

PREACHING TO COLOSSIANS

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During my years at Purdue University, I engaged in a series of evangelistic Bible studies. I do not remember how I stumbled onto my method, but I used it consistently for several years. Lesson 1 involved reading the Sermon on the Mount. I would begin by reading a paragraph and making some comments, followed by the other person reading a paragraph and making comments. The dialogical style continued until we finished the text. If all went well, we met again the next week and read Colossians together. I imagine I picked Colossians because of its grand christological vision and central theme of soteriology. Or maybe I chose it because it was short. Either way, that serendipity served to shape my faith and my love affair with the book. My homiletical teaching career has included an assignment in writing a sermon series in Colossians more than any other text in the canon.

Soteriology stands as the primary stance of the book. Sumney notes,

The writer's Christology emphasizes the exalted position of Christ to assure readers that their identification with Christ provides them with forgiveness and the proper relationship with God. The extensive attention Colossians gives to developing its Christology does not indicate that the readers have a defective Christology but that they have not recognized the implications of their Christology and of their identification with the exalted and cosmic Christ. Christology stands at the heart of this epistle, but always in the service of soteriological claims.¹

Sumney expounds on this claim by defining salvation in terms of forgiveness of sins, participation in Christ, liberation from the powers, and transformation of character.²

Paul's words are thick with theological content, thus tempting preachers to leap into topical preaching rather than follow the theological argument. Instead, we need to ask questions about how the significance of its theology orients and enables us to enter into the world of the text and join its flow. In the analysis below, I emphasize the function of the text by examining its rhetorical argument and narrational substructures.

¹ Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 13.

² *Ibid.*, 13–16.

Narratives Come First

Although Colossians does not rely upon narration to tell its story, it does allude to aspects of an underlying narrative universe that reveals Paul's understanding of reality. Beginning with narrative is an exercise in uncovering the historical context. Paul connects his story to the community's story, demonstrating how both are woven into the fabric of God's salvation story.³

Paul's Story: Paul is not as autobiographical in Colossians as he is in other writings, yet his story can be reconstructed (1:7–8, 1:23–2:5; 4:3–4, 12–13). The lack of detail about Paul's life is due to his limited personal association with the church. In 2 Corinthians 10:13–16, Paul defends his right as an apostle to preach in the territory assigned to him by God. For others to impose themselves upon his territory crosses the boundary of acceptable behavior and violates the rule (*kanon*) appropriate for missionary activity. Paul acknowledges that he is not the church planter at Colossae; he affirms Epaphras' role and aligns his position with his colleague (1:7–8). He intentionally connects his understanding of the gospel that redeemed and produced fruit in them with the same message they heard and believed (1:23). Paul's first argument intended to persuade the Colossians of his authority is a description of his desire and goodwill enacted on their behalf (1:24–2:5). Finally, the lengthy greetings at the end of the letter describe various overlaps between Paul's travels and companions. Although the gospel has been preached to the whole world (1:23), it is a small world after all (4:7–18). While Paul does not need a letter of recommendation to a church that he established (2 Cor 3:1–3), he relies here on the goodwill of the relationships that he and the Colossians share in common.

Colossians' Story: Paul begins where their story begins, recalling how they first heard the gospel and came to faith. The local story can be reconstructed (1:12–14, 18, 21–22; 2:11–14, 19; 3:1–4, 7–9). They were pagans who heard the gospel through the preaching of Epaphras. They believed his word and were baptized. The promise that God would reveal them with Christ in glory remained secure. God's cosmic plan of redemption found fruition in their lives. But something happened. The threat of intrusions foiled the plot-line. While Paul does not call them to repentance for yielding to false teachings, he does warn them of a looming threat.

The primary questions that plague interpreters reading Colossians revolve around the nature of the heresy and the identity of the heretics. Paul's Amber Alert gives us clues. "Three-year-old girl with blue eyes was last seen wearing a pink jumper. Look for a dark green Volvo going west on Hwy. 31." However, most of the story is not told. Why was she alone when she was picked up? Who abducted her? Why did someone grab her?" The options horrify us. The possibilities range from a desperate father in a custody battle

³ James W. Thompson, "Reading the Letters as Narrative," in *Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching: Reuniting New Testament Interpretation and Proclamation* (eds. Joel Green and Michael Pasquarello; Baker Academic, 2003), 86–87.

to a serial sex offender. The flashing alert on the highway warns us but does not provide any more details. Parental thoughts turn homeward. They double check the back seat, send a text to the childcare provider, and take a detour by the school in order to calm their racing hearts. The warning to help one little girl functions to heighten parents' vigilance for their own children.

