

Paul's Prison Correspondence to Colossae and Philippi
Studies in Pauline literature

by
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Preface

There is a general consensus among biblical scholars regarding the grouping of Paul's letters (assuming that the letters bearing Paul's signature are all authentic). The earliest group is composed of the Thessalonian letters and probably the Galatian letter. The next group contains the Corinthian letters and Romans.¹ Then follows the prison group of Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians and Philippians. In each letter of this latter group, Paul calls himself a "prisoner" (Col. 4:3, 18; Phlm 10, 13, 22-23; Ep. 3:1; 4:1; 6:20; Phil. 1:7, 13). In none of them, however, does Paul enlarge upon the circumstances of his imprisonment. The traditional opinion is that Paul wrote them during his Roman house arrest while he awaited his critical hearing before Caesar (Ac. 28:16, 30), though the options of his earlier Caesarean imprisonment (Ac. 24:27) and even the possibility of an Ephesian imprisonment cannot be ruled out (see the standard introductions). The order in which Paul wrote them also is open to debate. Though Colossians and Philemon were almost certainly written at the same time, and possibly Ephesians also, the Philippian letter apparently was not written at the same time, since the salutations offered to the recipients in behalf of Paul's companions are quite different for Philippians than for the others.

In the following brief commentaries, three of the four prison letters will be treated. Each letter has unique characteristics, Philippians with its warmth, Colossians with its warning against theological deception, and Philemon with its social-ethical implications. Each letter is highly relevant to the modern church as well, for the problems and challenges of these ancient Christians were in many ways similar to our own. Finally, each letter adds important factors for fleshing out the mind and ministry of Paul, the man above all other New Testament writers who has challenged the church with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

¹If the Galatian letter does not belong to the first group, it almost certainly belongs to the second one.

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The Crisis of Syncretistic Mysticism

Paul's Letter to the Colossians

The Letter to the Colossians addresses a matrix of critical theological questions which are particularly relevant in the modern period. Is Christ the only true Savior? Are the mystical and revelatory claims of other religions valid? Is Christ to be considered the exclusive avenue to truth, or is he one among many ways to truth? How can one achieve the fullness of religious experience? These kinds of questions that arose from the theological crisis in Colossae of ancient Asia Minor could just as well be addressed to a modern society which hears the voices of the New Age movement, transcendentalism, astrology, eastern mysticism and an eclectic religious spirit of the age.

Introduction to the Letter

The Letter to the Colossians is usually categorized with Paul's prison correspondence. That Paul was imprisoned when he wrote it seems evident (1:24; 4:3, 18). However, the time and place of the imprisonment are not completely clear. For one thing, it seems that the time of the imprisonment is not identical to that depicted in the Philippian Letter. In Philippians, Paul has only one messenger, Timothy (Phil. 2:19-21), and one companion, Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25-30), whom he intends to send back to Philippi. In Colossians, Paul mentions several associates with whom he has regular contact, such as, Tychicus, Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus Justus, Epaphras, Luke and Demas (Col. 4:7, 10-14). Significantly, the persons mentioned in Philippians are absent in Colossians. Furthermore, there is a difference of tone between Philippians and Colossians. In Philippians, Paul is full of uncertainty and anxiety regarding his future (Phil. 1:20ff.), but Colossians contains none of this. To complicate the discussion, we know that Paul was incarcerated at Caesarea for two years (Ac. 23:23-35; 24:27) and later was held under house arrest in Rome for two years (Ac. 25:9-12; 28:16, 30). The upshot is that the exact circumstances, place and time of Paul's imprisonment when he wrote the Colossian Letter cannot be determined with any certainty. The traditional view, of course, is that Colossians belongs to the earlier phase of Paul's detention in Rome, and while this is plausible and may very well be true, it cannot be asserted with any finality. In general, the letter can be placed within the period of about AD 57-64, which encompasses both of Paul's imprisonments.

The Authenticity of the Letter

Unlike Philippians, whose Pauline authorship is undisputed, Colossians has

sometimes been treated as a document written by a disciple of Paul shortly after Paul's death. Pseudonymous writing was known to be practiced in the ancient world in which the name of a dead person instead of the composer was attached to a document. The arguments that Paul was not the author generally appeal to divergencies of literary style and theological content as compared with Paul's other letters. Furthermore, some scholars doubt that the treatment of Christian baptism, christology and eschatology in Colossians harmonizes with the undisputed letters of Paul.² Nevertheless, even on historical-critical grounds there is a very strong case for Pauline authorship, so much so, that Kummel can say, "All the evidence points to the conclusion that Col, probably used as early as Justin (*Dial.* 85.2; 138.2) and listed in Marcion's canon, is to be regarded as Pauline."³ Within evangelicalism, the fact that the letter says it is by Paul (1:1) and that it rests within the canon of the New Testament is *a priori* reason enough.

