "and your soul will swell with gratitude." Then comes a warning that tells us something of the doctrine knocking at the door of the Colossian church. 2:8 characterizes it as "the foolish fancies of some so-called 'philosophy,' following human traditions, and the world's presuppositions, rather than Christ."

The purported "higher thought" has much going for it: the weight of esteemed traditions, an air of academic respectability, and the force of cultural norms and social mores or, quite possibly, the "common sense" of the day. Paul characterizes it as "the world's presuppositions." The "Christ" of such creed is "the Christ of Culture,"* to use one of H. Richard Niebuhr's descriptive categories of the relation of Christ to Culture.

Not yet, though, do we discover just what traditions, what pretended philosophical arguments, what norms, or what notions of "common sense," are wrapped up in the intrusive doctrine(s). Rather, the Christian antidote is reaffirmed. "It is in Christ that the full expression of God lives embodied, and you have been made complete in Him, who is the Head over every power and authority in the universe."

Such passages as this led me to select as the general title for these *Colossian* lectures the question, "What On Earth Do You Want -- When Everything Under Heaven Is Yours?" Christ Jesus is the completion of God's human creation, and "You are complete in Him, who is the Head over every power and authority in the universe."

Paul's affirmation of the supremacy of Christ over "every power and authority" suggests that the "higher thought" has within it some view of "powers and authorities" over which Christ is not Head, but which control the lives and destinies of those who don't have the secret knowledge of the salvation "mystery."

Here are Gnostic-like strains of thought. In pagan Gnosticism there is a series of "emanations" or "aeons" between the Supreme, unknowable God and fleshly humans. The Supreme, remote, unknowable God could not create matter, which is itself evil. The "creator god," or "Demiurge," was way down the chain of emanations. Through some mischance or fall among higher aeons he emerged, became the immediate source of creation and the primary ruler of the world, a world which was not only imperfect, but antagonistic to what is truly "spiritual."

"Gnosis" (*Γνωσις*) is the Greek word for "knowledge" and is the central idea in the doctrine. It is not some ordinary knowledge achieved by humanity in its fallen fleshly state, but knowledge of God, of the origin and destiny of humanity, by means of which the spiritual element in humanity can receive redemption.

* *Christ and Culture*, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1951: Chap. 2. Other chapters include analyses of "Christ Against Culture," "Christ Above Culture," "Christ and Culture in Paradox," and "Christ the Transformer of Culture."

Gnosticism was not a neat, consistent system, but took many different forms and ranged from engagement in considerable genuine philosophical speculation to wild amalgams of mythology and magic. Some forms including Christian elements secured a firm foothold in the early Church.

Two Faces Of The Offenders

Two major strains moved in opposite directions, producing both ascetics and libertines. Holding that the body is bad, because matter is evil, ascetics concluded that they were to "mortify the flesh." It could not be controlled, so it must be killed. Libertines concluded that the flesh was no part of the real (i.e., "spiritual") person. Therefore, it made no difference what the flesh did. One could engage in the grossest fleshly sins without damaging the "spirit."

Whether the false teachers in Colossae were or were not Gnostics, they had picked up a few Gnostic pedagogical pearls and were enthusiastically displaying them. Both ascetic and libertine strains were manifest. At least, Paul strikes at both. First, though, he deals primarily with the ascetic strain. It has surfaced among Judaizers in their insistence on keeping the rituals of the Mosaic Law. It has surfaced, too, among others with no interest in Judaism, but who see the rite of circumcision as an initiation into the "mystery."

Life In Christ, The Death Of Legalism

In 2:11-23 Paul talks to the disciples about being dead to legalism and alive to Christ. In verses 11-15 he focuses on their situation and lets the Gospel impact their current condition. In verses 16-23 he becomes soberingly specific about the Gospel in their everyday living and how it simply will not tolerate the legalism that would lure them back into bondage.

Let's listen first to verses 11-15:

In Him [Christ] also you were circumcised, not literally by a human hand, but by Christ's cutting away the fleshly nature, for in baptism you were buried and raised with Him through faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead. Though you were dead because of your sins and your spiritual uncircumcision, God has made you alive in Christ. For he has forgiven us all our sins, and having canceled the charges written over our heads, He seized the bond and nailed it to the top of his own Cross. There He disarmed the cosmic powers and authorities. Publicly He displayed them in defeat and led them captives in His triumphal procession.

No matter who urges circumcision on the Colossian Christians and for whatever reason, Paul flatly rejects it. They are already circumcised "in Christ." "Not literally," he adds for anyone so dull as to think that's what he means. For libertines who hold that it makes no difference what we do with the body, for ascetics who hold that the flesh drags us down until it is beaten into insensitivity, Paul declares that the "circumcision" of

which he speaks is Christ's "cutting away the fleshly nature" when we were spiritually buried and raised with Him in baptism.

For Paul to affirm that Christians are spiritually circumcised in the experience of baptism is to throw light on his understanding of both circumcision and baptism. In itself plunging beneath the water no more removes the old nature and puts on the new than does taking a knife and cutting away the flesh. The creative power does not reside in the literal act, but flows in from the Creator Lord to whom the believer in faith-union is joined.

The Apostle would not simply replace one physical rite with another. His point is that once the end is realized, we shouldn't keep focusing on an obsolete means. The end is a spiritual union with Jesus Christ that makes people new. Such union occurs when believers embrace Him as the dying, rising Lord and God forgives them. As Paul told the Romans in chapter 6, faith (which is an opening up of the self to Christ) really unites the self with Christ all the way from death to life. In that vital relationship the old self-centered self with all its traits (which is what Paul means here by "the fleshly nature") dies.

The action of baptism is: 1) to enable faith-identification, and 2) to evidence outwardly what is taking place inwardly, which was in fact the purpose of circumcision. Cutting away the flesh meant cutting off all that separated one from God and the acceptance of a covenant relationship with Him and His People.

The rituals of worship have always been intended as means to the end of a living relationship with God and other members of the covenant community. All God-given law has been a means to that end. That's the reason Jesus could say, as Williams translates *Matt. 22:37-40*: "'You must love the Lord your God with your whole heart, your whole soul, and your whole mind.' This is the greatest command, and is first in importance. The second is like it: 'You must love your neighbor as you do yourself.' The essence of the whole law and the prophets is packed into these two commands."

Paul had come to understand Jesus' teaching about the purpose of the Law, and he voiced it repeatedly. To the Romans he wrote,

Be in debt to no one -- the only debt you should have is to love one another. Whoever loves his fellow-man has obeyed the Law. The commandments, 'Do not commit adultery; do not murder; do not steal; do not covet'-- all these, and any others besides, are summed up in the one command, 'Love your fellow-man as yourself.'...To love, then, is to obey the whole Law (13;8-10, *TEV*).

To the Galatians in 5:6 Paul said, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love" (*NAS*). Then in 6:15 he repeated, "For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation." The end of the Law is the new creation, the Covenant Community of mutual love. Circumcision is not the issue in the Church today, but the debate still rages over the relation of ritual and office to the validity of the Church and membership in it, as well as to the will of God for humanity. At times an outsider can get the idea that the things that actually matter are bishops and baptism and bingo. Paul and the prophets would have a hard time among the legalists, and, of course, they managed to kill Jesus.

Nevertheless, we do not answer ultimately to any authority but to Him whom we call "Lord." We are buried, and we are raised with Him. We are His. Once we were dead in our sins, but have been made alive in Him. The glad Good News is, "He has forgiven us all our sins," and that is by no means "cheap grace."

To see its power, look, also, at Calvary. You see what our sin does to the heart of God, what it is always doing to the heart of God. You see for a few short hours the historical Cross we raised at Golgotha. You see it, unless you pull your eyelids shut and walk away, unless in response to the question, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" you dig your fingers in your ears and leave. Was it not Rembrandt, painting the faces of those who ringed the Cross, who put his own face there? With broken heart we see the "Love that will let [us] go" there on that hill and then in our own hands the hammer and the nails.

At first it's too much. We want to turn away, but cannot. We keep looking, and there on that Cross, behind it, above it, inclosing it, we see holding His Son, holding all His daughters and sons, the Father... on His eternal Cross. And, we know, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 *Cor.* 5:19). We don't comprehend the length and breadth and height and depth of it, but we sense something breaking up inside us, something happening to the "I" that I know and have been, and I am being distanced from it. I hate the things in me that nailed Him there. I love Him who in unwearying care has pursued me to this awe-full place.

There is so much to see. Keep looking and you see the cosmic drama whose stage stretches up and out from Golgotha to the far edges of the universe. Here the pent-up fury of frustrated powers and principalities beats upon the exposed breast of God. We can name those incarnate powers: "religion" and "the state," utilizing their political and military machines. We can name the spirits that live in and reach out through them: "pride" and "ambition," "nationalism" and "tradition."

These are our familiar, cherished, destructive sins, and we see them all there at Calvary. We see them strike at God, strike the fatal blow at Jesus. We see them as they strike at those who are His, glancing backward to pierce our own hearts.

But..., we must see them stricken, too. written out one by one with our name signed below them, they are nailed down there to die. To see ourselves crucified with Christ is to see the execution of our sins in Him on that bloody tree.

Paul alludes to this wiping out of all the warrants against us when he says of Christ, "having canceled the charges written over our heads, He seized the bond and nailed it to the top of His own Cross." This I must see, too, if I am really to see the Cross of Christ. I must see and accept the death of my failures, the death of my self-centered self, with its proud ambitions, its reach for power over others, its obsession to play God. I must be willing to be forgiven.

Until I see my sins spiked down to die on Calvary, I have not shared with Jesus Christ His crucifixion!

Defeat Of The Cosmic Powers

Paul sees farther behind the events of that Black Friday to the unseen tyrants that engineered the crucifixion. He sees the discarnate powers that redirect our institutions and their leaders to a purpose other than the purpose of God. In *1 Cor. 2:8* he speaks of "the princes of this world" or "rulers of this age," who did not understand God's "secret" ("mystery") which was to be revealed in Christ. Otherwise, he says, they would not have crucified Jesus. Numerous commentators think he speaks here of the coalition of Annas, Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate. How, though, could they have been expected to know God's "secret" revealed only in Christ, uniquely in Christ on the Cross, and that these Christians are just now learning?

It is all these "cosmic powers and authorities" that in the Cross have been disarmed. Paul uses the familiar military figure of a conqueror disarming his captives and making them march as vanquished foes in his triumphal procession. No longer should anyone take hope in such "spiritual" rulers, for Christ has vanquished every one.

This is "Good News" to folks afraid of the "cosmic powers," who wonder if they need some new "secret," some esoteric "knowledge," to help them escape the destruction of the unseen forces around them. Consequently, Paul turns and tells them to live as free men and women, not cowering slaves. Let's now note 2:16-23:

Freedom In Christ

Therefore, let nobody make laws for you about what you can eat or drink or do on the festivals: annual, monthly, or the weekly Sabbaths. These have been simply the shadow of what was to come; the reality is Christ. Don't be wiped out by a conspicuous humility, self-mortification, and angel worship, imposed by somebody claiming the authority of visions, all puffed up by a sensuous mind. Such a one is out of touch with the Head, through whom the whole Body, bound together by its various joints and sinews, is nourished and grows with the growth God gives. You have died with Christ and are free from the ruling spirits of the universe. Why, then, do you live as if you still belonged to this world? Why will you let people dictate such rules as: 'Don't handle this;' 'Don't taste that;' 'Don't touch the other;' when 'this,' 'that,' and 'the other' will all be gone with the using. This is to follow merely human rules and dogma. I know they have an air of wisdom in their self-abasement and studied piety, but they are absolutely useless in curbing the passions.

Here more specifics of the false teaching are disclosed. It is a combination of Jewish ritual, various food laws, and angel worship. Adherents claim authority on the basis of knowledge revealed to them in a vision or visions. Paul characterizes them as having a "conspicuous humility." Perhaps, just to name this vice will be enough. Most of us tolerate a considerable number of proud people and a few humble ones, but, it certainly strains our souls to put up with those who are proud of their humility. Remember Screwtape's advice to young Wormwood on handling a humble man at prayer,

"Just interject into his mind the thought, 'By Jove, I'm being humble!'" Here are those who've not only had such a fleeting thought, but make sure others have it, as well.