Whatever the exact nature of the heresy is, we know it is an ominous menace (a "philosophy," 2:8) that affects faithfulness (2:6–7).⁴ The Colossians received Christ, but the impulse to expand their spirituality by going beyond the gospel became a potential target by outsiders. They are tempted to abstain from earthly desires of the body (2:16, 21–23), to practice self-abasement and false humility (2:18, 23), and to observe special days (2:16). More knowledge, insights, and heavenly visions of the mysteries of the cosmos (2:18) are dangled before their eyes. More spiritual experiences entice them. The possibility of participating in angelic worship practices (2:18) knocks on their door. The "philosophy" accentuates the feeling that something is missing in their relationship with God and offers tantalizing alternatives.

It is not that the Colossian heresy is beyond figuring out. The elusive nature of the teachings haunts us because it is so nearby, tempting our own desires for more. Colossae is not as far away as we thought, for it is our hometown. Downtown Colossae is just around the corner. The children of the Colossians play in our backyard. We worship together, marry one another, take vacations with each other, and buy plots on the same acreage. The insecurities we often feel about our relationship with God entice us to buy what the "philosophy" is selling.

Paul, therefore, writes an Amber Alert on their behalf. He writes a warning from the Surgeon General to protect their spiritual health. "The following lists of additives are known to cause disease." Paul states, "While the TV infomercial offers the moon, it is a hoax." Some spiritualities and religious additives harm your health. The lists of new spiritualities and dualisms reappear in some form in every generation. Groups claiming esoteric knowledge that leads to unseen heights of spirituality emerge in every culture. For example, "The body is evil and inferior to the soul." "I possess a secret to the hidden depths of God's will." "You have never experienced anything like it until you come and join us." "Our group has it all figured out." "Let me show you the god that is within you." And if we thought we were safe, be warned—it also happens at church.

God's story (seen through Israel and showcased in Jesus): Paul claims to have a secret knowledge too, a secret that is being shouted on every housetop, whispered loudly in the marketplace, and forwarded exponentially through the

⁴ On the one hand, Paul does not reprimand the Colossians for being guilty of heresy. The letter contains no direct evidence that the Colossians adopted the practices described in 2:16–23. On the other hand, Paul warns them against accepting the heresy. The present danger lurked close by and threatened their faithfulness (2:6). See Morna Hooker, "Were There False Teachers in Colossae?" in *God's Christ and His People* (ed. B. Lindars and S. Smalley; Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1972), 192–208.

internet. God's mystery is Christ (1:27; 2:3). Paul proclaims the secret openly in order to present the Colossians mature in Christ (1:28). The secret contained in the hope of the gospel, the hope of glory, is Christ living in them (1:27).

The Christ hymn (1:15–20) locates God's story as the metanarrative for Paul and the church. The gospel of Jesus Christ that Epaphras preached is God's story. The community often hears other stories and songs. The folk hymns of their parents and grandparents shaped their early childhood development. Those melodies hum in the background of their minds when they work, play, and dream. The local street vendor plays the newer tunes, the top ten of popular culture. Those tunes are cranked out into the streets from every storefront, inn, and café on Market Street. The song Paul teaches, the Christ hymn, calls the Colossians to sing a new lyric, a tune that places them into a new narrative. God's song about the gospel of Jesus Christ, performed by Paul, forms and shapes them into a new people.

The Christ hymn relies upon the master story of creation and redemption. Elements of the story are found throughout the letter (1:12, 15–23; 2:8–15, 20; 3:1, 4–9, 10–11). Every pericope must be interpreted by the thick theological content of the hymn. Even if our issues differ from those of the Colossians, we learn from Paul a commitment to the deep theological witness of the gospel when addressing the problems facing the church. The rest of the text means less when it is isolated from the glorious chorus that lauds the nature and work of Christ.

From Narrative to Argument

Paul's words are part of a sustained conversation that began when Epaphras first preached the gospel in Colossae. The conversation does not end until the eschaton, when their life will be revealed with Christ in glory (3:4). At the intersection of God's, Paul's, and the Colossians' stories, Paul enters the conversation with an urgent warning, an argument intended to persuade them to stay the course. Good preaching not only presents the content of the text but also attends to how the text itself preaches. Paul's words are not a series of isolated propositions to be divided and shaped into sermons but have a pre-existing rhetorical form designed to persuade the listeners. Using the rhetorical techniques of the Greek masters,⁵ Paul appeals to the Colossians

⁵ James W. Thompson, "Preaching Philippians," *Int* 61 (July 2007): 303, states, "The handbooks on rhetoric offer valuable insights for our analysis of the arrangement of Philippians. Aristotle and his successors noted that the persuasive power of an oration depended on careful arrangement. The effective oration included the *exordium*, *narratio*, *propositio*, *probatio*, and *peroratio*. The *exordium* introduced the topic and made the audience favorably disposed. The *narratio* covered the history of the case and was commonly followed by the *propositio*, the thesis statement of the argument. The *probatio* consisted of the proofs of the case, and the *peroratio* summarized the argument and made an emotional appeal to the audience. Although no one, including Paul, followed this arrangement slavishly, this progression provides helpful categories

with words shaped by content, intent, and technique. By examining the rhetorical argument, we can trace Paul's defense of their souls and his skill in the art of persuasion.