The Colossian Church

The city of Colossae was located on the Lycus River in Phrygia on the main highway from Ephesus to Tarsus. Compared to its larger neighbors, Laodocia and Hierapolis (4:13), it was a minor market town. In Paul's day, the city was comprised of indigenous Phrygians, Greek settlers and Jewish colonists who had migrated there in the early 2nd century BC and later. During the reign of Caesar Nero, the Lycus Valley was struck with a severe earthquake that devastated neighboring Laodocia, though how much this might have affected Colossae is unknown.⁴ Religiously, Colossae, like the other cities in the Lycus Valley, was diverse. The Jewish population, of course, would have an established synagogue. The Greeks and Phrygians worshiped Cybele, the mother goddess of Asia, as well as Isis and Apollo. Almost certainly the mystery religions, such as the cult of Mithraism, were prominent.⁵ However, since the site of ancient Colossae has never been excavated, archaeological confirmation is lacking as to particulars.⁶

We know that Paul did not himself establish the Colossian church. Instead, it was planted by a friend of Paul, Epaphras (1:6-7), who had labored hard and continued to support the fellowship with his prayers even when he was absent (4:12-

²To follow the arguments which make Colossians deutero-Pauline, see R. Fuller, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1971) 59-64; W. Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. H. Kee (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975) 340-346.

³Kummel, 346.

⁴W. Meeks, ed., *The Writings of St. Paul* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972) 112-113; F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 407-408.

⁵R. Martin, *New Testament Foundations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) II.210-211.

⁶Meeks, 113.

13). Paul's knowledge of the Colossian Christians came to him by the report of others (1:4), and even at the time of his letter, he remained unknown to them by face (2:1). It is quite possible that the Colossian church as well as the churches in Hierapolis and Laodecia were established during Paul's stay at Ephesus, since all three are in the proximity of Ephesus. While Paul resided at Ephesus, the Christian message was propagated through the outlying regions (Ac. 19:10). Epaphras apparently came to Ephesus, met Paul, became converted to Christianity, and returned to his own town with the Christian gospel. In any case, even though the Colossians had not met Paul personally, through Epaphras they knew of him and maintained an interest in his life and affairs (4:7-8).

The members of the Colossian church seemed to have been largely Gentile, or at least Paul's language seems inappropriate for adherents to Judaism (1:12, 21, 27; 2:13). The vices of the Colossians that preceded their Christian conversion also seem especially typical of pagans (3:5-7). Why Epaphras decided to visit Paul during his imprisonment is not stated, but it is not unlikely that he came specifically to seek advice about the new development in Colossian theology. While Epaphras was visiting with Paul, he also was incarcerated for reasons unknown (Phlm 23). In his place, Tychicus was commissioned to be the courier of the letter to the church (4:7-8), and Paul indicated that Tychicus would be traveling to Colossae with Onesimus, another member of the congregation (4:9).

The Colossian Heresy

Paul does not give a formal description of the Colossian theological crisis, but its general shape can be inferred from his polemics.⁷ Paul is obviously combating what he considers to be a perversion of the gospel, and it may be that the Colossians were inadvertently being taken in by a mixing of Christianity with other religious thought (2:8). Paul offers no vehement denunciations to the Colossians in the way he does, for instance, to the Galatians (cf. Ga. 1:6; 3:1; 4:9-11, 21), but this does not make the crisis less serious.

That the problem concerned a philosophic approach to religion, Paul directly states (2:8). That this philosophy in some way was aimed at producing a fullness of religious experience and religious knowledge is implied by the frequent use of vocabulary denoting fullness and knowledge.⁸ It is not too difficult to understand how

⁷Of course, it might be suggested that Paul is doing no more than forewarning the Colossian Christians against false teachers who might in the future attempt to infiltrate their ranks, and if so, then the Colossian Letter is less urgent, so M. Hooker, "Were There False Teachers in Colossae?" *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament: Essays in Honor of C. F. D. Moule*, ed. B. Lindars and S. Smalley (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1973) 315-331. However, though it is somewhat of a subjective impression, most scholars assess the letter as addressing an actual crisis.