Mention of "self-mortification" suggests rigorous ascetic practices. Angel-worship may be, according to the cult leader, a proper way of showing humility. At any rate, Paul acknowledges it as being "imposed by somebody claiming the authority of visions." The irony appears as the one insisting on humility, along with self-mortification and angel-worship, displays "a conspicuous humility" "all puffed up by a sensuous mind."

Such a one is not truly growing in Christ. He's out of touch with Christ. Without the life and direction of the Head, the Body disintegrates. And, "You are in touch with the Head. You have died to all these 'human rules and dogmas,' for you died with Christ and were so set free. You have moved beyond the Judaistic shadows to Reality, so refuse every shackle old or new. 'I know they have an air of wisdom in their self-abasement and studied piety, but they are absolutely useless in curbing the passions.'"

Identifying Our Contemporary Equivalent

Earlier in this lecture I mentioned that it is not essential to give a name to the "new age" thought of Paul's day, becoming a problem to the churches of the Lycus Valley. I said it's more important to ask, "What is its contemporary equivalent?" I don't claim insider information on that matter, but I push on to say it's not as important for me to give you an answer as for you to grapple with the question.

My conviction, though, is that in any age the contemporary equivalent is "the religio-philosophic scientism popular at the time." It takes different forms in different cultures. At one time in one culture religion determines the philosophy and science of the day. It determines even what can be thought or discovered. For instance, one must believe the earth to be flat with four corners, created in 4,004 B.C., with fossils placed in the mountains at the moment of creation, and humans created in an instant full-grown.

At another time philosophy determines what can be believed or thought or discovered. Hume's philosophy rules out the possibility of miracle. Current Existentialism finds no place for meaning in creation. In Modernism one could find no adequate explanation for Evil. Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Buchenwald, Aushwitz, Chernoble, and Tieneman Square, must be some sort of good in disguise, or at worst, some cultural lag or evolutionary fluke.

I mention "Modernism," because I suspect that it is not a cherished tradition here and because it well illustrates the nature of our contemporary "agnostic" heresy, an amalgam of popular scientific, philosophic, and religious views.

Modernists were Christians who wanted to make the Christian faith acceptable to their contemporaries, a noble aim. Too, they were Christians who had thoroughly imbibed the optimistic philosophy of the time, "the liberal assumption." That assumption was grounded in the doctrine of biological evolution. Not only has the species evolved over the ages, so has everything else, including the social, religious, political, and economic institutions.

The "gnostic" strain becomes evident in the central concept of "knowledge" as the way of salvation. Sin is ignorance, and education is the route to salvation. Christianity is the apex of religious development, democracy of political development, and capitalism of economic development. America before World War I is virtually "the Kingdom of God!"

There are many flaws in the Modernist view, but the primary flaw is that the Modernist was first a child of the age and second a Christian. His attempt was to rescue everything about the Christian faith that could be squared with his philosophy and science, but it was ultimately his philo-scientific view that determined what had to go and what could be retained.

Today we are apt to view "Modernists" as radicals in religion and politics, but that is by no means true. Fundamentalists "modernize" the Bible all the time as they read into it their own current views and ignore its original content and intent. They do it as they accept "the liberal assumption" about their own denominations, their own nation-state, their own foreign policy, their own economics and politics. They do it as they identify the Gospel with the culture religion of the state.

One of the sweetest, most-beguiling siren songs we hear is that a Christian is a "patriot," and that means that he or she always supports Caesar, particularly Caesar's Legionnaires, no matter where they go or how they get there. One reason that the churches are not bothered by the state is because they offer no threat to the state's ambitions, even though it demands a loyalty that belongs only to God. They are tigers toilet-trained and nail-clipped, seated at the national banquet table with bibs about their necks and embroidered napkins in their paws,

Then, there is "Scientism," held by those who view themselves as pure scientists, but, whose "science" is determined not by the facts, but by a philosophical methodology. They see the laboratory method as the only method for determining what is real. That means that all reality can be quantified: measured, weighed, photographed. Anything that cannot fit into this Procrustean bed is not "objective," and, therefore, unreal.

Much of the scientific community has moved beyond such dogmatism. Mystery creeps back into reality as its one-dimensional nature is replaced by a rich, plurality of dimensions or levels. Atoms are divided and sub-divided into subatomic parts that are further subdivided until we arrive at pure undifferentiated energy. What the scientific method ultimately gives are certain characteristics of energy measured in a limited number of its operations. What energy itself is it cannot say. That question moves beyond the province of science.

Yet, there remains a protected reserve of "scientific" dinosaurs whose eloquence and apparent logic dazzle and beguile. So long as they are allowed to deal with the quantitative aspect of reality, they are the experts, and they are convincing. When they quit their description and begins to deal in proscription, they abandon their field where they have earned the right to speak and enter a foreign field, where they are no more expert than others.

The dogmatist must not go unchallenged, no matter what hat he wears. When she stops speaking indicative language and starts speaking convictional language, that fact should be pointed out. He/she speaks not as a scientist now, but simply as another man or woman. To argue on the basis of the scientific method that the only avenue to reality is the scientific method is to beg the question.

In our time, however, there are growing numbers who agree with the described limitations of religion, philosophy, and science. That is, the religion, philosophy, and science that have recently held the field. They recognize that there are powers at work in the universe that we cannot quantify. We have not harnessed them, but are in danger of being destroyed by them. Many turn to the occult, Satanism, numerology, theosophy, gemology, or the growing "New Age" movement.

Serving in a university community for twenty years, I watched fine young men and women, brought up in Christian homes, in their search for acceptance, fellowship, meaning, and mission, move into cults of various sorts. Often after a time of rapture followed by bitter disillusionment, they came home. But, it takes a special welcome for them and a caring tutelage to help them see the things they sought are at their fingertips, if only they reach out.

Somebody needs to be ready to ask, "What on earth do you want -- when everything under heaven is yours?" Then, somebody needs to be able to point to that "everything" waiting not simply to be wanted, but embraced. They need to be shown how to hold out their arms and let the Love come in.

It seems a shame that in our mainline churches we can rear our children to adulthood without their falling in love with Jesus, that we can leave them defenseless before the "smooth speech" and "foolish fancies" of some pitchman for the culture religion of nationalism; a pseudo-intellectualism parading as religion, philosophy, or science; or before one particular "mystery" cult that reduces them to serving ciphers or another that has them saying, "I am God!"

This leads me to say more about the "New Age Movement," which in many ways is the growing contemporary equivalent of old Gnosticism. It is similar in that it is not a centrally organized movement under a single leader. It is an umbrella covering various people, organizations, events, practices, and ideas. According to Douglas Groothuis of InterVarsity, "Although it includes cults and sects, it is not restricted to any one of these. Rather it is a constellation of like-minded people and groups all desiring spiritual and social change that will usher in a New Age of self-actualization."

Here is a laudable aim. We need such a "New Age," and we need groups striving on different fronts to help usher it in. So, it is good to be working for holistic health, clean politics, responsible technology, and other such vital matters. Many of the goals are worthy of Christian support. In fact, they are our goals. It is the "faith" of the adherents that we must challenge, their invisible means of support.

"New Age"ism is a form of mysticism, with its strengths and weaknesses. Spiritual union with Christ is, also, a form of mysticism, but is mediated, rather than absolute. The soul is not so merged with the Divine as to lose personal identity. Mysticism, however,

always veering toward pantheism, with everything part of the Divine, clearly characterizes "New Age" thought.

"New Agers" not only have a largely impersonal view of God, but see Jesus as one of the many "Avatars" who descend in human form as a manifestation and revelation of divinity. Attaining a high level of attunement to Him, Jesus for three years became a bodily vehicle for the Cosmic Christ.

There is a considerable amount of Hindu thought and terminology in "New Age" doctrines. In its lower form Hinduism is full of gods, but at its highest it is monistic and pantheistic. The "New Age" thought has borrowed heavily from the higher expression. Yet, while it seeks a "New Age," there seems to be little "new" about it. Proposing to face the future, it turned to the past for concepts formerly discarded by most careful thinkers.

In a not-so-charitable characterization, *Time Magazine* in 1987 ran the following:

New Age is a combination of spirituality and superstition, fad and farce, about which the only thing certain is that it is not new... The rise of the New Age is a barometer of the disintegration of American culture. Dostoyevsky said that anything is permissible if there is no God. There is no way to make any distinction between good and evil... once you've deified yourself, which is what the New Age is all about, there is no higher moral absolute. It is a recipe for ethical anarchy... it is both messianic and millennial.

I end this brief critique with Shirley MacLaine's concluding credo from her book *Dancing in the Light*. The pantheistic mysticism of the movement stands clear. "I know that I exist, therefore I am. I know the God-source exists, therefore it is. Since I am part of that force, then I am that I am."

These words have an awesome ring to those who know the story of the Exodus and the creation of the Covenant-People. When one arrogates to oneself words that identify the God who brought up that slave people of whom Jesus Christ was born, we can leave such a boast to be its own witness.

Where is the contemporary equivalent of the disruptive, destructive teaching that came to Colossae? Such teachings exist, and similar dogmas right now vie for our allegiance. As then, they take different forms, but all produce speculations that dethrone Jesus Christ as Lord of Creation and Redemption.

In a given situation the intruding dogma may be limited to a single community. It was in a congregation served by my brother, Harold, in St. Louis. A leader in the church became enamored with the Cabala, (spelled, also, "Kabala") and proceeded to interpret the Bible along its mystical and esoteric lines. Then, he began leading others to do the same. It seemed a rerun of the drama in Colossae.

The Cabala, you might like to know, is a kind of occultism or mystic art. As a system of interpretation it arose among Jewish rabbis and was embraced by certain medieval Christians. It finds symbolic meanings for almost every biblical statement. A

passage hardly ever means what it says, but has a "higher," "deeper," "more spiritual" meaning for any who have the "spiritual knowledge" to recognize it.

Relatively few Christians have heard of the Cabala, and you may well feel that your life would not have been unduly impoverished had you never heard of it. However, what happens with this or similar so-called "discoveries" is that one person finds out about it, takes pride in his knowledge, and begins to think that he has glimpsed some "new" light that others need. Responsible bible study is replaced with mystic speculation, and the historical gives way to the esoteric.

For example, study of the book of *Colossians* would not proceed by asking such questions as: "Who wrote it?" "When was it written?" "To whom was it written?" "Why was it written?" "What was the historical situation: the social, political, economic, and religious conditions of the day?" "What can we determine by examining the text itself?" "What can we discover from other sources?" and such practical, common sense, but scholarly questions. The study would center on the mysterious key that unlocks the door and lets in the Light, the secret meaning of plain passages, the hidden message in numbers and names, the secret rites that usher the devotees into the higher realms of truth and life.

Cultic devotees often depersonalize God and deify humanity. They fail to take history seriously. They fail to take sin seriously. They fail to take grace seriously. Emphasizing knowledge as the prime goal, they tend to become arrogant and proud. Ignorant of the "treasures of wisdom and knowledge" in Jesus Christ, they turn to what at length is nothing. "Dancing in the Light" becomes weeping in the wind.

If you won the \$10,000,000 Sweepstakes, would you trade your first \$100,000 check for a raffle ticket at the local used car auction? To get you to do so, the local pitchman would have to be pretty persuasive. If you had a friend or member of the family who won the big prize, but was tempted to trade it for a song and dance, would you care? And, if you did, would you do anything about it?

If you had a loved one looking for the "good life" and tempted to search for it in drugs, would you care? If you did, would you do anything about it? If you somehow missed the meaning and joy in the Gift of Jesus Christ, would you hope that somebody cared? And, if somebody did, would you hope he/she did something about it?