Salutation: Col 1:1–2—Paul establishes his role as an apostle of God and portrays the recipients as holy and faithful. Since Paul had not met these Christians before, he makes note of his authority as an apostle to speak to them. Paul addresses the church in accustomed kinship language: brothers [and sisters]. Throughout the letter, he writes to the whole community, exhorting all of them with his message. His communal concern is also reflected by referring to the churches at Laodicea and Hierapolis and calling for an exchange of letters (2:1; 4:13–16). By describing the brothers and sisters as holy and faithful, he lays before them the primary challenge that shapes his message.

Exordium⁶ (an introduction designed to elicit favor): Col 1:3–23—Paul affirms that their relationship in Christ is certain. He prays that what they have already received in Christ will continue to abound. For preaching purposes the section can be divided as follows: 1) Paul's thanksgiving for the Colossians' salvation (1:3–14). 2),⁷ the Christ hymn (1:15–20), and 3) the exhortation to holy and faithful living (1:21–23). Paul claims that God has rescued, transferred, redeemed, and forgiven them in Christ. Therefore, they are able to share in God's inheritance with all Christians everywhere.

The Christ hymn (1:15–20): As noted above, Christology serves soteriological claims primarily through the *Christus Victor* metaphor, in which Christ, through the cross, imposes peace upon the cosmic powers. The hymn sits between two grand statements about forgiveness of sins (1:13–14 and 21–23), and its Christology represents some of the grandest confessions found in the NT. Krentz notes, "Opening the door of Colossians is like opening a door to a cathedral. The Christology is breathtaking. It overwhelms us with its size and majesty."⁸ Christensen elaborates, saying, "In remarkably few words, the writer presents us with the fullness of the gospel: from creation, sustenance, and fall to redemption, reconciliation, discipleship, and consummation."⁹ All

for tracing Paul's argument. By offering a sense of the entire letter as a coherent discourse, rhetorical criticism allows the preacher to consider how each unit contributes to the entire communication."

⁶ Extending the thanksgiving so that it includes the *propositio* is due to the *inclusio*, "the hope that was heard" in 1:5 and 23. Sumney, *Colossians*, 30, recognizes that the thanksgiving extends to v. 23 and notes the change from the second person plural (you) to the first person singular (I). Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Letter to the Colossians*, New Interpreter's Bible XI, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 554, also argues for 1:3–23. I opt for separating the *propositio* and the *exordium* for homiletical purposes, thus allowing the thesis of the book (1:21–23) to receive singular attention.

⁷ Within the thanksgiving he briefly refers to the *narratio* (the history of the case) by mentioning the work of Epaphras.

⁸ Edgar Krentz, "Κατά τον Χριστόν: Preaching Colossians in Year C," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 25 (April 1998): 134.

⁹ Richard L. Christensen, "Colossians 1:15–28," *Int* 61 (July 2007): 318.

God's actions are based upon the nature and work of Christ as the agent of creation and salvation and are extolled in the hymn. Christ's nature is fully known and integrated in God's nature. Christ is the icon of God and contains all God's fullness. Christ's work occurs in the framework of the church. Our position in the church under the lordship of Christ is assured because of God's action at the cross. The hymn establishes the basis for resisting any teaching that might offer other means for a relationship with God. The rest of the book's exhortations to holiness and faithfulness are embedded here. It would not be an exaggeration to conclude every sermon in a series from Colossians by re-reading the hymn.

Propositio (the thesis): Col 1: 21–23 and amplified in 2:6–7—The thesis calls the Colossians to remain steadfast, holding onto the salvation they received in Christ. After the triumph theme seen in the hymn, the thesis echoes the earlier metaphor of reconciliation (1:13–14). Lincoln sees the propositio as a complex statement set out in a partitio (a division of a thesis into separate headings, or proofs).¹⁰ His schema can be represented as follows:

A	1:21–22	The work of Christ to achieve the holiness of believers
B	1:23a	The need for the recipients to continue in the faith
C	1:23c	The recognition of the role of Paul proclaiming the gospel

Then in the probatio, the topics from the propositio are discussed in reverse order.¹¹

C'	1:24–2:5		Paul's role in delivering the message
B'	2:6–3:4	2:6–23	Affirmation to remain faithful to the message
A'	3:5–4:1	3:1–4:6	Admonition for holiness of life as a response to the message

Probatio (supporting proofs): Col 1:24–4:1—As noted in the chart, Paul gives three arguments, or proofs, supporting his thesis that the gospel of salvation found in Christ is sufficient, provided that believers remain faithful. The first proof establishes Paul's credibility as a witness to the gospel they accepted by believing the message first preached by Epaphras. The second proof encourages the Colossians to remain faithful to the gospel by warning them against the possible threat of outsiders who offer supplemental practices and experiences designed to enhance the work of Christ. The final proof connects their holiness to their baptism and describes appropriate practices of those who commit to the gospel.