⁸Paul uses words that denote fullness, such as, *pleroo* (= to be filled, cf. 1:9; 2:10), *pleroma* (= fullness, cf. 1:19; 2:9), *plerophorias* (= full, cf. 2:2), *teleios* (= completion or maturity, cf. 1:28). He also uses several words denoting

a recently founded Christian community which had lost its leading figure to imprisonment could have become vulnerable to the counter-claims of other cults, especially when these other cults did not call for a full-scale rejection of Christ but only for the incorporation of new thought forms into the Christian framework.⁹ In several crucial passages, Paul seems to be actually quoting slogans and buzz-words of the cult he warns against. When he says, "In Christ, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell," he seems to be deliberately setting this statement in opposition to an alien idea (1:19). He argues against such things as self-abasement, the worship of angels (2:18) and expressions of extreme asceticism (2:21, 23). He alludes to the dangers of following the elemental spirits of the universe (2:8, 20).

What should be made of this alien thought system? In some respects, the teaching Paul opposes seems to have a strong Jewish flavor. It includes legal ordinances, circumcision, food regulations, Sabbath observances, and the new moon celebrations (2:11, 14, 16, 20-22). On the other hand, concepts like *pleroma* (= fullness) and *gnosis* (= knowledge) and the *stoicheia* (= elemental beings) may well imply Hellenistic religious thought. It is probable that the threat Paul opposes was a form of Jewish mysticism which had embraced certain aspects of Greco-Roman theosophy. Some of these possibilities will be pursued further in the commentary on actual passages.

The Opening and Thanksgiving: 1:1-14

As is well known, Paul, for the most part, adapted the letter writing form in his epistles that was standard in the Greco-Roman world. Usually, Paul's letters consisted of five main sections,¹⁰ and Colossians is no exception.

- ♦ *Opening* (sender, addressee, greeting)
- ♦ *Thanksgiving/Blessing* (often with intercession and/or an eschatological climax)
- ♦ *Body* (introductory formulae; often having an eschatological conclusion and/or an indication of future plans)
- ♦ *Paraenesis* (ethical exhortations)
- ♦ *Closing* (benedictions, greetings, sometimes a mention of the writing process)

knowledge, such as, *epignosis* (= full knowledge, cf. 1:9, 10; 2:2), *sophia* (= wisdom, cf. 1:9; 2:3), *gnoseos* (= knowledge, cf. 2:3), and *synesis* (= understanding, cf. 1:9; 2:2). Finally, he uses the modifier *pas* (= all or every) no less than nineteen times (cf. 1:9, 10 (x 2), 11, 15, 16 (x 2), 17 (x 2), 18, 19, 20, 23, 28 (x 2); 2:2, 3, 9, 10).

⁹L. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) 359.

¹⁰W. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973) 11-27.

Salutation (1:1-2)

Paul, along with Timothy, addresses his readers, the Colossians. As an apostle, Paul is a chosen missionary of Jesus Christ, singled out by God to be an ambassador of the good news about Jesus to the Gentile world (Ac. 26:15-18). As is usual in addressing a largely Gentile readership, Paul uses his Greek name *Paulos* rather than his Hebrew name Saul. Timothy, who became Paul's most important assistant after his conversion in Lystra (Ac. 16:1-3), is named as Paul's companion, and he also is so named in the letters to the Romans (16:21), 1 Corinthians (4:17; 16:10), 2 Corinthians (1:1), Philippians (1:1), 1 Thessalonians (1:1), 2 Thessalonians (1:1) and Philemon (1). It is unclear how much of a hand Timothy had in the composition of the letters. On the one hand, he may have served as an amanuensis or secretary, and on the other, he may be mentioned merely because he was Paul's lieutenant.

The Colossian Christians themselves are addressed as *hagioi* (= saints or holy ones) and *pistoi adelphoi* (= faithful brothers). In the apostolic era, a saint was not a super-Christian who had been canonized after death. Rather, the saints were the whole community of Christians who had come to faith in Christ. Paul finishes the salutation with the familiar Christian words of "grace and peace," *charis* (= grace) being a Christianized variant of the more usual Roman greeting *chairein* (= greeting), and *eirene* (= peace) being the equivalent of the Jewish *shalom*.