Paul cared. That care was contagious; he caught it from Jesus. He had some brothers and sisters who were in danger of missing the meaning, the joy, the adventure of life. They lived far away, over in Asia Minor in a place he'd not been. He'd like to do something about it, but he couldn't. He was in jail and couldn't do a thing. O yes, there was one thing he could do. He could write a letter, pour his whole soul into it, wrap up inside it a dream that stretched from Colossae to Rome... to Spain... to the moon and the stars... to the very throne of God. It's the Dream down deep in the psyche, the soul, of us -- every one.

He could sketch a pen-portrait of a Cosmic Love that reached all the way down to Colossae and stretched on out to Calvary and then ask those sisters and brothers,

Isn't this the One that captured your heart when you met Him? when you took Him as your own and let Him take you? Isn't He the One that made you a more caring soul? a more joyous and energetic person? that made you know at the time your life was full?

If so, do you think that He has deserted you now? Do you think that He has less to give you than some newcomer to town? Are you really considering a liaison with someone else? And, do you not understand that your covenant-union is a sacred trust not to be trifled with? Will you allow an old man who loves you to tell you that everything you want, you already have? Possess your possessions.... Accept the Gift you hunger for, and let God-in-Christ surprise you with joy all along the way.

Don't, please, don't let some smooth talker swindle you out of it all. I'd come to you myself, but I'm in jail. Don't you let some self-styled 'intellectual' slap you in his jail. When he comes to you with handcuffs velvet-lined, don't let him snap them on you. When the new teacher asks you to sign up for her course in the thrill of chains, don't do it. When one tells you how to read your fortune in the stars, don't believe him.

God has opened His 'secret' to you in Jesus Christ. It is He who rules the stars and all the 'powers' beneath and above them. If you really see the Creator-Redeemer-Sustainer Lord, you'll never be confused by any substitute.

This is all I know, but I've found it to be more than enough. I can send you nothing else but my love, and that you have always.

Yours and His, Paul.

This is something of what I see in this ancient letter. But, this is my discovery, too:--when I let it speak its original message to those who first received and read it, then, and only then, it breaks open and calls my name.

Then, it calls on me to stop and ask, "What 'Philosophistry's' siren song tempts you in this hour? What system of thought; ritual; social, political, or religious organization; asks for your supreme allegiance? Where do you look for the meaning of creation? Will you see the nature of God, of humanity, and of the world in Jesus Christ? Then, will you fall on your knees in wonder and thanksgiving, and get up on your feet to go about that co-partnership in creation, which is your heritage and trusteeship in Him?"

4

POWER TO RESHAPE THE WORLD

Paul has now made his case for the all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ. The Christian need not turn elsewhere or be lured from his or her faith by those who, pied-piper like, would lead them from the “home” they have found in the Lord of both the old and New Creation.

Living in the Power of the Risen Christ

It is to this New Creation that the Apostle now turns. Having come to know its ground, the Colossians ought to see its form. They ought to know what it looks and feels like in the midst of their day-to-day experience. The Christian life is not simply a creed to confess, but a vocation to manifest. Whoever would talk the talk must, also, walk the walk. Whoever is joined to the root must in due season bear the fruit.

First, then, Paul points to Christ as the source of Resurrection-power. Christ is the Ground. Christ is the root. Christ is the Life bringing forth the fruit. But, all who are His must will it so.

It is said that one came to the Buddha and asked how he might find life. The Buddha took him to the river at bathing time, grasped his head, plunged it under the water and held it there. When finally the struggler broke free and came up gasping for breath, the Buddha quietly asked, “When you thought you were drowning, what did you want most?” “Air,” was the breathless reply. “When you want life as desperately as you wanted air, you will find it.”

So, Paul says, “Yearn...,” “set your heart...” Here are his words in the opening paragraph of chapter 3:11-4:

You have been raised with Christ. Yearn, therefore, for the highest gifts of heaven, where Christ in power reigns at God’s right hand. Set your heart on those higher goods, and not on the fleeting ‘things’ of earth. For you died, and your life lies hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life appears on stage, you all will share with Him that glorious finale when the meaning of life’s Drama is made plain.

Repeatedly Paul affirms that the Colossians “have died with Christ.” The dead are free of all that previously enslaved them. That’s why there is such power in the old Negro spiritual,

Free at last!
Free at last!
Thank God Almighty,
I’m free at last!

So, Martin Luther King, Jr. could thrill, unify and galvanize a Black community by lifting up these words.

Blacks of the '60s sang of a dream, a glad, triumphant tomorrow. Paul sang of a dream-come-true, a glad, triumphant today. To be sure, it's not present in its fullness; nevertheless, it is a blest tomorrow whose glory gleams light up our now, an "already" breaking through our "not-yet" deep-luring us into God's future. The decisive battle of D-Day is won, though the ultimate triumph of V-Day lies ahead. However, it is through Resurrection-eyes that we see the ultimate triumph and glimpse that Tomorrow breaking in today.

Michelangelo is said to have asked his fellow-painters, "Why do you paint Christ on the Cross so much? Christ suffering? Christ dying? Christ dead? Paint Him, rather, risen! With His foot on the riven rock... Paint Him victorious and glorious! Paint Him the conqueror of sin and death."

Years earlier that passion to paint the Christ of Resurrection power burned in Paul's blood. Yet, he resolved "to know nothing among you but Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (*1 Cor. 2:2*). He did not say, "I am determined to know nothing among you but the crucifixion." He says, "I am determined to know nothing among you but the *Crucified*." The Cross is at the center of Pauline theology, for it is in the Cross that the heart of God is fully revealed. To be God's, to share completely God's Self-giving Spirit, we share that Cross. In it we are freed from every form of death. In the Cross "self" died... and Death... and the Law... and Sin! This is where, according to Paul, the Gospel begins.

It is not, however, where the Gospel ends. If it did, it really would end. Death is the prelude to Resurrection. It is to the Resurrection that the Story moves. It is to the Resurrection that our spiritual pilgrimage moves. Therefore, as often as the Apostle says, "You have died with Christ," he goes on to cry, "You have been raised with Christ!"

Paul was not like some modern disciples who live between Black Friday and Easter Sunday, who for all practical purposes left on their road to Emmaus Saturday noon and haven't heard that anything happened since. And, he certainly did not intend for his sisters and brothers to live their lives on that sad, silent Saturday, remembering a glad hope now dead. Consequently, the Apostle calls to them, "You died and rose with Christ. Live life, then, with Him on His plane. Don't keep trying to live where you did before anything happened to you."

If you won that \$10,000,000 Sweepstake, would you say, "O well, life's been O.K. till now. I'm familiar and comfortable with this lifestyle. Some day I may decide to pick up the prize and live differently, but right now I like things as they are."

More apropos to the Christian's new life is the decision to marry. Do people enter that union with every intention of living just the way they always have? Do not the partners expect something different? Why be married at all, unless they plan "to love, honor and cherish each other?"

To be Christ's is to live where Christ lives. In one sense that's everywhere there are people to love and serve, everywhere there are wounds to wash and breaks to bind. It's to live with Kagawa in Japan's worst slums (Shinkawa), with Schweitzer in a make-shift jungle hospital in (Lambarene) Africa, with King among our own disenfranchised

and disinherited, with Mother Teresa among Calcutta's dying outcasts, with Paul in a Roman prison, with Colossians and Laodiceans among family and friends who need freedom from slavery to wretched dogma and superstition.

When we hear Paul tell the Colossians to “yearn for the highest gifts of heaven, where Christ in power reigns at God's right hand,” we sometimes get hung up on terms like “high” and “low” in a universe where there is no “up” and “down,” where to point “up” is simply to point out into space away from the center of the earth, we get sidetracked in anthropomorphic notions of “God's right hand” and the kind of limitations such a concept implies.

It's not likely that Paul had opportunity or need to know 20th-century astronomy. It may be that he thought “up” was “up.” It is not at all likely that he thought heaven was only “up,” localized somewhere out in space, along with God, and that Jesus literally sat on God's hand! It seems much more profitable to conclude that Paul used such language in quite the same way we do when we speak of “higher” and “lower” kinds of living and of one being another's “right hand.”

People are not necessarily dumb just because they arrived on the planet before we did, whether yesterday or a few millenniums ago. Paul, most certainly, was not. He steers people for whom he deeply cares away from death and toward life, away from a stumbling, stunted, starved, frustrated existence to soaring in the power of the Risen Christ.

Chickens grubbing in the barnyard never soar on eagles' wings. The eagle's life is hid to the chicken. The most philosophical rooster in the pen couldn't begin to crow out a definition of “the essence of ‘eaglehood.’” So, Paul can tell his readers that to live where Christ lives is to live a “hidden” life to people scurrying around spending themselves for “things.” It's unlikely that Donald Trump or Leota Helmsley pass many sleepless night envying Mother Teresa. It's doubtful that most folks have the foggiest idea of what makes her tick or, for that matter, could dimly illumine what they mean as they sing, “Jesus is all the world to me.”

The greatest and best reason to be with somebody we love is just to be there... present to each other. We're created to care and share, to love and be loved in a creative partnership. A father relearned that fact painfully from his young daughter who stole up to him and clung close. After awhile, reaching in his pocket, he pulled out a coin, and said, “Here, now you can run along and buy something.” With hurt spreading over her face, the child replied, “Daddy, I don't want your old money. I just want you.”

We have a Father who doesn't make such mistakes. Rather, He made us *in* love... *for* love. Out of His own love He created *through* Christ *for* Christ. It is not at all strange that Jesus, about to leave the disciples, told them, “I go to prepare a place for you, that where I am there you may be also” (*John* 14:2). If Paul labors the point, it is a labor of love. Christ does not only give us life; He *is* “our Life.”

“For me to live is Christ,” cried Paul (*Phil.* 1:21). Others have had other cries, but this is Paul's. Essentially, Napoleon cried, “For me to live is power!” “Mazzini cried, “For me to live is Italy!” Patrick Henry cried, “For me to live is liberty.” Others have

cried, “For me to live is fame!... money!... sex!... knowledge!... success (whatever that means)! Invited to address a fraternity, the speaker turned to the president and asked. “Young man, what are you living for?” “I’m studying to become a dentist,” he replied. “Yes, I understand what you intend to with your life, but what are you living *for*?” After a pause, the response came, “I’m sorry, Sir, but I guess I haven’t thought that through.” And, it isn’t as if this young man were all alone. If the question came at us like a rifle shot, many of us might have to say, “I’m sorry, but I guess I haven’t thought that through.”

Paul had..., and he wanted to help others get on with the thinking, because there are a few follow-up questions: “If you get it, what will you have? Is it what you most want? Will it be worth the trade? Will you some day say, ‘I gave my *life* for that!’ or, ‘I gave my life for *that!*??’”

“For me to live is _____.” This is a fill-in-the blank question that could be a pop quiz sooner than we think. James asks, “What is your life?” and then doesn’t answer his question at all, but goes on to point out that whatever it is, it’s mighty short, a wisp of smoke or fog, “a vapor soon gone.”

John answers, though. “This is life eternal, to know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You sent” (17:3). The life that is real is not biological existence – pleasant, pampered, pleased. Real life is right relationships. The Kingdom is the Kingdom of right relations. The Body is the Body of right relations. God’s People is the Household or Family of right relations. The New Covenant is a new order, a new world of right relationships – the harmony, security, joy, and peace of Shalom.

Paul urges the Colossians to yearn for the living relation to Christ now, and at last when the midnight hour comes, the curtain is pulled, the masks all come off and the glorious meaning of Life’s Drama comes clear to all, then we shall share the glory that is Christ’s.

“Glory” (*doxa, δοξα*) points to a manifestation of that which comes in radiant splendor, eliciting praise. According to 2 *Peter* 1:3-4, it is by God’s Glory that we are called.

His divine power has granted to us everything that we need for life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence, by which He has given to us His greatest and most-precious promises, that through these you might escape the corruption that lust has brought upon the world, and become sharers in the divine nature.

Then, in 1:17-19, pointing to Jesus’ Transfiguration, Peter goes on to say:

...we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to Him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased,’ we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with Him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay

attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your heart.

