

ALLIANCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Exegetical Paper on Colossians 1: 15-23

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I. Main Idea and Outline

This exegetical paper on Colossians 1:15-23 main idea is summarized as “Christians must move forward faithfully (1:21-23) because Christ, our model (1:18) who is Creator, superior to all other rulers and sustainers (1:15-20), reconciled us (the Church) and all creatures to God the Father through His death on the cross (1:18); that great Creator, Ruler, and Sustainer (the Lord Jesus) became visible (1:15a), was born as a human (1:15b), died and came back to life (1:18, 20), and all the while was brimming with Godness in his body (1:19; cf. 2:9), there are no other ways, such as a transcendent-ascetic approach to obtain spirituality and peace outside Christ.”

Outline

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II. Scripture diagram of Colossians 1: 15-23 (English Standard Version)

The Preeminence of Christ

15 He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation.

16 For by him all things were created,
in heaven and on earth,
visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions
or rulers or authorities—
all things were created
through him and for him.

17 And he is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.

18 And he is the head of the body, the church.

He is the beginning,
the firstborn from the dead,
that in everything he might be preeminent.

19 For in him
all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things,
whether on earth or in heaven,
making peace by the blood of his cross.

21 And you,
who once were alienated and hostile
in mind, doing evil deeds,
22 he has now reconciled
in his body of flesh by his death,
in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him,

23 if indeed you continue in the faith,
stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard,
which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven,
and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

III. Introduction

Colossians 1: 15-20 signified the preeminence of Christ, but at the same time the passage demonstrated a crucified-and-exalted Christ. The humble, crucified Christ is just as central to Colossians as the reigning, ascended Christ. Through knowing the level of rulers in spiritual realms, we know more about Christ's supremacy. Through knowing Christ's headship, we know more about the Church's nature. Through knowing God's plan for all creatures, we know more about the whole cosmos' destiny. Finally, in Colossians 1: 21-23 that leads us to reflect on how God's work of redemption impacted the Colossians, and how it should impact on today's Christians' life and role.

God's redemptive work started in Colossians 1: 12-14, which occurred in the incarnational fullness of God in Christ (1:14, 16, 19; 2:9-12), through whom (1:20) God effects the reconciliation of all things. Redemption then occurs through an incarnated life to the point of death-by-crucifixion and resurrection and exaltation (as in Phil 2:5-11).

IV. Context

● Historical-cultural context

The potential danger of the book of Colossians addressed was the false teachings and its influences for the Colossians. Paul wants to correct believers and redirect them back to the gospel of Christ. The false teachings are derived from Judaism, which require believers to

observe Jewish food codes and festivals. These false teachers taught believers to obtain ‘wisdom’ through their spiritual transcendent-ascetic practices without the need for following Christ’s model. Paul’s warning in Colossians 2:16-23 presented the following: 2:16-17: strict regulations for food/drink and festivals, 2:18-19: ascetic practices and transcendent/mystical worship, 2:20-23: sensory restrictions and ascetic practices in religious devotion. Gupta, Nijay K. called them the “transcendent-ascetic philosophy,”¹ having the six characteristics as follows:

1. A certain teaching, based on traditions that Paul does not support, has appeared in Colossae.
2. The teaching is marked by philosophical arguments.
3. The philosophy offers heavenly wisdom, knowledge, spiritual maturity, and protection from evil spirits.
4. The method of success focuses, at least in part, on ascetic practices that treat the physical body negatively and abstemiously, and requires strict adherence of particular dietary practices and festival observances.
5. This philosophy devalues the importance of Christ (either directly or by implication) in the pursuit of maturity and protection.
6. This philosophy has had enough of an impact on the Colossian community to cause Paul's concern for their stability.

Scot McKnight calls them the ‘Halakic mystics.’²

According Col. 1:16 ‘...all things were created through him and for him.’ Therefore, true Christian spirituality does not drive someone to certain practices and mantras in hope of

¹ Nijay K. Gupta, “Colossians,” in Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, (Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2013) (e-book), 16.

² Scot McKnight, “The Letter to The Colossians,” in The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2018), 219.

transcendence but to the very heart of the world that God so longs to redeem. In 2:4, Paul expresses his hope that no one would deceive them with “plausible arguments.” In 2:8-9, he urges them, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is head of every ruler and authority.”