Thanksgiving (1:3-8)

Paul's thanksgiving focuses on the fact that the Colossians were believers whose Christianity was expressed by their faith in Christ Jesus and their love for other Christians, a faith and love that had its origin in the hope for the future. This triad of graces--faith, hope and love--are familiar ground for Paul (cf. 1 Co. 13:13; Ro. 5:1-5; 1 Th. 1:3). Faith is the Christian commitment toward God, hope is the Christian assurance of eternal life, and love is the Christian outward expression toward others. All these graces were a product of the gospel, God's truth, which was being preached and accepted by more and more people all over the Roman world. It was the good news preached originally to the Colossians by Epaphras, who had returned to Paul with the report of the Colossian's response to Christ.

Paul's mention of all these central Christian concepts and his use of such primary Christian vocabulary was far from arbitrary. Since the Colossians, as will be seen later, were being told that the Christian message was limited in its adequacy for a full life, it was important for Paul to set forth at the very beginning the essence of the Christian faith and to reaffirm to the Colossians that what they had heard from

Epaphras was in fact the full Christian message.¹¹ The true gospel is the gospel of grace, peace, faith, hope, and love in the Spirit, and this is God's truth! The God that Epaphras preached was the God Paul also preached--the God who was the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Epaphras had been a faithful minister in his preaching of Christ and in his representation of Paul, and his message was to be trusted!

Prayer (1:9-14)

Paul's habit was to pray regularly for his congregations (cf. Ro. 1:9-10; Ep. 1:15-16; Phil. 1:3-4; 2 Th. 1:11). His prayers, unlike the more popular modern prayers that seem to be constantly focused on mundane needs, were invariably directed toward Christian maturity and perseverance. Here he prays that the Colossians might be filled with wisdom, knowledge and understanding. If pressure was being exerted upon the Colossians toward some mystical bent under the promise that more knowledge was available to them in other religious spheres than what Epaphras had told them, Paul corrects this notion by directing his prayers toward their fullness in Christ. To be truly filled with knowledge, wisdom and understanding (and these were very likely "buzz words" of those who were urging the Colossians to join them¹²) was to live a life worthy of the Lord Jesus and to please him. Only by living the Christian life does one grow in the knowledge of God. Only by living the Christian life does one tap into the resources of God's power. It is noteworthy that Paul's idea of power is not to be equated with either sensationalism or mysticism, but rather, the graces of endurance and patience.

Finally, the Colossians must realize that there are in reality only two kingdoms, the dominion of darkness and the kingdom of light. At all costs they must not approach religion like a marketplace of ideas in which one can shop at the various bazaars so as to pick and choose among the elements of spirituality. Rather, they must realize their great privilege and joyfully give thanks that the Father had enabled them to belong to the kingdom of his Son! In Christ they already had been qualified to share in the inheritance, God already had rescued them from the alien powers of darkness, and he already had transferred them over into the kingdom of the Son. Redemption and forgiveness were present realities. That the Colossians might realize their great privilege was Paul's earnest prayer.

The Body of the Letter: 1:15--3:4

There is not a marked transition between Paul's prayer of blessing and the body of his letter, but by 1:15 it is clear that he is now addressing the central issue at

¹¹R. Lucas, *Fullness & Freedom: The Message of Colossians & Philemon* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1980) 30.

¹²R. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) 51.

hand, that is, the urgency with which he intends to argue the Christian case for true fullness in Christ as opposed to fullness elsewhere.

The Supremacy of Christ (1:15-20)

Two background issues of importance should be addressed at the beginning of this section. The first has to do with the Hellenistic idea of *pleroma* (= fullness) that appears in 1:19, since this word was particularly characteristic of a form of Christian gnosticism in the second century. Christian gnosticism was an eclectic mixture of Christian theology and elements of Greek metaphysics. In Gnosticism, the term *pleroma* referred to the thirty aeons that were emanations proceeding from God to the world of humans. A basic Gnostic assumption was that there were two "stuffs" in the universe, spirit and matter, and spirit alone was good while matter was essentially evil. Furthermore, since matter was eternal, God had not created the universe *ex nihilo* (= out of nothing), but he had created the universe out of this flawed matter.