“The Majestic Glory” gave glory to the Son. The Son became transparent to the Father, so that looking at the Son, one sees the Father. That glory given to the Son is given to all God’s daughters and sons, so that all creation is at last transparent to God, and nothing veils His glory. The final revelation, however, is at the Second Coming, when God’s glory illumines everything, including us and our place in a World made whole and new.

Resurrection Born of Crucifixion

Living in union with the Christ of glory means living in the power of His Resurrection. This life, however, is born out of death. Dying with Christ by self-identification with Him on the Cross, our old self-centered self was crucified. That means that there its characteristic traits were executed. We are not simply “trouser apes,” living by natural instinct. We are free beings, free still to make and break covenant. Consequently, Paul states that what has happened to us in principle through our coming to Christ must now happen to us in fact by our continued relationship with Him.

As we took the hammer to strike those fatal blows at Calvary, so we are to hold it tight and swing it again and again. This time we are to see our old nature tied down there on that blood soaked beam. We must see it writhe in pain and beg for mercy, plead with us to hold back the blows. It is here that we cannot listen, not even as Ulysses, tied to his ship mast so that he could not respond to the sweet song of the sirens. We must be swift to grasp with both hands the hammer and swing it hard.

In three short paragraphs Paul points to the traits of our old nature that must go. In 3:5-11 he urges:

Then put to death all in you that is earthy: sexual impurity, indecency, lust, unchanneled passions, and that greed which is really idol-worship. It’s on account of these very things that God’s holy anger will fall, and, remember that you once practiced these sins as you lived that kind of life,

But, now you must be done with them all: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Stop lying to one another, for you have stripped off the old self with all its ways, and have put on the new self, which is even now being created anew in the likeness of its Creator, that it may know Him and His perfect plan.

In this new creation there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, for Christ is all in all.

In this section Paul points to three kinds of actions and attitudes that separate us from God and one another. The first has to do with sexual sins. It is not that these are worse than all others. Neither Jesus nor Paul taught that sins of the body are worse than sins of the spirit. In the story of the two lost sons Jesus indicated that it is the other way around (*Luke 15*).

Sexual sins were exceedingly plentiful and prominent in the Gentile culture from which many (likely, most) of these Lycus Valley Christians came. After listing five of them, Paul says, “And, remember that you once practiced these sins as you lived that kind of life.” “That kind of life” does not suggest a one-time fall into an overpowering temptation of which one at once repents and vows never to be unfaithful again. Rather, it suggests a calculated, chosen way.

The Christian view of sex, according to the Apostle, is that such union is sacred, involving a mystical, spiritual oneness that is far more intimate and powerful than we could ever suspect. In a reference to Christian union with the Risen Lord (*1 Cor.* 6:13b-17) he writes:

The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By His power God raised the Lord from the dead, and He will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ Himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, ‘the two shall become one flesh.’ But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with Him in spirit.

There is a sacramental union here that simply cannot be turned on and off with a mental switch. It was a commentary on the moral and spiritual dullness of the culture that these people had at one time thought nothing of casual liaisons, or worshipping at the cultic shrines where the sacred prostitutes were kept. They simply did not know the meaning of the spiritual union of “one flesh,” which means that neither did they sense the nature of that deeper union with the Lord and one another.

To be united with the Lord in the power of His Resurrection precludes unions that violate the covenant that we have with Him, unions binding us to actions and attitudes that produce guilt in the sensitive and callousness in the insensitive. Rationalizations that clear the way for sexual union outside the marriage covenant involve one in a pattern of lies to self, to the partner, and to God.

To pretend that there are no destructive consequences is to blind ourselves to the degeneracy of Paul’s time and ours. Sex has become in our day a commodity to be marketed in magazines, newspapers, on radio and television, and no longer restricted to the non-respectable red-light districts of depersonalized areas. It’s used to sell cereal, slacks and soap. By no accident are sex-saturated video dramas called “soaps.” And when a car is hawked as “sexy,” a sacrament has been debased into a tool “Adam” uses to wield power over the spiritually vulnerable.

The fifth sin in Paul’s list does not immediately seem to be sexual in nature. In fact, it can include all forms of “greed,” for any compulsion to possess what is not one’s own pushes God into a subsidiary position. It is, therefore, idolatry. In this list of sexual sins, such desire appears to center not in some animate “thing,” but in a person reduced to a “thing,” one made in God’s image, whether joined or unjoined to another, a person who must not be made into an object of illicit “greed.”

Following “the gang of five” that are to be put to death, Paul changes the metaphor to one of taking off and putting on one’s clothing. Though the figure changes, the train of thought does not. Traits and ways of the old self are removed. The new self, with its ways and traits, is put on.

The old self, with its anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy talk, and continued lies, digs deeper and wider the gulf separating us, builds higher the wall that divides us. Such destructive attitudes/acts may be directed at God, as well as at one another. For instance, “slander” above is at times translated “blasphemy.”

One of the illnesses that we as counselors frequently face is anger at God disguised as anger at a loved one, an acquaintance, or at “the dirty deal” life has handed us. Putting on the new self means putting off this old one. That self, Paul contends, “is even now being created anew in the likeness of its Creator, that it may know Him and His perfect plan.”

“That it may know Him and His perfect plan” is the destiny of the new self. It will not merely know about Him, but will know Him. It will not parrot words about God’s Great Creative Adventure, but will see it, thrill to it and know that over in his/her little corner of creation that plan is taking shape, and the Kingdom is breaking in.

That this self is now being created anew in its Creator’s likeness is both a promise and a warning. It is a promise that what we are we shall not always be. “We know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as he is (*1 John* 3:2). Now “we all with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as it comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (*2 Cor*, 3:18).

Our metamorphosis (transfiguration, transformation) is in process. We are active in accepting our birthright. God, looking at us, will not some day have to shake His head and say, “I never thought anything could be as stubborn as this.” Some day the angels will look at us and say, “How much like Christ she looks.” “How much like Christ he looks.”

That Deadliest Sin

At the same time the fact that we are in process of becoming a “new creation” warns us not to judge that such process is complete. So much unlike Christ is that spiritual arrogance that considers the self already to have arrived. Pride is the deadliest of all sins, for in lying about itself to God, self and everybody else, it becomes most “respectable,” hardest to recognize, most difficult to repudiate, the saint’s besetting sin.

It is pride that formulates and perpetuates “distinctions between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free.” Race, ritual, culture, social status, become objects of primary loyalty. “Christ is [not] all in all,” for other loyalties have pushed into the foreground. In the New Creation it is not so. Nothing competes with Christ; the false distinctions are gone.

It has taken a long time for God's People to learn this simple truth. The Church is still one of the most segregated institutions on earth, and Sunday 10:00 to noon the most-segregated hours of the week. Large sections of the Church have baptized every distinction in society and defended it with passion until the dominant cultural view brought change.

A little girl in distress ran to her mother, who asked, "What's the matter, dear?" The child replied, "That little Polish girl down the street is moving away." "Why," exclaimed the mother, "I didn't know that you and she were such good friends," "O, it's not that," came the response, "it's just that when she's gone, there'll be nobody I'm better than."

That's the problem, surfacing in the distinctions that build walls and dig the ditches between us. Pride lures, drives, compels us to find somebody we're better than. We're better than them religiously, because they're "wrong," and we're "right." We've done the ceremonies according to every "jot and tittle" We're better than them racially, nationally and culturally, because we're white Americans, upper-middleclass. This is not true where "Christ is all in all." Such sexual, tyrannical, discriminatory sins must go, be put off like a dirty, worn-out wardrobe, and a fresh set of clothing put on. Paul details it in verses 12-14:

"Over it All"

As God's chosen people so dearly loved, clothe yourselves with tender-heartedness, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience. Bear with one another and forgive one another. If any has a complaint against another, forgive as the Lord forgave you. And, over it all, put on love, which ties everything together in harmony complete.

These are not characteristics grown in isolation. We are tender-hearted and kind toward somebody. We are humble before and patient with people. We love persons, unless we've reverted to the old self that uses people and loves "things." Consistent in giving first place once more to love, Paul pictures it as the belt that wraps one round and holds everything else in place. That's the reason he can say, "Whoever loves has fulfilled the law."

There is no real love, though, where grudges are nurtured. Some of the most miserable people I have ever known have been those who were hurt and never let the wound heal. They picked at it continually, pulled off every beginning scab and left themselves raw... painfully, perpetually raw. Paul says, "Bear with one another, and forgive one another." But, lest we define "bear" and "forgive" in cheap or sentimental terms, he adds, "Forgive as the Lord forgave you." The measure is not our little foot rules. It is nothing less than our crucified Savior.

Victory

Antidote to the temptation to use and abuse one another, or just to separate from one another and go our own sweet way, or to plod painfully along, doleful drudges victimized by life, is the peace God gives that comes singing in our souls. Listen to Paul now in 3:15-17:

Let the peace of Christ be umpire in your hearts, for you have been called to be one Body. And be thankful. Make a home in your hearts for the message of Christ with all its wealth of wisdom. Teach and warn one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grateful hearts to God. And, no matter what you say or do, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

“You have been called to be one Body.” This has been God’s call through creation from the beginning and God’s historic call since the days of Abraham. The “open secret” in Christ is that here the call is made in Resurrection-power. As Paul thinks of a broken humanity he sees the secret as the inclusion of the Gentiles in union with the Jews. As he thinks of a broken creation, he sees everything in the universe united and made whole in Christ.

“Start now,” Paul urges. “Be at peace with one another now. Settle your differences by letting Christ’s peace be umpire in your hearts. His peace can settle your troubled souls and everything that pulls you apart. And be thankful.” We can’t be thankful till “we count [our] many blessings, name them one by one.” And, we can’t do that in the spirit of petty dissension. We can’t make “a home in [our] hearts” for both. Some spirits can’t live together. There is no wedding of the message of Christ and a thankless, quarrelsome self-pity. “Don’t shut one another out,” the Apostle says. “Embrace one another. Teach and warn one another as you lift your souls in song to God, and sing with thanksgiving. Give thanks; don’t ever quit giving thanks.”

Paul cannot say it often or convincingly enough. “In everything you say, in everything you do, do it all in Jesus’ name, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” What has been left out? If everything we *say* and *do* is done in praise to God, what part of life is left over? What segment is not offered in worship to our Creator-Redeemer? Paul’s faith is radical (“going to the root”) in that he sees the totality of life turned into worship.

One of the most deadly concepts sold us in the ideological marketplace is that of the segmentation of life. It divides your life and mine into compartments labeled “sacred” and “secular,” then identifies God with the “sacred” and the world with the “secular.” In the sphere of the “sacred” God rules, and the teachings of Christ are relevant. In the sphere of the “secular” blind “laws” are operative, and a “wall of separation” is erected.

Conscience is relieved when those so-called “laws,” along with their consequences, are emasculated and rendered impersonal. They can then be spoken of in “objective” terms, such as “the law of supply and demand” or “the law of justice.” It sounds like “the law of gravity,” doesn’t it? It’s supposed to, as if we had nothing to do with “supply,” “demand,” the interpretation, interruption or execution of “justice.” We can embrace the myth that all these things operate on their own, and if they are destructive, that’s not our fault. They are expressions of the rebel “powers and principalities” that rule the “secular” world.

Further yet, our time and work are divided into “public” and “private” spheres, then work is identified with the “public” and worship with the “private.” Secularized work is labeled “the rat race,” “the salt mines” and “the grind.” One Saturday before

“Labor Sunday” a lady asked me, “What are you preaching on tomorrow?” I answered, “Glorifying Our Daily Work.” “Glorifying Our Daily Work?!?!” she exclaimed. “I despise mine!” Many of us ought to change our work or our attitude toward it. Most of our waking hours are spent in work... or at work. For all practical purposes that ‘s most of our life. The time of our lives is what makes them up. My time is “me.” It’s my energy, my mind, my hands, my creation all wrapped up and traded to somebody for something. My money is “me,” because it’s my life poured out somewhere, my life and work compacted and made portable.