¹⁰ Lincoln, 558. Col 1:23b is not included, I assume because 1:23b functions as an inclusio with 1:5 rather than as a theme to be developed later.

¹¹ The variation in B' and A' given in the second column comes from Sumney, *Colossians*, 80. Sumney follows a traditional division of the text; however, the discretionary decision is difficult due to the intertwining themes in the pericopes.

Paul uses ethos and pathos in 1:24–2:5 to establish his credibility and evoke both sympathy and admiration from his readers.¹² His intent is for their respect to be changed into emulation. It might seem strange to a twenty-first-century audience that a person's character and goodwill provide proof of one's argument. However, first-century people would anticipate the argument. Reid describes "voice" as the "assumptions" of a preacher's stance, persona, and "implied identity" that shape his "effect" and reveal his cultural consciousness.¹³ Aristotle argues that a person's character as communicated in the speech is the single most important ingredient to persuasion.¹⁴ Aristotle elaborated, "There are three reasons speakers themselves are persuasive; for these are three things we trust other than logical demonstrations. These are practical wisdom [*phronesis*] and virtue [*arête*] and good will [*eunoia*]."¹⁵ Reid summarizes the three canons of persuasion as follows, "Congregants come to trust wise counsel (*logos*) from the preacher who seems to possess good character (*ethos*), who becomes appropriately passionate (*pathos*) about matters that the community views as central to their corporate shared identity."¹⁶ Although all three, *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*, contribute to the preacher's credibility and authenticity, *ethos* is primary.

Paul affirms that the gospel is their present possession, which is producing fruit in them. Paul works, suffers, and struggles for them even though he has never met them. He puts his body in harm's way for them. Epaphras, Onesimus, Nympha, and the Laodiceans know him. The list of greetings in 4:7–18 functions to facilitate their relationship. Paul also arouses fear of the outsiders (2:8), for they are deceivers who espouse false wisdom (2:4, 23).¹⁷ Paul seemingly brags on himself (2 Cor 11–12) in order to persuade them of his message and protect them from the threat of others who teach differently.

Colossians 2:6–7 provides an explicit contrast between the traditions of Christ and those who deceitfully try to ensnare the Colossians with their version of an augmented Christianity (2:4, 8). The two concise verses reiterate

¹² Jerry C. Sumney, "The Argument in Colossians," in *Rhetorical Argumentation in Biblical Texts: Essays from the Lund 2000 Conference* (ed. Anders Eriksson, Thomas H. Olbricht, and Walter Übelacker; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 340–41. The *inclusio* of "rejoicing" holds 1:24–2:5 together as one unit.

¹³ Robert Reid, *Four Voices of Preaching*, Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006. Reid's use of "voice" then differs from Cicero's classical canons of rhetoric in which voice is discussed under "delivery." See also Thomas H. Olbricht and A. Eriksson eds., *Rhetoric, Ethic, and Moral Persuasion in Biblical Discourse: Essays from the 2002 Heidelberg Conference*, Emory Studies in Early Christianity (New York: T&T Clark, 2005).

¹⁴ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 1.2.4.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 2.1.5.

¹⁶ Reid, 17. To read more about the oral nature of Paul's rhetoric and the use of *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*, see James W. Thompson, *Preaching like Paul* (Atlanta: WJK, 2001).

¹⁷ Sumney, "The Argument in Colossians," 342.

the thesis and provide a transition from the first to the second proof. Before Paul addresses his affirmative case again, he attacks the outsiders directly.

Refutatio (anticipating and rejecting counter arguments): Col 2:8–15— After encouraging them to remain firm in the faith (2:6–7), Paul warns them to avoid the opposite: being taken captive. Throughout the section, Paul describes how they are “in” Christ, making the overt connection that what is true of Jesus as described in the Christ hymn is also true for Christians.¹⁸ Emphatically, Paul describes the Colossians as being filled with the fullness of deity. Nothing can be added to fullness. Baptismal language predominates the discussion, indicating that through their connection with Christ’s death and resurrection, nothing else is needed to accomplish their forgiveness.¹⁹

Paul declares, “He [Christ] disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it [the cross] (2:15).²⁰ Where do we see this victory? Oppression and violence pervade the world. We see it when a student walks into a high school, shooting anyone who offends. We see it in inner-city contexts in which a gang becomes family. We see it when authoritarian regimes remove their control and long-subdued ethnic hatred raises its head of retaliation. We see the effects of the abuse of power in homeless shelters, emergency rooms filled with the uninsured, and refugee camps. Jesus’ death conquered evil. Yet evil remains. Was his death sufficient? Or do we need something more to face down the powers of evil? Do we need some supplemental help to our confession of faith? Christians often opt out of the discussion and rely upon their political affiliations to address social ills. No matter what stand they take on a societal problem, brothers and sisters accuse them of taking sides with the opposite party. The path of safety encourages preachers either to serve churches that agree with them politically or to interpret “separation of church and state” as a mandate of silence from the pulpit.