- Literary context of Colossians 1:15-23

- a. Author’s flow of thought

- The Priority and Supremacy of Christ, 1:15-20

- Above All Powers, 1:15-17

- Leader of the Resurrection Church, 1:18

- Divine and Cosmic Peacemaker, 1:19-20

- A Call to Move Forward Faithfully in the Hope of the Cosmic Gospel, 1:21-23

- b. How Colossians 1:15-23 relates to the passage that precedes it and the one that follows it.

Colossians 1:15-20 is called supreme Christology in the New Testament, the passage that precedes it is Paul’s prayer for the church, and the passage that follows it describes Paul’s labor for the church. Many scholars believe this passage is a church hymn Paul inserted here for the purpose of explaining what is Jesus’ identity and what is Jesus’ redemptive work signifying in the Christians’ life of the Colossians.

V. Content

A. The Priority and Supremacy of Christ, 1:15-20

Many scholars think Col. 1:15-20 is an early Christian hymn or confession.³ It reflects an early Christian hymn or fragments of a hymn, or poetic lines. Gupta says “Paul did not desire to direct attention to the preeminence of Christ per se, but he established this supremacy to teach the Colossians that Christ is ever and always the solution to their fears and perplexities.”⁴ In 1:15-20, Paul argues for a supreme Christology. Christ is first in rank above all (1:15), he created all (1:16), he is before all (1:17), he is sovereign over the whole church (1:18a), he is victor over death itself (the enemy above all) (1:18a), and he is reconciler of all (1:20).

However, it is equally important to remember Christ as a human being. Gupta writes “The key for Paul was the balancing of Christ’s power and his (self-imposed, voluntary) weakness.”⁵ These two dimensions of Christ’s identity, namely, an exalted, cosmic Christ and a humble Christ whose body was broken and whose blood was spilt, can be also read in Philippians 2:5-11. God’s work of reconciliation is through Jesus’ blood and the cross, which Romans viewed as the symbols of weakness and shame. Based on the teachings of transcendent-ascetic philosophy, the physical body was disgraced and probably was a particular object of attack from evil powers. However, Paul argues that the body of Christ is not a hindrance, but a necessary instrumental means for redemption and reconciliation. Gupta described this body as “It took a human body, a member of the old age under sin and death, to confront death once and for all, but with a twist: this body would have the fullness of God, the mortal “as-good-as-dead” body of old Adam imbued with the resurrection life and fullness of the Creator God.”⁶

● Above All Powers, 1:15-17

³ Ibid., 133.

⁴ Nijay K. Gupta, 51.

⁵ Ibid., 53.

⁶ Ibid., 60.

To say Jesus is the image of the invisible God is to say that Jesus is the ‘exact representation’ of the invisible God (Heb 1:3). Scholars also made this image to connect with Jewish wisdom tradition as read in Prov 8:22. McKnight pointed out that for some Jews, the primary form of Wisdom revelation is the Torah, while for the Christians it is Jesus and the Spirit. He said, “These terms then come to be fulfilled in Christ: rule, revelation, Wisdom, and Torah.”⁷

For interpreting the four terms ‘thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities’, McKnight writes, “Most New Testament scholars, in clear difference with later theologians, do not see here an explicit ordering of the hierarchies of heaven, but a more generalized listing of potentates ... I read them as earthly, systemic manifestations of (perhaps fallen) angelic powers – hence, the systemic worldly, socio-political manifestations of cosmic/angelic rebellion against God.”⁸

● Leader of the Resurrection Church, 1:18

v. 18a “And he is the head of the body, the church.” It anticipates what comes in 1:18b – 20. The theme turns from creation to redemption or to new creation, by means of the Church. McKnight says, “the ‘head’ in this context is the one who grants and sustains life, while also creating a new kind of unity among the members.”⁹ v. 18b “He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.” The ‘firstborn from the dead’ refers to the resurrection, and the ‘preeminent’ describes his exalted status as a result of the resurrection.

● Divine and Cosmic Peacemaker, 1:19-20

McKnight speculates that “the halakic mystics at work at Colossae were boasting that they had found ‘fullness’ in their mystical encounters with the angels, leading to the inference

⁷ Scot McKnight, 148.

⁸ Ibid., 152.