What I do with the stuff I hold in my hands on payday and put in my pocket is my decision. Part of it I take to the market. A part of my life I trade for food. Part I parcel out in little pieces of paper called “checks” and mail to the power company, auto dealer and school bursar. Part of my life I take to the movie house, race track, liquor store, soup kitchen, hospital, church house, or whatever I choose and trade it or give it away.

In the past I’ve made choices, good and bad, that determine where I pour out most of my life. Right now, though, I choose the spirit in which I do it. I can make it pain or joy, the glory or the grind. Paul has more to say about work a bit later, but now he says, “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the father through Him.”

On Sunday we offer symbolically what we’ve been offering up to our Lord all week long. The minor offering is what we have called “The Service.” The major offering is our work. Unless work is worship, most of our life is secularized, and the compartments hold. Christ has come breaking down these middle walls of partition, too. It is we whom we offer up in sacrifice to God. Not a burnt offering, unless it becomes a burnt-out offering, but “a living sacrifice,” says Paul in *Rom. 12:1*, “which is your spiritual worship.”

It takes the wealth of wisdom in the message of Christ and the power of the Risen Lord to offer all of life in thanksgiving to God. It is that wisdom and that power which surge through His Body, the Church. Yet, this is a Body in which the members do not operate on electronic signals from a cosmic computer. We’re in process, still learning and growing as stewards of God’s grace-gifts.

Christ and the Social Orders

Consequently, Paul moves now to look at the orders of life when they are made captive to the spell of Jesus, shot through with His glory, and operative by His wisdom and power. We turn to 3:18—4:1:

Wives, live in such submission to your husbands as in fitting in Christ. Husbands, love your wives and stop being harsh with them. Children, be completely obedient to your parents, for this is pleasing to the Lord. Parents, stop exasperating your children, that they may not lose heart. Slaves, be fully obedient to your earthly masters, not merely when they are watching, as if you meant only to please them, but sincerely, because you reverence the Lord. Whatever you do, work for the Lord and not for people, knowing that your reward comes only from the Lord. It is the Lord Christ whom you

serve. Whoever wrongs another will suffer the consequences of that wrong, and there are no exceptions.

Masters, be just and fair to your slaves, knowing that you, too, have a master in heaven.

Verse 1 of chapter 4 is included in this section, because it evidently belongs, concluding the section on new relationships within the orders of life. Here are the two orders in Paul's day that Christians could do something about: the home and work, or family and labor. He does not include the state, the military, mass media, public education, public welfare, art, such social, political and cultural institutions as powerfully impact our lives daily.

Responsibilities under totalitarian and democratic regimes are not identical, as Christians divided by Iron and Bamboo Curtains learned. Colossians and Laodiceans could not vote the emperor in or out. The slave issue was not on the ballot. They had no say in the size of the military budget, the nature and quality of education, public welfare, mass media, art, or the place of women and children in society. Today we decide to limit our influence by backing out of the decision-making process, but in Paul's day there was no such option. Therefore, he encouraged creation of right relationships where Christians had the power to help bring them about.

Family Obligations

Both at home and in labor the Apostle points out mutual obligations. He begins with the home. Members of the family have claims on one another. Each owes the others love and respect. Paul's general rule of "submission" is given in a parallel passage In *Ephesians* 5:21 immediately preceding his injunction to wives: "Submit yourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ." It is in this context of mutual submission that Christian wives are called upon to be submissive to their husbands as the family-leader.

It's true that in the culture of the day wives were expected to give submission, and were punished for any perceived lack of it. They had no "women's rights," just as there were no "children's rights" or any "bill of rights for slaves." Christians could not overtly revolutionize the social order, but they could begin to live in a way that, if permitted to survive, could make the orders of life pulsate with the power of Jesus, breathing His breath in every relationship.

If one insists that Paul's view was itself a product of the culture, let him or her go on to explain how such a limited view can catch a vision so splendidly revolutionary. Undoubtedly, the implications of it must be worked through in day-to-day living, and Paul would have hardly seen them from the beginning.

Peter needed a vision from heaven to help him see the nature of a Family with Jew and Gentile distinctions all gone..., and for three years he had lived with Jesus. It was a struggle for the early Church to let the wall fall and embrace one another across humanly-devised barricades. So, today we yearningly search for more light to break forth from the Word. Still, soon or late we'll come with Paul to say, "For all of you who were

united with Christ in baptism have been clothed with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (*Galatians* 3:27-28).

The relation of husbands and wives is a volatile one today, and no details of how the wife is to be submissive are given in the text. They must be wrought out in a loving relationship. Homes differ, and in them the division of duties and sphere of authority will not be identical. If “Christ is all in all,” there will be no grasping for position (Cf. *Phil.* 2:5-8) by husband or wife. Nor will there be knee-jerk resistance to the spiritual authority coming from either.

Phillips translates the injunction, “Wives, adapt yourselves to your husbands.” While “adapt” hardly seems to be a literal translation of the word “submit,” it does capture the spirit in this context. It suggests the pliability and vulnerability on the part of all who share in it.

Paul is more specific about the husband’s response. In direct conflict with the culture, he urges love and tenderness. “Stop being harsh with them.” Harshness may have been all too common, and the Apostle seeks an entry for gracious care. In *Ephesians*, which may be the Laodicean letter coming later, Paul urges, “Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for it” (5:25). There is no greater submission than total self-giving. It is not squeezed up and out by resolutions, but is a grateful response to the incredible Gift. Paul does not speak to every husband, but to those captured by the Cross and empowered by the Resurrection.

Nor does he speak to non-Christian parents and children. The motive to which he appeals as he calls on children to obey their parents is, “for this is pleasing to the Lord.” Assuming that Christian parents care, he says, “Stop exasperating your children, that they may not lose heart.” Undisciplined children reflect no glory upon God, but neither do insensitive parents. They certainly do not reflect the self-giving of Jesus. There is no code of household conduct given. There is the attempt to focus the family on Him who holds all things together and will in His Resurrection-power make their home a kindergarten of heaven.

It is in the home where the vocabulary of heaven is learned. God is our “Father.” “Christ is our “Brother.” We are “sisters” and “brothers” to one another in the “Family” or “Household” of God. It is tragic when we so “exasperate” one another that we not only “lose heart,” but destroy our vocabulary. It is said that Martin Luther could not say the Lord’s Prayer without a shudder, because of what his father had done to him. God’s mercy drew him, anyway, but it might have been with much less pain had his home been a refuge of care.

Labor Relations

Finally, Paul addresses slaves and masters, giving more attention to slaves than masters, children, parents, wives or husbands. This may have been because there was a slave dear to him, his son in the Gospel, whose fate was at that moment uncertain. If Onesimus’ life is spared and he again serves Philemon, Paul wants him to do so as the “new man” he is in Christ, and not the old man who ran away.

Paul has been severely criticized for his counsel. He tells slaves to “be fully obedient to your earthly masters” and “not merely when they are watching.” This “quietistic” ethic causes those in power no trouble. The *status* remains *quo*. The passage, therefore, is dubbed a bastion

of support for the institution of slavery, with the charge that were it strictly followed, slavery would be with us yet, baptized and sanctified by the Church.

Granted, the criticism carries weight. Paul's counsel would never have led to Civil Rights demonstrations and more equitable laws in our land. Nor would it ever lead to the abolition of Apartheid in South Africa. How shall earnest, humanitarian Christians who respect the authority of Scripture deal with counsel such as this? Is it by surrendering to the slave system? A closer look at the text shows that Paul did not. What he did was to recognize brute facts and point to a way to live triumphantly in the midst of them. It's likely that the Church was composed largely of slaves, Philemon as a master being the exception. Since they were powerless militarily, politically and socially, they were forced either into suicidal rebellion or some kind of life within the system. Paul tells them how to live that life victoriously.

Substantially what the Apostle urges is, "Be totally responsible, but know that your ultimate responsibility is to God alone. It is out of reverence to God that you do quality work. Work faithfully whether your master is present or not, for you are working for the Lord, not people, and your reward is coming from Him."

Ironically, it is from Paul's counsel to slaves that Christians in all times and places can glimpse the vision splendid of what their work can be. In a situation such as this, if work can become an offering to God, it can be turned into worship anywhere. For worship is not wholly in the act, but in the heart, not fully in the what, but in the why.

A crumpled dandelion in a grubby little hand is joyfully accepted when held up with the words "It's for you, Mommy." So our Father can delight in a Brother Lawrence washing pots and pan "to the glory of God." And His servant can say, "I feel as close to God in my kitchen as I do taking the holy sacrament."

"Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage," nor can a slave's shackles on one made in the image of one's Creator keep that one from living and working creatively. Today's assembly line can be as dull and deadening as life in a Georgia chain gang or Siberian labor camp. Yet, those whose gift includes turning work into worship not only move from drudgery to joy, but bring light to a dark place for others who can see. A tremendous deed, therefore, on Paul's part is to transform the situation from within.

Second, he lays the ground for its transformation from without; and the ultimate abolition of slavery. He does it without direct assault on the system, but through a revolution of relationships within it. Master and slave are "brothers" and "sisters." They have the same "Father" and are accepted equally in His "Family." They come to His "Table" on a common level. Then they go to their work with mutual responsibilities. Masters, as well as slaves, are both reminded that they have "a Master in heaven." Their treatment of one another is His concern, and both work under His careful eye.

There is a spirit let loose here too big for the slave system. Like new wine in old skins, its ferment finally bursts bonds too brittle for its restless power. In this old oppressive social order Paul opens a window to let in the winds of God, and the Resurrection-power of Jesus Christ begins its creative work of making all things new.

Even more than in this letter, the little note Paul sent in the hand of Onesimus, which now rests in our bible under the slave owner's name ("Philemon"), breathes the air of freedom. It shows that Paul expected Philemon to send Onesimus back to him to serve him in the name of the Master they all served.

Colossians does not tell us how all the orders of life can and will be transfigured. It tells us that they *will* be and gives glimpses of beginning in Century 1. The Spirit of the living Lord is with us still, working still, moving into forbidden social, economic, political, educational, military, mass media realms. "Powers and principalities" fight hard to push it out, bar the doors and lock the windows, but it will not turn away. Slowly, at times imperceptibly, its ferment cracks open another system and penetrates a new order.

Our Heritage

Heirs of the Restoration Movement ought not to be ignorant of the vision. It was none other than Alexander Campbell who grasped it in the movement's early days. It possessed him so fully that he abandoned his pugilistic paper called *The Christian Baptist* and launched an irenic one known as *The Millennial Harbinger*, whose name points directly to the dream.

This great soul, with all his erudition and academic reserve, passionately believed that God's will shall "be done on earth as it is in heaven." Nor did he believe that God must abandon His effort through the Cross and resort to the method of the Caesars to bring in the Kingdom. In the very beginning of His ministry Jesus rejected the temptation to use such physical force, and the Father will not succumb to it in the end.

It will be through the believing, teaching and accepting of the Gospel that the power of Christ penetrates the whole world. Religion, education, politics, all society will be remade through Him. The Kingdom in its fullness will be ushered in and God's will have its way with the world. So Campbell was convinced.

A divided Church, though, can never speak authentically and persuasively to a divided world about the world's division and the unity God seeks for Creation. Consequently, Campbell moved to eradicate the Church's contradiction between life and message, form and dream. He called for the unity of all Christians, as Jesus prayed (*John 17:20-23*) that the world might believe that the Father did send Him. As God's glad harbinger Campbell worked in the Church.

Next, he moved into the arena of Education. Not only did he edit *The Millennial Harbinger*, but in Bethany, West Virginia, founded, became president of and taught in Bethany College. The influential order of Education must be captured by Christ. Furthermore, unwilling to limit his efforts to the Church and Education, he entered the West Virginia legislature to work in the Political Order. It is here that wide-ranging decisions for the common good or ill are made. If political life is exempt from the domain of Christ, then a major area of life is voluntarily surrendered to the "powers and principalities," "the rulers of this world's darkness." Campbell refused to have it so.