Meanwhile, the church continues to grow weak and ineffectual. We look to a few mission trips and food drives as a measure of success when more and more people are casualties of war. The truth of 2:15 will continually be questioned as long as the church remains seated. If the “fullness of deity”

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 347.

¹⁹ Note the present tense of the resurrected life as compared to the future tense described in Rom 6. In Colossians the power of the resurrection is a current possession.

²⁰ The following paragraphs are dependent upon Lincoln, “The Letter to the Colossians,” 628, who offers various reflections for preachers relating to the powers. For an extended discussion of the principalities and powers, see Andrew T. Lincoln, “Liberation from the Powers: Supernatural Spirits or Societal Structures?” in *The Bible in Human Society* (eds. M. D. Carroll, D. J. A. Clines, and P. R. Davies; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 335–54. I opt to understand the powers as systemic structures. See Walter Wink’s three classic works: *Naming the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), *Unmasking the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), and *Engaging the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992). For preaching see Charles Campbell, *The Word before the Powers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

dwelling in us fully (2:10) is to be taken seriously, then the call to faithfulness requires us to live out our baptism in places outside the four walls of the sanctuary.

The preacher needs to be cautious not to make a complete denunciation of the systemic powers that oppose us because the hymn insists that all powers controlling human life have been created through Christ and for Christ (1:16). The principalities and the powers are in subjection to Christ and have a positive role to play in the divine economy of God. Even though the powers are often perverted into agents of oppression (similar to humanity's plight), they too stand in need of reconciliation. When the powers act oppressively, when political and economic forces that are beyond our control act harmfully, then the gospel calls us to carry the cross and resurrection as instruments of healing and peace. Peace and security are not obtained by violent uses of power. Spanking children to teach them not to hit is nonsensical. Instead, the gospel message of Christ's supremacy opposes materialism, consumerism, sexism, nationalism, and all the other "isms" that desperately want to control the way we think, act, and feel.

To visualize the nature of the Colossian threat, a metaphor from geometry will help. "The circle is defined not by its circumference but by its center."²¹ When Jesus is placed off-center, our faith becomes eccentric and skewed. The dualistic nature of the threat at Colossae resembles an ellipse more than a circle. The ellipse is a geometric figure that has two foci. Whenever reason, greed, autonomy, false spiritualities, or security enter the picture as rivals to the supremacy of Christ, the threat of captivity exists. The Christian circle cannot have two foci.

In 2:16–23, Paul names specific practices that the Colossians must reject. Primarily, they ought to reject the impositions of practices that are deemed by the outsiders as necessary ingredients to their spirituality. The twenty-first-century list might look different, but the motives of someone who advocates additional steps and habits in order to help another have a deeper experience of Christ are the same. Such false spiritualities creep into congregational life without notice. Blatant practices that are cult-like are easy to recognize. As true with many ancient mystery religions, when a practice is focused on the individual rather than the edification of the community, the very body Christ died for is harmed (2:19). Although we expect Paul to say that Christ is the head of the whole cosmos, the church is his primary concern (1:18).

Additionally, traditional healthy practices are sometimes perverted. Prayer times, retreat experiences, Bible study programs, curricula, service projects can all be shrouded in mystery, imposed on others, and made into a second-level faith experience inaccessible to the uninitiated.²² "These have

²¹ Christensen, 320.

²² Your list will differ from mine, but I have witnessed Christian elitism connected to drinking caffeine, home schooling, marriage enhancement retreats, and private devotions. My concrete experiences might not be identical to those of people in

indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety and humility," but they have no value in our pursuit of holiness and faithfulness to the gospel we first received. We learn from Paul that even private devotions, individual experiences, and lone spiritual encounters all count for naught if it is not edifying to the body of Christ. Nothing, even pious acts of worship and noble deeds of service, adds to God's accomplishment at the cross.

Paul is not making a distinction between obedience and grace. The gospel calls us to conform to righteous living, piety, and service. If we participated in Christ's death at the cross through baptism (2:12, 20), then we will also participate in new life by seeking the ways above (3:1-4). The hinge text between the last two proofs (3:1-4) is saturated with the language and imagery of the previous pericope to prepare for the ethical exhortations in the next pericope. The integration of Paul's theology and his ethics is complete. To disassemble the component parts of Paul's argument to preserve a dichotomy between works and grace misreads how Paul understands their relationship. Knowing the nature and the work of Christ, experiencing participation in his death on the cross through baptism, and receiving forgiveness and redemption result in ethical living.