⁹ Ibid.

that Paul's locating the 'fullness' in Christ is a polemical move against the mystics (cf. 2:8-9, 16-23)."¹⁰ The Son's redemption reconciles all things toward God, whose wrath against sin is the background for the concept. 'All things' includes things on earth and things in heaven, that all created things are included. Some interpreters have used this verse to argue for universal salvation: in the end, God will not allow anything to fall outside the scope of his saving love in Christ. Douglas J. Moo points out this belief cannot be reconciled with New Testament teaching about the reality and eternity of Hell. The meaning of v. 20 is tied to v. 2:15 that God, 'having disarmed the powers and authorities, ...made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.' Moo says, "The spiritual beings to which Paul refers explicitly in v. 20 are not saved by Christ but vanquished by him."¹¹ Then, Col 1:20 teaches "not 'cosmic salvation' or even 'cosmic redemption,' but 'cosmic restoration' or 'renewal.'"¹²

B. A Call to Move Forward Faithfully in the Hope of the Cosmic Gospel, 1:21-23

In this section, Paul discusses the personal effects of the crucifixion of Christ on the Colossians' past, present, and future. In the past, they were rescued from their dead ways in sin (1:21) and brought to new life. Their future (1:22) would involve an eschatological "presentation" before God, much like a sacrifice being inspected for blemishes. Their present occupation must be a steady course of following Christ in faith and patience in anticipation of the hope of future glory in him (1:23a).¹³

¹⁰ Scot McKnight, 161.

¹¹ Douglas J. Moo, "The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon," in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 134-135.

¹² *Ibid.*, 136.

¹³ See Nijay K. Gupta, 60,61.

Gupta writes, “Paul argues that flesh and body should not be done away with, but reclaimed in the service of God for the benefit of others (see Rom 8:3), and Christ climatically demonstrated this through his suffering and death (see 1 Pet 2:24).”¹⁴

The Colossians’ future (Col 1:22b) is the eventual judgment by God whereby they must demonstrate a changed life. To be properly prepared for this eschatological judgement, Paul urges the Colossians to hold steady in the faith preached to them (Col 1:23). The intent of the Father’s act of reconciliation is to ‘present’ the Colossians to himself in purity. McKnight explains that the act of presentation can be connected to a judicial act (justification at the final judgment) or to a cultic-sacrificial act of purity, or it could be more general.”¹⁵ McKnight is inclined to see more of an emphasis “on the eschatological judgment, at which God declares human beings (here the Colossians) “holy and without blemish” and “free from accusation.”¹⁶ That final judgment has already been accomplished in the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ and has been brought forward for the status and experience of humans in the here and now.¹⁷ He continues, “this process was accomplished on the cross, is now in process, and will be consummated in the kingdom.”¹⁸

McKnight discusses that “for some theologians the priority and superabundance of grace must mean grace is pure gift without conditions, ... However, Barclay’s study of both the Greco-Roman concept of gift and how gift/grace is used in Jewish sources has established that grace in Paul begins and emphasizes the incongruity, priority, and superabundance of God’s gift, but the entire context for Paul knew that those concepts did not rule out the perfection of grace he calls

¹⁴ Nijay K. Gupta, 63.

¹⁵ McKnight, 176.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

‘circularity’ – namely, that the gift is both given as a gift and summons the receiver of the gift into reciprocal responses of gratitude, faith, and obedience.”¹⁹

VI. Application

Under the current pandemic situation, with the fear of being attacked by COVID-19 virus, how can I move forward with the attitudes:

- Keeping the cosmic hope faithfully

God’s redemptive work is still continuing in process and its goal is to restore all things in Christ. Christians should keep faith firmly and believe Christ is the solution, no matter what kind of problems occur.

- Doing ministry, the humbly cross-way

As Michael J. Gorman used the term “cruciformity,” which means “conformity to the cross, to Christ crucified. . . . because the living Christ remains the crucified one, cruciformity is Spirit-enabled conformity to the indwelling crucified and resurrected Christ. It is the ministry of the living Christ, who re-shapes all relationships and responsibilities to express the self-giving, life-giving love of God that was displayed on the cross.”

To die with Christ may not mean dying physically, it means change our self-centered mindset toward a more Christ-like mindset. As John Stott said, “It may be . . . a death to comfort and ease, and a separation from home and relatives; or a death to personal ambition as they [Christians, but especially missionaries] renounce the temptation to climb the professional ladder, being content to remain in a humble servant ministry instead; or a death to cultural imperialism In these and other ways we may be called to “die” as the means to a life of fruitfulness.”

¹⁹ Ibid., 178.

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