It may be that he was too optimistic about history and its possibilities. It does not appear either from a look at history or Scripture that the Kingdom will ever fully come in time. However, to conclude that progress is impossible and turn this world over to Satan is the grossest abandonment of our stewardship of the "open secret" -- Christ in you! And it is the Spirit of this living Lord that Paul turned loose in the orders of his day wherever he found an opening. When no structural opening appeared, he brought to it the Spirit that would one day shatter the old structures and create new.

It is not likely that we shall do better in our time. To be at all faithful we pray as he did, "that I may know Him in the power of His resurrection and the fellowships of His sufferings," becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, attain to the resurrection of the dead" (*Phil. 3:10-11*).

5

GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE-- AUDACIOUS HOPE

Lingering At Leave-Taking

What do you do when you're saying "good-bye" to dear friends? You give them some final instructions. You may have done it already, but you do it again, because you want them to be sure to remember. If you are leaving, you may stand awhile on the doorstep and keep talking, knowing you must go and reluctant to leave. Who knows when you'll see them again or what will happen to either of you in the between times?

You begin the final ritual of the names. "I'm so glad Jean could come while we here. I wish George could have been with her. Tell Sam and Sarah we've got an extra bed, if they can stop by on the way to their folks at Thanksgiving. Let Jenny know we meant it when we said she could stay with us till she gets on her feet again." One after another the names come.

What's going on here? Is it that we must say something and don't know what, as it was when we first met? Then we said, "It's been a hot one, hasn't it?" or, "It looks a little like rain, but I guess we're in for a long dry spell." At first we don't know what to say, so we talk about the weather. However, if there is any connection from these little verbal cords we toss out, we then move to the names.

"Do you know so and so?"

"No, but I went to school with a girl who had the same last name. I wonder if they... No, I don't suppose... Do you reckon they could be related?"

"I once knew a fellow from your town. Well, we weren't close, but I knew him."

And, so it goes. This may be killing time. Or, it may be an exercise in discovery. Are there any cords, or enough cords, to tie these souls together? If any mutual interest surfaces, they keep trying to see.

When you're saying "goodbye" to dear friends, though, you're not trying to find out if there is anything to tie you together. You already know. Those cords are strong and many. They've been tightened over the years. It's because they are dear that you draw them tighter still. Too, there is always that possibility that you may not meet again, or that something can happen to one or both to pull you a space apart. So, even sub-consciously you cling and pull as tightly as you can. It's not killing time. Whatever you call it, it's not that.

Paul is not on their doorstep literally, but the time has come for him to say "goodbye" to the Colossians. So, he lingers at his desk, and Timothy, or whoever serves as scribe, waits. No longer does the Apostle see the Colossians as wives, husbands, children, slaves, masters. He sees them all together now as if gathered for a family portrait or clustered around the Communion Table. "They're waiting, Paul, as you know they will be when your letter is read to them." They're members of the Family, God's great Family, and Paul's family, and he wants to say a last word to them all.

Persistent Prayer

Here it is from 4:2-6:

Keep praying. Stay wide awake. Give thanks. At the same time pray for us that God will open a door for the Word and let us tell the open secret of Christ, for which I am in chains, that I may make it as clear as I ought.

Be wise in the way you live with outsiders, and make the most of your opportunities. Be gracious in your conversation, and winsome, that you may know how to answer everyone.

"Keep praying." That's safe enough to say to church folk, isn't it? Sermons on prayer (at one time, anyway) were the least controversial and the most popular of all. "Prayer" oozes from the pen, "Prayerfully Yours." It glides off the tongue, "I'll remember you in prayer." Occasionally it bites, "I'll *pray* for you!" But, for Paul this is the first of his last words. It must mean much more to him.

Paul's Christian experience began in an agony of prayer, as for three days and nights in Damascus he lay blind and excruciatingly alone. His ministry was born and nurtured in prayer, as he wrestled in an Arabian desert, not three days or forty days, but three years!

Lincoln commented that often he had been driven to his knees in prayer, for he had nowhere else to go. Paul knew that drivenness...in more jails than he could quickly remember: sick, hunted, hated, harried, driven to get the Gospel out faster and farther, needing more energy than his frail frame could supply. Prayer was his diet. It kept him going.

Therefore, when he comes to his most-important words of farewell, he says, "Keep praying." He knew something most of us don't know. I doubt that he could answer the questions much better than we: "How does God answer prayer? If He already knows our need, what's the point of telling Him? Can prayer change the weather? or the

condition of the sick, for that matter?" And, on they go. I know them and have asked them, too.

I have partial answers. But, I tell you, when for 33 days our oldest daughter in Intensive Care lay clinging to life by a frayed hair, I prayed...continuously..., asked the church to pray, called long distance to request prayer. Did it help? It certainly helped me. It deepened the church's spirituality and tightened its bonds of fellowship. It helped friends and relatives. Did it help our daughter? This I can never prove, but signs point to a complete ("miraculous"?) recovery. However, had she not surprised all who attended her, medical staff included -- had she died, would we have been able to say that prayer helped? I can't blithely answer, "O, yes," but I do believe that through it God would have pressed close, held us tight, assured us of His love for her and us, and let us know that He ached, too.

"Pray on, and don't lose heart," Jesus encouraged His disciples in *Luke* 18. He thought it made a difference. Otherwise, it was foolish to spend all night in prayer, as He occasionally did. Finally, in Gethsemane He knew it makes a difference even when the cup doesn't pass.

Mary Queen of Scots said, "I fear nothing as much as the prayers of John Knox." Ah, both fear and hope are born of prayer, and with the wound unhealed I have known myself borne up on the prayers of others long after my little strength was gone.

"Keep praying," but, Paul properly adds, "Stay wide awake." Jesus' disciples failed to do so that fateful Thursday night in the Garden, and the memory of their shame burned in their souls. If we are to be there for others, we must stay awake. If we are to escape the danger of prayer, we must stay awake. Be sure you want what you ask, for it is written, "He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their souls" (*Ps.* 106:15).

There's high voltage in our unprotected hands. Here is the awesome reality that we become like the One to whom, or that to which, we pray. If our god is too small, too partisan, and too parochial, in prayer we become spiritual pygmies and shriveled bigots, made in the image of our god.

Continuous Thanksgiving

"Give thanks," Paul adds, joining thanksgiving to prayer, not as a note tacked on to the end, but as a note that sings and soars throughout a song that without it will fall dead. He cannot imagine going to the Throne without a heart spilling over in gratitude for God's "amazing grace." What is prayer without thankful praise but holding up a beggar's cup? And, what do we seek? the Almighty and All-Loving Companion, or coins in our cup?

It's as if Paul knows that in continued prayer they will be lifting up one another, lifting up "kings and all those in authority, that we may lead peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (*1 Tim.* 2:2). Then, he adds, "Remember us." "Pray for us that God will open a door for the Word..." Elsewhere he speaks of such a door, a door that lets the Gospel through into rooms where it has never gone, to people who have never heard.

Luke tells how God "opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" (*Acts* 14:27). Paul tells the Corinthians he wants to spend some time with them later, "but, I will stay on in Ephesus till Pentecost, because a great and effective door has been opened to me, and I have many adversaries" (*1 Cor.* 16:8-9). In his second letter to Corinth he writes, "...I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me..." (2:12). Now he seeks another, greater door ajar in Rome, right at Caesar's doorstep. If only this "ambassador in chains" can utilize his time in telling that new, new "Story of Jesus and His love!" "The open secret of Christ," he again calls it, "for which I am in chains, that I may make it as clear as I ought." "Pray for us that this can happen here in Rome."

It's improbable that Paul seeks prayer for increased oratorical skills. It could be that as a prisoner he asks for courage not to quaver or ever mumble when, because of his message, he is brought to trial. It could be that he yearns so fervently for people to see his marvelous Lord and thrill to the prospects of a world nestled in His arms and wrapped with His glory, that he asks, "Cling to the hem of God's garment for me, asking Him to help me help them see."

Wise And Winsome Witness

But, the Lord's harvest does not happen only in Rome. It is going on, as surely, there in Colossae, among Colossian relatives and friends, neighbors and townspeople. "Be wise in the way you live with outsiders, and make the most of your opportunities." Paul points to lifestyle evangelism. The way one lives is a witness for or against Jesus Christ and His Reign.

Each of us is a witness... to something. Remember the old question, "If you had three wishes, what would they be?" Have you ever taken this seriously enough to identify what it is that is most important to you? If you can identify one of those three wishes right now, do it, and then answer another question, "What have you said or done about that this last week?" Anything? What? You have said and done a lot, but what have you done about this that is the most important matter in your world?

What we have said and done is our witness, and most of the time we are unconscious witnesses. Our need as Christians is to move from unconscious to intentional witness. So, Paul would sensitize the Colossians to the power of lifestyle evangelism, and have them become intentional, rather than unconscious, witnesses.

Then he adds, "and make the most of your opportunities." Here we need to raise a caution flag. There is a kind of self-righteous rationalization abroad that says, "I can't say anything. I just let my life speak for me." In the first place, it is exceedingly difficult to tell most church folks from the rest of society. That means that their lives witness, but they don't witness decisively to anything beyond the national culture-religion. It means that their lives don't point clearly to Jesus Christ and His dream for the world, but at best are ambiguous.

Even God had to say something! Had actions not required interpretation, there would have been no need for One called "the Word." It's all too true that words are so often substituted for deeds they become cheap. It's all too true that in a deed-hungry and

word-weary world words "without works are dead." It, also, remains that the best works without words are ambiguous.

"Make the most of your opportunities," wherever and whatever they are -- word and deed. That's the Christian responsibility. At times there are no appropriate opportunities to speak. Wisdom dictates silence. Harangues in the name of Jesus are worse than useless. but, there are nearly always opportunities to speak with wisdom and care. Seize them.

A word already spoken may echo in the deed and invest it with power. Peter calls on wives to "be submissive to your husbands, so that if any of them do not believe the word, they may without talk be won over by the behavior of their wives" (*1 Pet.* 3:1). Doubtless, such deeds are genderless.

The Greeks had a statue to "Opportunity," a woman with a long forelock and the back of her head bald. Symbolically it said, "Opportunity can be seized only as it comes. Once it is past, there is no way to pull it back." Opportunities for both word and deed come in droves. The move from unconscious to intentional witness opens one's eyes to see.

Paul considers conversation an integral part of one's way of life. To "be wise in the way you live" is to "be gracious in your conversation, and winsome, that you may know how to answer everyone." We not only adapt personally to others, but we take care to adapt our speech. It's possible to win an argument and lose the person. Words can silence that do not convince. Paul does not say prepare to answer every argument, but to "answer *everyone*." That is not done unconsciously, but intentionally.

Fond Remembrances

Now comes the point where Paul stops giving his final instructions and moves to the names. He is not, however, on the doorstep taking leave. He cannot touch the hand and see the glistening eye. So, there in his cell he visualizes their faces. He does what I call "thumbing through the old directory."

There are different kinds of church directories. There are those in black and white, with names, addresses, and telephone numbers. After you've been away from the congregation awhile, most of the people sort of blur off into space. "I can't recall much about them," we say, "I know they were around, but I don't remember what they looked like or anything they did."

Then came pictorial directories. A few are tremendously helpful. They not only show faces in living color, along with street addresses and phone numbers. They include vocations and special interests. That's the kind I like best, though I suppose that Colossae had never invited Olan Mills over to do one. Yet, it is the very kind Paul saw in his mind and took time to thumb through, postponing the completion of this letter.

First, we thumb slowly, eyes resting on each familiar face for a few, sometimes several, moments. He or she or we stop to reminisce with one another, all of us friends who were there together or have over the years come to know one another somewhere

else. Then we begin the "names," linked to the "remembers." "Remember Phoebe? how she used to wear her hair in that little knot right up on top of her head?"

"Remember Lucius? The last time I saw him I thought he looked a little tired from the battle." "Yes, I think he's definitely beginning to break." "Remember Mary? I declare, I don't think she got a day older in three whole years."