The virtuous walk described in 3:5-17 exemplifies those who remain faithful and live out their baptism. Sumney notes, "the manner of life prescribed in 3:5 and following is presented as the logical consequence of their having died with Christ, being raised with him, and looking forward to being made manifest with him."²³ The ethic described in this pericope affirms a distinctive piety that counters the practices of the outsiders (2:20-23).

The baptismal language continues throughout the section with terms such as "put to death," "get rid of," "take off the old self," and "clothe yourselves with the new self." The new communal ethic that clothes the person found in Christ opposes the old individualistic ethic that should be stripped off and put to death. The virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, without complaint, with forgiveness, in love, unity, and peace are communal practices that are done in the name of Jesus (3:12-17). Therefore, we let the gospel we first received dwell in our hearts in all wisdom in order to bless one another whether in word, song, or practice (3:16). Paul's writing to the Colossians has exemplified these virtues because he deeply desires that they have all the riches available in Christ (2:2-3).

The household codes that follow are concrete examples of the virtuous life that followers seek to imitate Christ and join him in the eschaton.²⁴

the pew, but by telling my story, the points of similarity will ring true and create identification.

²³ Sumney, "The Argument in Colossians," 350. For a complete discussion of this section, see Roy Yates, "The Christian Way of Life: The Paraenetic Material in Colossians 3:1-4:6," *EvQ* 63 (July 1991): 241-51, and D. F. Bradley, "The *TOPOI* as a Form in Pauline Paraenesis," *JBL* 72 (1953): 235-46.

²⁴ See J. E. Crouch, *The Origin and Intention of the Colossian Haustafel* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1972), 120-45; Andrew T. Lincoln, "The Household

Furthermore, the household codes exemplify what it means to live in the fullness of Christ, in which reconciliation entails overcoming the powers of division between social groups and overturning the powers of domination. Therefore, due to the lordship of Jesus, the person in the weaker social position exercises power and choice by remaining in submission.²⁵ If it is true that the less privileged predominantly populated the church's makeup, including slaves, the poor, and women, then they would belong to households where loyalty to the church could cause havoc. "In such situations, the [head of the household] would have been concerned to hear that his slaves were meeting with a group that undermined the accepted boundaries separating status groups or that his wife had joined a group encouraging women to become public leaders. Thus the setting of the code carries with it the suspicion that the church aroused among the more powerful when their subordinates met without proper supervision."²⁶

The household codes in the NT reverse the expectant relationships that commonly exist in culture. Being in the Lord (seven references in nine verses) overturns and transforms how we relate to one another and urges us to interpret against the grain of the social constructs of the world. For instance, note the radical nature of the slave receiving an inheritance (3:24), or, as some suggest, that Nympha is a female leader in the church (4:15). The church becomes a place of healing of the divisions caused by the systemic powers of the world, including class, wealth, gender, race, education, age, nationality, politics, and religious traditions (3:11). In Christ, we operate under a new set of rules. Ethnic, religious, and social distinctions are lost. Human dignity is not measured by the UN Human Development Index, but by a relationship in Christ in which the whole body is united and nourished by God (2:19).

Sunney summarizes, "The household code, then, must give its readers a way to navigate a world that does not recognize the lordship of Christ or accept its implications for the structuring of relationships within the world. This table of instructions enables the recipients to rethink how to be faithful, how to understand their situation, and how to live in a way that does not bring unnecessary hostility or persecution."²⁷

Throughout the *probatio*, Paul addresses the particularities of the Colossian context. He does not address abstract and theoretical possibilities but concrete realities. Our faith is not otherworldly or esoteric. The present reality of being raised with Christ in our baptism changes how we view and respond to everything. To answer the question "When?"—our hope recognizes the future, but it lives now. To answer the question "Where?"—our resurrected lives do not look towards vague mystical realities out there somewhere, but

Code and Wisdom Mode of Colossians," *JSNT* 74 (1999): 93–112; and Sunney, *Colossians*, 230–38.

²⁵ Suzanne Watts Henderson, "Taking Liberties with the Text: The Colossian Household Code as Hermeneutical Paradigm," *Int* 60 (Oct 2006): 420–32.

²⁶ Sunney, *Colossians*, 239.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 240.

confront the grittiness of life here. Likewise, our preaching must tackle the issues confronting our congregations here and now. Paul's Christology and soteriology continue to provide the only foundation able to support our faith and address our concrete situations. Preaching the fullness of Christ in us on Sunday affects how we live in Christ on Monday.

Paul's concrete use of the household codes offers a clue for how our preaching can face people's lives directly. On the one hand, illustrations are designed to illuminate the mind by making difficult concepts accessible. If I asked you to illustrate the idea of transformation, you might respond with the image of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly or a tadpole morphing into a frog. I now "get it." My mind grasps the notion of one form changing into another, but does that change my day, relationships, or attitudes? It can, but the applications are elusive. On the other hand, concretizations are designed to influence actions, habits, and practices. A concretization is a subcategory of illustration that describes the realities of lived experience and taps into the power of story and metaphor. If I ask you to give me a concrete example of transformation, you might describe how your teenage son quit drinking after the fatal accident of his best friend. The stories of Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King Jr. inspire us, but the story of my neighbor who gave up his vacation to tend to a hospice patient is something I can imitate here and now. Just as Paul cited how people's critical relationships need to submit to the lordship of Christ in the household codes, our preaching should point to people's particular pains, fears, hopes, and joys so that "whatever [they] do, whether in word or deed, [they] do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (3:17).