Such basic beliefs had inevitable consequences for Christian theology. In Hellenistic thought, if God was spirit (which was good), he could not possibly have any personal contact with a physical universe made out of flawed matter. In fact, he would not personally have created it in the first place. Instead, he had put forth a series of emanations from himself, each somewhat more distant and inferior, and in the end there was an emanation distant enough and inferior enough to handle the "stuff" of matter. This emanation or demi-god created the universe. Another Gnostic assumption was that the further an emanation was from God in the chain of emanations, the more ignorant of and hostile toward God it became. The emanation that created the world, being very distant from God, was completely ignorant and utterly hostile. Finally, the idea of incarnation, at least in the orthodox sense of the word, was untenable and even laughable. If matter was evil, it followed that human bodies were evil, and therefore, they either must be starved, beaten and denied through rigid asceticism or ignored altogether and put under no restrictions at all. In any case, what the body did was unimportant. As an intellectual and mystical faith, the Gnostic system was shot through with all sorts of esoteric knowledge and secret passwords. Thus, *gnosis* (= knowledge) figured prominently as the primarily avenue by which humans could climb the ladder through the various emanations back toward God.¹³

Now, it must be pointed out that there is no evidence as early as the first century of this form of Christian gnosticism such as was combated by Irenaeus and Tertullian near the close of the second century. At the same time, a sweeping

¹³G. Dellings, *TDNT* (1968) VI.300-301; W. Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 97-99.

rejection of any connection between Colossians and at least some gnosticizing elements is probably too extreme. It is not unlikely that the matrix of philosophical notions in Colossae against which Paul argued are the early developments of Gnostic-like ideas.¹⁴ Such ideas had to start somewhere, and various streams of thinking within what is sometimes called nonconformist Judaism, particularly the gnosticizing tendencies of the Essenes as is evident in the Dead Sea Scrolls, more than likely reached Asia Minor during the first century.¹⁵ We know, of course, that the *Coptic Gospel of Thomas* in the Nag Hammadi texts (Gnostic Christian texts discovered in 1946) may go all the way back to a text as primitive as AD 140.¹⁶ Thus, when Paul speaks of fullness and knowledge, he is probably directly confronting a system of Jewish-Hellenistic theosophy.

The second important background issue concerns the christological hymn in 1:15-20. The passage is in two distinct parts: Christ and creation (1:15-18a) and Christ and the church (1:18a-20). Certain stylistic peculiarities, repetitions, rhythms, and correspondences lead most scholars to believe that this passage was an extant hymn from which Paul quoted. If so, Paul used this hymn in order to refute an incipient gnosticism that denied the supremacy of Jesus Christ and his uniqueness as the Mediator between God and humans.¹⁷ While it is possible that Paul composed the hymn himself, linguistic data seems to suggest that he did not.¹⁸

Christ, Lord of Creation (1:15-18a)

The first strophe in the hymn exalts Jesus Christ as the highest authority over all creation. Far from being an inferior being, distant from God and inferior to God, Christ was the very image of the unseen God. The nature and being of God have been perfectly revealed in Christ, and the invisible has become visible. This statement, so similar in kind to other incarnational passages in the New Testament (cf. Jn. 1:14, 18; 14:9; 2 Co. 4:4, 6; He. 1:1-3; 1 Ti. 3:16; etc.), is probably also a play upon the idea in Genesis that the first human was created in God's image. Christ is the archetypal image of God, and in him that image is not defaced as it was in the fall of Adam. Furthermore, it is because humans bear the image of their Creator that the Son of God could become incarnate as a human and in his humanity display the glory

¹⁴R. Schippers, *NIDNNT* (1975) I.740.

¹⁵M. Black, *The Scrolls and Christian Origins* (New York: Scribners, 1961) 165-167; Bruce, *Paul*, 412-417. The mention of visions (2:18) suggests a sort of Jewish mysticism typical of the Merkabah cult and its flights of prayer to the heavenly chariot throne where they "worshipped with angels," cf. Johnson, 360.

¹⁶E. Yamauchi, *ISBE* (1979) I.186.

¹⁷R. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 50-51. Against this, see P. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon [WBC]* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982) 46-47.