So it goes. Paul could say, "Remember Nympha? I understand the church meets in her house now." Epaphras responds, "Yes, she was among our first converts in Colossae." Then smiling, he could add, "I suggested her home as one of our meeting houses, and she agreed right off." He continues, "It's a wonder how she makes room for everybody in that little house church. Most sit on the floor, of course, and she still scurries about trying to see that they're all as comfortable as they can be, squashed together like that. She's quite a lady. The young folks love her, because she mothers them all to death."

"Remember Archippus? He's got lots of potential, can make a powerful witness for the Lord right there at home, but he seems shy? Epaphras, you know him best, and I suppose, Onesimus, you knew him some. Would you say he's a bit too timid right now for the most-effective ministry?"

Warm Introductions

Finally, Paul stops his mental thumbing through the old directory and announces, "We'd better finish the letter. Tychicus, Onesimus, we've got to get you two on your way, but I need to introduce you, Tychicus, and make sure you are both welcomed. Write this," and here are his words from 4:7-9:

Dear Brother Tychicus, whom I love, my faithful fellow-servant in the Lord, will tell you all about me. I'm sending him to you to bring you news of us and to cheer your hearts. With him is Onesimus, a faithful and dearly-loved brother, who is one of your own number. They will tell you all that is going on here.

Tychicus and Onesimus take with them three letters, possibly four: this letter called "*Colossians*," the one we now know as "*Philemon*," another called "*Ephesians*" (*Eph.* 6:21-22), and, possibly, a letter now lost to be delivered to the Laodiceans (*Col.* 4:16). It is, also, possible that the Laodicean letter may have been the one we know as "*Ephesians*." That Paul entrusts to these two messengers this wealth of personal correspondence demonstrates his unqualified faith in their integrity.

For a long time Tychicus has been a close and trusted companion of Paul, leaving his home in the province of Asia to go with the Apostle on the last leg of his third missionary journey (*Acts* 20:4). Apparently he is in the company when they go to Jerusalem, carrying a special contribution from the Gentile churches to help minister to Jewish Christians suffering from famine.

Five times the name of Tychicus appears in Scripture (*Acts* 20:4, *Eph.* 6:21, *Col.* 4:7, 2 *Tim.* 4:12, *Tit.* 3:12). First he appears as Paul's companion, and then in four other

passages his special emissary. To the Colossians he is introduced as "Dear Brother," one "whom I love," "my faithful fellow-servant in the Lord." If they care for Paul, they will care for one so dear to him and so fully trusted by him. Literally Tychicus is called a "faithful *diakonos*" (διακονος) or "minister" and "fellow-slave" (*sundoulos*, συνδουλος), *sun* being "with" and *doulos* "slave." As completely as Paul, he has surrendered to Christ as Lord and Master. Knowing the Apostle intimately, he can not only tell the Colossians all that is happening to Paul in prison, he can interpret for them what it means, as well as share Paul's plans, his hopes, his dreams,

He "will cheer your hearts," writes Paul. He has good news for them. At this time Paul expected to win his case in court and be set free to continue his ministry (*Phil.* 2:24, *Phi.* 22). That Tychicus can tell them. Too, he can add his own wisdom and spiritual insight to the letters he carries and encourage these people to stand firm in the face of persuasive, but false, teaching.

"With him is Onesimus," says Paul, then characterizes him in similar language as "a faithful and dearly-loved brother." He makes no reference whatever to the fact that he was once a slave among them, but says simply, "who is one of your own number." There was a great deal more to say, but Paul puts that in a private letter to Philemon. He will not embarrass Philemon before the whole congregation or use the church to pressure him into letting his slave return to help Paul.

Since run-away slaves were always in danger of being captured by slave hunters, Onesimus would be in the company of Tychicus, who could vouch for him and explain that at the very moment he is on his way back to his master.

The two of them "will tell you all that is going on here." By associating these two Paul uses every skill at his command to show his utter confidence in Onesimus. A slave will soon tell the church of his meeting Paul and his conversion by him, as well as report on the fate of the church in the Empire's capital city!

As Paul dictates these comments about Tychicus and Onesimus, companions with him chime in, "Remember me to them." "And me." "And me, too." "Give them my greeting." "Say 'hello' for me." No one wants to be left out. So Paul begins with the "names" on this end, and says (4:10-15):

Aristarchus, Christ's captive, like myself, sends greetings. So does Mark, Barnabas' cousin, about whom you received instructions. If he comes to see you, give him a warm welcome. Jesus, also called Justus, greets you. These are the only Jews working with me for God's Kingdom, and they have been a great comfort to me. Epaphras, another of your own number, servant of Jesus Christ, sends his greetings. He regularly wrestles in prayer for you, that you will stand mature, with firm conviction about God's will for you. I assure you that he works hard for you and for those in Laodicea and Hierapolis. Luke, our doctor and dear friend, and Demas, ask to be remembered to you. Remember me to our fellow-Christians in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church that meets in her house.

Only three Jews were with Paul during this crucial time of his imprisonment. The ache in his words are evident when we look at Moffatt's translation: "these are the only comrades in the work of God's realm, belonging to the circumcised, who have been any comfort to me." There were many Jewish Christians in the Church in Rome, as Paul's letter to the *Romans* clearly evidences, but they were giving no support to him in his hour of need.

Three valued friends were standing by him: Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus Justus. Till now we didn't know that a man named "Aristarchus" was a Jew! We knew that he was a Macedonian from Thessalonica (*Acts* 19:29; 20:4). He was with Paul in Ephesus and accompanied him on his voyage to Rome (*Acts* 27:2). He is called "Christ's captive, like myself." He may, also, have been a captive of the state, but the words seem to point to a spiritual, rather than political, captivity.

Mark is the young man that turned back and went home in the midst of the first missionary journey of Barnabas' and Paul. At Perga in Pamphilia he left for his home in Jerusalem. When Barnabas wanted to include him on the second missionary tour, Paul refused, and these two great souls parted company. Barnabas took his kinsman with him, and his faith in Mark is now seen to be justified. Having been reconciled to Paul, Mark now attends the one who formerly refused his services.

What the Colossians had heard about him we do not know. It could be that the story of his early desertion dogged him even at a distance, though it seems unlikely that folks in Colossae had any specific information about that incident. At any rate, the church had "received instructions" about him, and Paul was eager that "if he comes to see you, give him a warm welcome." Doubtless, he would have been welcomed among Jewish Christians, where the name of Barnabas was well-known, at least, known well enough for Paul to mention him and gladly vouch for Mark as his "cousin."

Jesus Justus is mentioned only here, "Jesus" being the Greek rendition of "Joshua" and a common name among Jews. Though he was no biblical giant, not even a star player on this team, he was a faithful helper. We may be encouraged by the mention of his name, confident that God uses the little people when in faithfulness we allow ourselves to be called into His service.

These three were particularly precious to Paul. He loved his Jewish people and once said, "For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel" (*Rom.* 9:3). Despite all he had done to try to heal the breaches in the church, Jewish Christians generally mistrusted him. Some may never have forgiven him for his early persecution of them. Others considered him far "too liberal" in his understanding of the Law and its place in the Church. Here were three whose care lifted his heavy heart.

Paul now gives the greetings from his Gentile co-workers. First, he mentions Epaphras, the one who founded the Colossian church. They knew him well. About him he calls on the identical language he used in reference to Onesimus, "who is one of your own number." He links the slave with the one who brought them the gospel and called

them together as a community of faith. However, he goes on to tell them how hard Epaphras struggles for them, constantly holding them up in his prayers.

Then, he tells them the focus of those prayers, "that you will stand mature, with firm conviction about God's will for you." "He prays that you will not be moved from your faith by the false teachers who have come in." Whenever they are tempted to give in, they will remember, "Our esteemed leader, who has loved us and loves us still across the miles, is holding us up in prayer, wrestling for our souls."

Two others "ask to be remembered to you, Luke, our doctor and dear friend, and Demas." Luke has long been a traveling companion, a brother in Christ, and a careful historian. His detailed diary was used in writing *Acts*, the sequel to his story of Jesus in the Gospel bearing his name. Luke was, also, Paul's personal physician, whom he characterizes as his "dear friend." Here a note of tenderness creeps in that is not necessarily present in referring to one as "a dear brother."

Demas is the only one about whom Paul says nothing. To Philemon he lists Demas with the others in sending greetings and calls them all "my fellow-workers." Later he will have to write to Timothy (2 *Tim.* 4:10), "Demas has deserted me, because his heart was set on this present world."

One writer suggests that Demas may have been the amanuensis (the scribe) who actually penned the letter. Modestly he would place his own name last without praise. That may be. It may, also, be that by the time Paul writes *Colossians*, he sees the sure signs of character decay and cannot bring himself to commend Demas as "fellow-captive of Christ," "beloved brother," or "dear friend." If it is coming clear that all Paul's nurture is fruitless, he can do no more than convey Demas' greeting without censure or praise.

A Glimpse Inside One Christian Community

Paul himself wants to be remembered to Nympha. *The King James Version* reads, "Salute Nymphas and the church in his house." Manuscripts vary between masculine and feminine forms of the name, along with their accompanying pronouns. Phillips and Moffatt follow the KJV, but all other recent versions that I have been able to consult use the feminine form, Nympha.

We know nothing more about this dedicated Christian, just that her or his home was the meeting place for one of the many house churches that made up the Church in one particular place. There is no record of church buildings as such until the third century. Consequently, it was necessary for homes to be opened for study and worship gatherings.

This particular house church was not the main Colossian body of believers, or the people who receive this letter would not be asked to greet Nympha and the house church meeting with her. Since this greeting comes between two references to Laodicea, it is commonly thought that Nympha's house church was part of the Laodicean congregation. Still, it would not be the main body there, for Paul sends a letter to the Laodicean church.

There is, however, still another possibility. Some see it suggested in the next verse, v. 16: "When this letter has been read to you, have it read, also, in the church at Laodicea, and make sure that you read the letter from Laodicea."

The third possibility is that Nympha and her house church were part of the church in Hierapolis, for, in v. 13 Hierapolis is mentioned along with Laodicea. Yet, there is no greeting at all to the church there, unless it is tucked in here. Like the question of the identity of the letter to Laodicea, the sex of Nympha and location of her house church remain unanswered questions.

From this short greeting we learn that Paul's letters were to be read aloud to the gathered group. *Anagnosthei* (Ἀναγνῶσθη) was the word that literally meant "to read" but its usage shows that it carried the meaning of "to read aloud." It was so used to indicate the public reading of Scripture in the Jewish synagogues (*Lk.* 4: 16; *Acts* 13:27; 15:21).

We learn, too, that unanswerable questions, such as those above, are not primary matters of concern. Much more important is the fact that the Church must never be identified with a building. It is the people, and they can meet wherever they choose. It is what takes place among them and with them that counts. Their faith must be centered in Christ, but in their common life they are to be a "household," a "family."

Verse 17 contains counsel for Archippus. There is no greeting, simply a single word of instruction: "See to it that you fulfill the ministry with which you were entrusted as the Lord's servant." Some take this as a public rebuke. However, if Paul would not rebuke Philemon or embarrass him, it's hard to see why he would make Archippus the exception.

In *Philemon* 2 Paul calls Archippus "our fellow-soldier," connects him with Philemon and Apphia, and refers to "the church that meets in your home." It is thought by many that Archippus was the son of Philemon and Apphia, and that he was the minister of the church, having taken the place of Epaphras when he left Colossae and found Paul, perhaps in Ephesus, possibly in Rome. Whether it is this ministry (διακονία) or some other, Paul sends a double message.

First he wants to encourage Archippus, to remind him that his ministry is legitimate, one "with which you were entrusted as the Lord's servant." Every minister wrestles with the genuineness of his call. Particularly in his youth when the first flush of joy is past and the rigors of the task grow burdensome, one is tempted to discouragement. Archippus appears to be just such a young man. Paul wants to give his support, assuring him that he believes in him and believes that no one less than the Lord is counting on him, too.