Peroratio (summary and final appeal) Col 4:2–6—Although the verses seemingly put forth generic admonitions, each exhortation is context specific and finds connections with the theological constructs asserted earlier.²⁸ For example, 4:2 exhorts them to be alert and watchful in prayer. The whole force of the epistle calls them to vigilance. It reminds them of Paul's prayer in the exordium. The theme of thanksgiving also reappears (2:7; 3:17). Colossians 4:3 exhorts them to pray specifically about the advancement of the gospel of the mystery of Christ. The language recalls Paul's emphasis on the gospel in chapter 1. Paul's reference to prison brings to mind how he has suffered not only for the sake of the gospel but also for them as well (1:24; 2:1). The admonitions continue in 4:5–6, as Paul encourages them to behave in a certain way when dealing with outsiders. While most commentators associate the word "outsiders" with non-believers, the context of the whole letter suggests that the "outsiders" are those who are threatening the church.

Greetings and Benedictions: Col 4:7–18—Similarly, do not dismiss final remarks as superfluous materials. Seek out the theological substructures that inform the function of these remarks. Relationships "in Christ" are exemplified, Paul's credibility is bolstered, and exhortations are implied. Paul

²⁸ Tim Sensing, "A Strategy for Preaching Paraenesis," *ResQ* 38 (1996): 207–18.

recognizes a large circle of those who agree with him, who know the Colossians, and who implicitly oppose the outsiders who would lead them away from the gospel.

Final Reflections about Preaching to Colossians

Preaching Colossians is often an exercise of lifting grand theological themes that are presented topically but abstractly, unconnected to Paul's intent.²⁹ Topical preaching has its place and serves the church, but it is not the same as expository preaching through a text. Literary and historical context is neglected in favor of the immediacy of the topic. On the other end of the spectrum, many sermons from the Pauline corpus resemble a historical lecture that identifies the heretics and explains Paul's response. Such sermons, while rehearsing the commentary tradition, often lack connection to people's everyday lives. The disconnect between text and pew is not the text's fault; the issues pulling the Colossians away from the gospel still plague the twenty-first-century church. A soteriology soaked with a grand vision of Christ's nature and work will re-establish people's faith so that they will produce fruit, grow in their knowledge of God, and live lives worthy of the Lord (1:10).

The gap that occurs between the text and pew, while often described in the literature, is difficult to traverse. Preaching requires imagination. When preachers sit in their studies and formulate three points that support their proposition, they are creatively connecting exegesis, hermeneutics, and homiletics. Traditional, deductive, exegetical sermons are acts of the imagination. The phrasing of the points in parallel construction requires thought, creativity, and art. Similarly, when preachers employ new forms of preaching, whether narrative, post-liberal, or emergent, they utilize the same intellectual and creative muscles. Therefore, while the exegetical work unfolds, the convergence of the hermeneutical and homiletical processes commences.

Two key questions that assist the preacher while crossing the gap are 1) where we see these same historical issues in our world (exegesis of the local context) and 2) what such a world would look like today if the text were taken seriously (concrete implications). The move from exegesis to homiletics is a move from the past-tense world of the Bible (significance then) to the present-tense world of the church (significance now). The journey of recontextualization recognizes that no two contexts are alike. Differences and particularities between the two cannot be glossed. However, even across time and place, humanity shares similar patterns of lived experience. Recognizing that a degree of everyday experiences is common to humans suggests the categories of "identification" and "resonance." Applications from a particular

²⁹ C. DeWitt Matthews, "Preaching Colossians," *SwJT* 16 (Fall 1973): 49–63. Sermon outlines are provided for each pericope. While each point in the outline derives from verses in the text, thus claiming to be an expository sermon, none of the examples show evidence of understanding Paul's pastoral and theological intent. Topics are lifted from the text with little regard to their literary genre, narrational substructure, or rhetorical context.

context might not directly transfer in a one-to-one fashion to another, but a degree of resonance can invoke a sense of identification and fittingness. The more we understand the historical complexities, the more we recognize our own story. Our congregations are not located in Colossae, but we still see the Colossians sitting in our pews.