¹⁸G. Cannon, *The Use of Traditional Materials in Colossians* (Macon, GA: Mercer University, 1983) 23ff.

of the unseen God.¹⁹

The expression *prototokos pases ktiseos* (= firstborn over all creation) emphasizes Christ's lordship over the universe. *Prototokos* is essentially a Jewish concept, and it is rarely found outside the Bible. The nuance of the word is hierarchical, and it refers to the supremacy of Christ in a way consistent with the Old Testament use of the word as a description of rank (cf. Ps. 89:27).²⁰ It is due to this nuance that the passage should be rendered as "head of all creation" (TCNT), "his is the primacy over all created things" (NEB), "superior to all created things" (TEV), "Lord of all creation" (Weymouth), and so forth.²¹

As the *prototokos*, Jesus was God's agent of creation. Everything that has been created was created by God through the agency of Christ, whether heavenly, earthly, visible, invisible, or the unseen forces and authorities in the spiritual world.²² Jesus is the preexistent, cosmic Christ! The fact that he is the agent of creation alludes to the personification of Wisdom in the Old Testament as the one assisting Yahweh in his creation of the world (Pr. 8:22ff.). Not only was everything created *by* Christ, everything was created *for* him! This statement of such obvious exaltation hails Jesus as the key and the center of the entire universe. He existed before anything else existed (cf. Jn. 1:1; 1 Jn. 1:2), and the cohesiveness of the entire cosmos depends strictly upon him (cf. He. 1:2). Finally, he is the head of the church, which is his mystical body in the world. The church is energized by his power, and it is his instrument through which he carries on his work in the world.

Christ, the Reconciler of Creation (1:18b-20)

Not only is Christ the Lord of creation, he is also the one who shall reconcile all creation to himself. The Greek idea that spirit and the material universe were irreparably at odds directly conflicted with the purpose of the incarnation and the

¹⁹E. Simpson and F. Bruce, *Ephesians and Colossians [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 193-194.

²⁰W. Michaelis, *TDNT* (1968) VI.871-881.

²¹As is well known, the Jehovah's Witnesses appeal to this verse as evidence that Christ was the first created being, and therefore, in their view he was not the immortal God, cf. W. Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1977) 47; W. Martin, *Jehovah's Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1957) 19. Such an argument blatantly ignores the semantics of language as it was used in the first century, and worse, the Jehovah's Witnesses insert into the translated text of their *New World Translation* four occurrences of the word "other" which have no basis at all in the Greek text nor in the passage's context. The four insertions of this word "other" was, as Bruce Metzger says, "obviously inserted to make the passage refer to Jesus as being on a par with other created things," cf. B. Metzger, "The Jehovah's Witnesses and Jesus Christ," *Theology Today*, 10 (April 1953) 70. Such Scripture twisting, which deliberately alters a key biblical passage so that it will not contradict a sectarian doctrine, is unconscionable, cf. J. Sire, *Scripture Twisting: 20 Ways the Cults Misread the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1980) 34-36.

²²The expression "thrones or powers or rulers or authorities" probably has reference to cosmic powers, not earthly kings. These same words are used in intertestamental Jewish literature to refer to angelic beings of the highest order, cf. P. O'Brien, 46-47.

redemptive work of Jesus. Christ is supreme in his redemptive work, and there is no source outside him that can be called upon to give redemptive fullness. He is the *arche* (= beginning), that is, the origin²³ of a new order, just as ancient Adam was the beginning of the old order. His headship over the new creation was established in his resurrection from the dead, or as Lightfoot says, "His resurrection from the dead is His title to the headship of the church."²⁴ As such, he is supreme in every regard, so much so, that the fullness of the Divine Nature resides in him.

This last idea, that God in all his fullness dwells in Christ, indicates that all the attributes and activities of God--his Spirit, word, wisdom and glory--are perfectly displayed in Christ.²⁵ There are no other intermediaries between God and the world of humans. Rather, there is only one mediator, the Christ who was both God and man (cf. 1 Ti. 2:5). Whoever were the teachers who confused the Colossians on this point, Paul makes clear that true fullness was in Christ alone, and in fact, the true Christian teacher does not possess anything beyond Christ to give to the people!²⁶ The reconciling work of Christ in his death on the cross was a cosmic event affecting the entire universe. Of course, the question must be answered as to what this means. Some, following Origen, conclude in favor of universalism, a state in which ultimately all humans, angels and even Satan himself will in the end be restored.²⁷ Most Christians, however, understand the reconciliation of all things to refer to the subjugation and forced submission of all rebellious entities to Christ (cf. Phil. 2:9-11), that is, that the whole created order will ultimately be brought into alignment with his supremacy through his atonement and exaltation. This is not to say that all will be saved, but that Christ is the sufficient Savior of all who believe and that there is no other Savior besides him. Furthermore, he has established peace precisely because he has defeated all alien forces in the cross and the resurrection. The idea of universal salvation seems very difficult to reconcile with the teachings of Jesus, and in fact, with the teachings of Paul elsewhere (cf. Mt. 7:21-23; 18:8-9; 25:41; Lk.