Second, he wants the church at Colossae to know all this, as well. If Archippus was asked to serve in the place of Epaphras, either temporarily, or permanently, members need to give him full support. One thing that can quickly undermine his confidence is to have the congregation make unfavorable comparisons between their former and present ministers. As a skilled counselor, Paul deals with many problems obliquely. If it will, the church, from this word to Archippus, can learn that he needs encouragement and then see it as part of their own ministry to supply it.

In verse 18 Paul comes to the end of his letter. As was his custom (*Rom.* 16:22), he employs an amanuensis. In those places where he seizes the pen to write a concluding sentence and sign his name, he says so (*1 Cor.* 16:21; *Gal.* 6:11; *2 Thess.* 3:17; and here in *Col.* 4:18:

Parenthesis Closed

“This farewell greeting I write with my Own hand -- PAUL. Remember I'm in prison. The grace of God enfold you.” So ends this Scriptural gem.

The Colossians must know that the letter is genuine. Therefore, Paul picks up the pen himself. With his own hand he asks them to remember that he is in prison. That fact they know very well; therefore, he is not imparting information. He has already asked for their prayers, but it's good to remember not only the names of those for whom we pray, but their special needs.

Paul, still in chains, will soon be brought from prison to stand before the Emperor. He needs their prayers for his fidelity in the testing time. He has asked them to pray that he may be an effective herald of the Gospel, and he does not want them to forget. Nor does he hesitate to appeal to their emotions when he pleads, "Remember I'm in prison."

This is a letter of prayer. It was begun in prayer, saturated with prayer, and wrapped in prayer at its close. Paul ends as he began, lifting these dear souls up to God. Here is his announcement of blessing and his petition for blessing, "The grace of God enfold you."

Our first time together I tried to point to that grace, for that is really all we can ever do. It's too big to explain and too personal to hand bodily to another. Those who know it first-hand can, and do, witness to it. One modest witness that has made a comeback in our time is the old song "Amazing Grace." It ever continues to amaze us. It points to a mercy we cannot fathom and a power we know is not our own. In theological terms we can define grace as "forgiveness and power," but it is in our hymns that the message is carried more-powerfully to our hearts. We sing of that "forgiveness and power" as we pray:

Let the water and the blood
From Thy wounded side which flowed
Be of sin the double cure,
Save me from its guilt and power.

We testify to it as in the spirit of the Prodigal and words of the blind man cured by Jesus we sing:

I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

We marvel at it in the words of an old song that goes:

I stand amazed in the presence
of Jesus, the Nazarene,

And wonder how He could love me,
A sinner, condemned, unclean.
How marvelous! How wonderful!
And my song shall ever be,
How marvelous! How wonderful!
Is my Savior's love to me.

So, Paul closes the parenthesis of God's love about these precious people. In doing so he asks for them everything they can ever need and that God will, indeed, surprise them with joy all along the way.

Please, do not sell short this letter's last section. Don't hurry over the "names" and the "remembers." They let us in on the inner life of a real Christian "family." This is what God is trying to do with His world, and He needs a living example of it, something that the world can see, the "Family" into which the world may be enfolded and find the "home" they ever seek. In my judgment the Church of tomorrow will be the Church that has caught from its Lord His incredible care.

There is much to do to make it so. We will have to repent of and be delivered from our compulsion for secrecy and glorying in individualism. Our relationship to Christ is always personal, but never private. His Dream is not for a collection of "saved"-but-unrelated "souls." It is for the incarnation of His Spirit in a Covenant People. "Unity" and "maturity" are the natural fruit of the Gospel.

I was brought up on the book of *Acts*, particularly chapter 2. I knew how to prove that baptism is "unto the remission of sins." I knew that many people got hung up the tongues of fire, which appears to be the most dramatic part of the chapter. I could quote much of the text. Then, one day in David Lipscomb College by the grace of the Z. T. Sweeney family I was given a three-volume set entitled "*New Testament Christianity*," which had a staggering impact on my understanding of the nature of the Church.

Isaac Errett in Vol. I has a sermon simply called "The Fellowship." In it he asks, "Why do we talk about restoring the New Testament Church, while we neglect the very heart and soul of it? the nature of its life?" Then, he points to the *koinonia* ("partnership," "fellowship," "communion," "joint-participation") in its common life. As one, wanting to recapture the dynamic of that beginning, I was staggered by a blow from which I have never recovered.

Time and again I've asked myself, "With most of the population of America claiming membership in church, why do we not, like the early Christian Community, 'turn the world upside down?'" I know there are a bushel basket of responses: "They don't really belong to the 'true' Church;" "They aren't fully committed;" and on and on. Glosalalia folks say, "They don't have the Spirit, and can't speak in tongues." Other Charismatics, "They don't possess the gift that captured the folks of Jesus' time; they can't heal."

I'm not here to argue for or against any of these positions. I say simply that the people of our culture are not going around, shaking their heads, exclaiming, "Look how these Christians love one another!" That will have to happen again before the world

takes us seriously. But, it is not likely to happen as long as we mimic the Church of the Dark Ages, instead of the beginning.

What was "the Church of the Dark Ages?" The institution that defined the Church as its "bishops." Ordinary people, shut out of the hierarchy, were really shut out of "the Church." They did not exist as a "community." Their relationship to God was actually private and direct...through the priesthood. Their responsibility was to take the sacraments and financially support the institution.

Given this individualism, there was no need to draw the people together in fellowship. Their fellowship was to be with the Lord by means of the Eucharist and prayer. Churches were built so that worshipers never had to see one another's faces, only the backs of their heads. Salvation "through the Church" was in part God's legalistic decree for those who approached Him in the "right" way. It was partly magic, in that God infused grace into their souls when the right people said the right words over them and did the right things with and for them.

This is about as far from the Church Paul knew and for which he worked as anything we can imagine. Yet, we follow along in building as church houses miniature Gothic cathedrals. I have served in them virtually all my ministry, preaching a doctrine of the Church that the architecture kept shouting down.

Not only that, but our practice of turning the worship of the Church into private meditations must change. Even our "Communion" is largely private, despite the meaning of the word. If someone comes in, pushes past us on the pew, and steps on our toes, we're apt to think, "Why has this dolt come in here and ruined my worship?" "Family" (corporate) worship is not coming together at an agreed on time to carry on private devotions publicly choreographed.

The Church of the future will not be clergy-dominated. It will not be composed of members asking constantly, "What's in it for me?" It will not be religious consumerism baptized and institutionalized. It will have an abundance of "Go" structures, rather than virtually all "Come" structures.

At the same time, tomorrow's Church will be a "home" for its members. Today there is a kind of "homesickness" abroad. In an increasingly depersonalized world even banking institutions advertise, "Come, do business with us, where you are a real person, and not just an account number." People are weary of being "just an account number." Yet, in most of their relationships they have no choice, and they recognize the phoniness in a mammoth structure pretending to know and personally care for them, even if they call themselves "churches."

To some of us doctrine is vital, for we know when taken seriously it shapes us. Yet, it's not important to most people. They don't choose a church by its doctrine. Denominational labels mean nothing. They are searching for a group of people who care. The big questions have become, "Were we made to feel at home?" "Did they seem to want us?" "Do they care enough about our babies to provide a clean and attractive nursery?" "Do they care enough about our Youth to offer a dynamic Youth program?" "Do they care about ordinary people, or just the dough in the upper crust?"

Such seekers are ambivalent. They don't want merely a "maintenance" church, focusing solely on self. They want a "mission" church, one at least concerned with folks like them. The serious ones want to be challenged to something greater than they have known before. A half-concealed divine restlessness stirs within, even though their first questions do not give expression to it.

In my work with students and university staff I have heard many debates on whether "the church is relevant." "Church" was equated with "institution." I have never heard a debate on whether the *koinonia* is relevant, the "sharing" of love and life.

A handsome young husband and father was caught making obscene phone calls and sentenced to prison. When he was released, I was greatly concerned about whether he would return to our fellowship, and whether that fellowship would be open to him, if he did. I knew that I saw "the Church" when we gathered for worship, for he and his family were on the fourth row, surrounded by another young family whose integrity and ability were unquestioned. After the benediction others hurried to greet and welcome them "home."

I knew that I saw "the Church" when Don Clark (one of our laymen) took it on himself to begin calling to say, "Ed Gurganus is going to Iowa City to have a very expensive operation. He doesn't have the money, and his insurance has not promised to back him. They say that the surgery is experimental. Can you help a little?" I can't remember the amount collected, but it was enough to make the difference.

Months later Ed asked for a moment during what we called "The Concerns." I said, "Sure," thinking he wanted to express thanks for the help. He did, then held up a check for that same amount and said, "I am not paying back what you gave. You gave it, and I gratefully accept it. I'm so touched by your action that I want to do something similar, and I'm now able. I want to give this check as the beginning of a 'love fund' for others in like circumstance. Later if they can replace it, fine. We can keep the fund alive. If they can't, that's all right. It serves its purpose." A separate fund was created, and for 20 years "The Love Fund" has blessed many. It still lives and says, "When we say 'We Care,' you can know it's true."

A group of "Caretakers" emerged to pray for persons in special need, and to give whatever help we could, spiritual and material. We supplied our own funds, or at times, if the need was too big for us, went to the Christian Action Committee or Church Board. This group has not survived, but it was one of many attempts to help the church be about its business. I dare not say that it failed. When the Church takes seriously its mission, it continually critiques its life, concerns, resources, and opportunities.

A most-joyous and rewarding attempt to be the Community of Care was creation of what we called "The Disciples Covenant House." As a congregation in a university town we felt a special responsibility to incoming Students. The church bought a house close to our building, and opened it to Students covenanting to be responsible to one another and the congregation. Over the years we had scores of Students, including a number from abroad. One fateful night a Student delegation came to the parsonage, and challenged my family to come down and live with them. This was too much. Our responsibilities were to the whole church. Besides, we didn't know if at our age we could

take it. For weeks we struggled, through prayer, sharing our dilemma with church leaders, and asking for the counsel of trusted Christians.

By now the church owned four houses, one occupied by the elderly, one by married couples, the Covenant House, and the old parsonage, which for years had housed custodians. Finally, we moved into the (refurbished) old parsonage and began to be part of the "community." We took particular pains to see that we did not pull off from the church, but were more-fully immersed in its life.

I have time to tell you but a few of the consequences. Some of the Students became congregational leaders, including chairs of the various departments and committees. Their spirit of joy and dedication infected wider circles. A group first looked at skeptically was embraced and became a means of drawing the larger group more tightly. Years later the church is still blessed.

Older people bless the Students who looked after them, and Students come "home" whenever they can. Evelyn and I have people around the world who call us "Mom" and "Dad." At times they descend on us way down in Rogers, Arkansas. Any week we expect a visit from a Micronesian married last Spring. Nothing would do but that we come back to Iowa to share in the wedding. Evelyn was asked to be his "Mother." A round robin letter closes the circle among a goodly number of us.

I have known others as dear friends in many congregations, but nowhere else have I experienced as fully the *koinonia* of the early Church. At times it was expensive. Among dearest friends and family there are differences. We cannot in this situation, though, pull apart, do our own thing and go our own way. We have to work things through, and by the grace of God we do.

I'd like to tell you more, for I know most Christians say the early Church "experiment" in common life failed. Maybe. It did not continue in the Church at large, any more than the Sermon on the Mount and all those teachings of Jesus that in "the real world" are considered irrelevant. It's this "real world" that holds back the Kingdom, this "real world" that stoned the prophets and killed the Lord of glory, this "real world" doomed by Him who cries, "Look! I make all things new!" (*Rev. 21:5*).

He will. That is a part of Paul's "Good News." I hope that it becomes part of yours.

Above all, see Christ! See Him sufficient, sufficient to make us and then remake us, sufficient to reshape and vitalize all creation. See Him as in the Church through us He begins to realize Creation's end -- one grown-up Family in a brand-new world with everybody Home for thanksgiving.

My closing prayer for you is:

*May you be grasped by grace and wrapped in peace
by God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.*