Colossians contains various metaphors used by Paul to communicate his message to a particular context.³⁰ Time, culture, and usage sometimes alter the way metaphors function in different locations. Examine the metaphors closely. Do they still articulate effectively “God’s actions in the world and in shaping the lives of Christians in community?”³¹ If you determine that a metaphor does not retain its original force in our culture, seek out alternatives. First, understand the connection the metaphor is making with the theological construct Paul is describing. Second, explore contemporary images that potentially make the same connection. In the age of the internet, multiple images are often used to make one focal connection for the audience. A composite of images, flashed together in a series of rhetorical lines, will function more effectively with a younger generation. This opinion is contra conventional wisdom that advised, “When you find a good image, explore it deeply, make it lather, allow it to gel, do not leave it prematurely.” The advertising world rarely prolongs a metaphor’s life unless connecting it to an extended narrative. In our age of image, metaphors are dear friends. Thanks to Paul, the epistles are stock full of them.

When preaching Colossians,³² the lectionary helps by providing continuity in the weekly lections. The Common Revised Lectionary calls for reading texts from Colossians on five Sundays in Year C—Pentecost 8: Col 1:1–14; Pentecost 9: Col 1:21–28; Pentecost 10: Col 2:6–15; Pentecost 11: Col 3:1–11, and Christ the King Sunday: Col 1:13–20. Lessons from Colossians also appear once in Year A (Easter: Col 3:1–4) and Year B (Christmas: Col 3:12–17). The lectionary omits only 1:29 (a strange omission), 2:1–5 (pastoral concern for readers), 2:16–23 (extended rejection of the false religion), and 3:18–4:18 (the household codes, closing exhortation and greetings).³³

Taking my cue from the lectionary, I recently preached the following short series of sermons from Colossians. Note the present-tense nature of the messages. Although I used the historical context to ground each sermon, the theology of the living text addresses the twenty-first-century church in the

³⁰ Sumney, *Colossians*, 90–91, summarizes the soteriological metaphors in Colossians.

³¹ Lincoln, 627.

³² Whether Colossians is deutero-Pauline or not, it remains in the pew Bible and the yearly readings of the church. Colossians is in the canon and cannot be dismissed.

³³ Krentz, 132. The lectionary omits all the household codes, including Eph 5:21–6:9; Titus 2:1–10; 1 Pet 2:13–18; and 1 Pet 3:1–7.

here and now. I offer a sketch of the series as a seed to germinate your imagination.³⁴

Title: The Gospel of Hope

Text: Col 1:3–14

Focus: The salvation that comes through the gospel produces fruit and secures our position in Christ.

Function: To affirm faith by proclaiming hope as a secure foundation for our salvation.

Flow: Do you remember the first time you heard the gospel of hope? If your experience was like that of the Colossians, then the gospel of hope sustained, nurtured, and produced holiness and fruit in you. But not just back then, when you first heard the gospel; it continues to act on your behalf now. The hope you heard about in the gospel is both your inheritance and your present possession, securing your redemption and forgiveness.

Title: The Cosmic Christ

Text: Col 1:15–20

Focus: The supremacy of Christ fully supplies us.

Function: To inspire awe by showcasing the nature and work of Christ.

Flow: Whether we think so or not, songs influence our thinking. Listen to the verses in God's song about Christ. Christ is supreme because of his relationship to God, to the cosmos, and to us. Join me as we stand and read together our song.

Title: More is Less (or) Subtraction by Addition

Text: Col 2

Focus: Additions to the gospel do not supplement spiritual growth but supplant Christ.

Function: To warn against false notions of spirituality, success, and faithfulness.

Flow: In our Christian walk, various criteria for faithfulness are taught and exemplified as the keys for success. So we come to accept the principle

³⁴ According to Thomas Long, *Witness of Preaching* (2d ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 108–9, “A *focus statement* is a concise description of the central, controlling, and unifying theme of the sermon. In short, this is what the whole sermon will be “about.” A *function statement* is a description of what the preacher hopes the sermon will create or cause to happen for the hearers. Sermons make demands upon the hearers, which is another way of saying that they provoke change in the hearers. . . . The function statement names the hoped-for change.” Each sentence in the flow of the sermon represents a different episode or movement of the sermon. To test for coherence, the last sentence of the flow (representing the conclusion of the sermon) will correlate with the focus and function sentences. In other words, the conclusion of the sermon should fulfill the intent of the sermon.

“More is Better.” In that way, we are like the Colossians. But Paul has a different standard for success and faithfulness: “More is Less.”

Title: Loyalty

Text: Col 3

Focus: Christ, who is our life, compels us to live virtuously in Christian community.

Function: To promote commitment to ethical behavior.

Flow: Alexander Bain’s definition of belief—“that upon which a [person] is prepared to act”³⁵—prompts two questions: If one is loyal, what are the evidences? If one is disloyal, what are the evidences? Disloyalties lead to a lifestyle unbecoming of Christ. Instead, loyalty to Christ instills virtuous living (holiness and faithfulness are interlocking virtues). Thus loyalty to Christ is demonstrated by your behavior.

³⁵ Alexander Bain, *The Emotions and the Will* (London: J. W. Parker and Son, 1859).



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