²³The term *arche* (= beginning, origin) does not mean that Jesus was the first Christian, but that he was the origin of the church, or as the NEB renders it, "He is its origin, the first to return from the dead," cf. H. McDonald, *Colossians & Philemon* (Waco, TX: Word, 1980) 51.

²⁴J. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians* (rpt. Lynn, MA: Hendrickson, 1981) 157.

²⁵F. Bruce, *Colossians*, 207.

²⁶Lucas, 53.

²⁷The earliest clearly universalist writings date from the Greek church fathers, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, though the idea was declared to be heretical by the 5th Ecumenical Council in AD 553. In more modern times, theologians such as Karl Barth have implied, if not directly affirmed, universal salvation and restoration, not to mention other thinkers, such as Jacques Ellul, cf. D. Eller, *EDT* (1984) 1128-1130; J. Ellul, *What I Believe*, trans. G. Bromiley (Grand Rapids/London: Eerdmans/Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1989) 188-209. Augustine, and later the Reformers, rejected the idea, though it resurfaces periodically among various streams of Christian thinking, such as, in Neal Punt, *Unconditional Good News* (1980), cf. Eller, 1130.

12:4-5; Ro. 2:5, 8, 12; 9:22; Phil. 3:19; 2 Th. 1:8-9; 2:10; 1 Th. 1:10; 5:3, 9; etc.).²⁸

The Reconciling Work of Christ (1:21-23)

From the assertion that Christ ultimately will reconcile everything to himself, Paul narrows his focus to the Colossians as women and men in whom God had begun this reconciling work by his sanctifying death. The event of reconciliation, as Paul already had said, was in the historical crucifixion (1:20). In that historical event, the Colossians themselves had been reconciled to God. True fullness was grounded in an accomplished work, not an existential or mystical experience. However, Paul was concerned to point out that this reconciliation was not an impersonal thing, for the Colossians, in fact, had been estranged and alienated from God. Paul's metaphor is of a broken familial relationship between humans and God. The Colossians had been intellectually hostile toward God and openly rebellious toward him in their lifestyle. But God had acted decisively in the death of Jesus to heal this divine-human rift. He took divine initiative,²⁹ and this initiative took the form of incarnation. Paul emphasizes the incarnational aspect of God's reconciling work by using the phrase "Christ's physical body" (NIV).³⁰ It is probable that Paul here is directly aiming at any tendency toward a docetic view of Christ.³¹ In his reconciling death, Christ effected holiness for the Colossian believers, a holiness that would have its culmination in the end when he would present them blemish-free and exempt from any accusations. This was true fullness! Neither asceticism nor mysticism could improve upon the reconciling, sanctifying work of Christ on the cross!

This presentation of the Colossians as holy and free from accusation at the end was contingent upon their perseverance until the end. As Bruce has said, "If the Bible teaches the final perseverance of the saints, it also teaches that the saints are those who finally persevere--in Christ."³² Paul's language need not be taken to imply doubt, however, even though continuance is the test of reality. O'Brien paraphrases

²⁸G. Ladd, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 87-102.

²⁹Incidentally, in Paul's theology of reconciliation, which appears in several of his letters, God is always the subject and humans are always the object, cf. A. Hunter, *The Gospel According to Paul*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966) 23.

³⁰Lit., "in the body of his flesh"

³¹Docetism, based on the Greek verb *dokeo* (= to seem), became an alternative Gnostic christology in the 2nd century. It was an attempt to protect the doctrine that matter was evil, and in terms of Jesus, it resulted in a christology that denied that he was truly human or that he truly suffered. The docetic view was that he only "seemed" to be human and only "seemed" to suffer. In a more generic way, the adjective "docetic" refers to any theology that would minimize or deny the humanness or human limitations of Jesus, cf. V. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (New York: Macmillan, 1964) 72. Whether docetism as a christology was as early as Paul is unknown, but according to a very ancient tradition, Gnostic thought had its origin with Simon Magus (mentioned in Acts 8), cf. J. Gonzales, *A History of Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970) I.134.

³²Simpson and Bruce, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 213.

the statement, "At any rate if you stand firm in the faith--and I am sure that you will."³³ The term *elpis* (= hope) in Paul's theology denotes not a tentative wishfulness, but rather, a source of confidence and strength, an earnest expectation, and a patient certainty.³⁴

Paul's own role as a missionary was part of the reconciling work of God. The gospel he preached and which Epaphras brought to Colossae was one and the same with the good news of God's universal reconciling work which had been announced to the world. Far from being announced to only a few who were special members of a secret society (typical of Gnostic sects and the Greco-Roman mystery religions), the Christian gospel was a universal event. Precisely what Paul may mean by the phrase "preached to every creature under heaven" is debatable. He can hardly mean that every person in the whole world already had heard the Christian message, for earlier he speaks of the current progress of the gospel (1:6). It may be that this statement is merely a generalism intended to say that the gospel already had reached the major urban centers of the empire,³⁵ and if so, is to be taken on a par with other statements, such as, "...from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ" (Ro. 15:19b) and "now there is no more place for me to work in these regions" (Ro. 15:23a).³⁶ On the other hand, this may be an idiomatic way of referring to the cross itself, a cosmic event that was "proclaimed to the world" in the sense that it was done for the world.³⁷ Some interpreters see the phrase as referring to the orientation of the gospel to all humankind, both Jew and Greek,³⁸ still others as a kind of prolepsis toward the future,³⁹ and yet others as an intentional hyperbole.⁴⁰ What is not in doubt is that Paul intends the Colossians to understand that the message about Jesus was universal in scope, and when they came to faith in Christ, they had committed themselves to a full gospel.

³³O'Brien, 69. How far this passage may go toward establishing a doctrine of falling from grace versus eternal security is moot, for each side reads the text through the lens of its theological presuppositions, and the question cannot be decided on the basis of grammar alone.

³⁴H. Ridderbos, *Paul, An Outline of His Theology*, trans. J. de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 248-249.

³⁵C. Vaughn, "Colossians," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) XI.188.

³⁶It seems that Paul's method of evangelizing a province was not to preach in every place himself, but to establish centers of Christian life in two or three important places from which the gospel then could be disseminated into the surrounding areas, cf. R. Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 12.

³⁷This seems to be the position of Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, 68.

³⁸McDonald, 61.

³⁹Simpson and Bruce, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 213.

⁴⁰C. Moule, "Colossians and Philemon," *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, ed. M. Black and H. Rowley (Hong Kong: Nelson, 1962) 992.

The Mystery and the Mission (1:24--2:5)

Paul's final statement in 1:23, that he had become a servant of the gospel, leads him to describe more fully what this role involves and what the gospel is. In the first place, Paul sees his service to the gospel as a way of participating in the sufferings of Christ which, as he states it, are uncompleted.⁴¹ These adversities accompanying his evangelistic tours (incarceration being one of them) were accepted without complaint, since they were experienced in the interests of the church and its extension into the world. God's commission⁴² to Paul was that he should preach the Christian message in its fullness, a message that he describes as a mystery.⁴³ There seems little doubt that when Paul speaks of the gospel as being "filled,"⁴⁴ he is directly challenging the notion that Christ was not enough. This mystery, which had been undisclosed in previous eras but now had been unveiled, was that nations of the world could share in the reconciling work of God. The very heart of this message was the indwelling of Christ as a final pledge of the glory to come. That the Messiah would come to the Israelite nation was a thought no Jew would find strange, but that he would come to indwell Gentiles was certainly a new, rich and glorious idea!⁴⁵ The fact of the indwelling Christ, and not some other religious path, was the guarantee of future perfection and maturity. Christ was the central content of the Christian proclamation as well as the central content of the teaching of the church.⁴⁶ This

⁴¹The exact expression, *antanaplero ta hystere mata ton thlipseon tou Christou* (= fill up the things lacking of the afflictions of Christ), has caused much comment. It is probable that what Paul has in mind is that the "sufferings of Christ" refer to the suffering of his messengers as they proclaim the gospel. As such, Christ continues to suffer when the members of his body, the church, suffer. In a similar way, the Lord Jesus once said to Paul when Paul was persecuting the church, "Why do you persecute me?" (Ac. 9:4). To be sure, some Roman Catholic interpreters have advanced the idea that this passage approves of the merits of the saints or of the efficacy of indulgences, but such an interpretation is certainly not uniform in the Roman church, and some of the best Roman Catholic scholars interpret the passage more or less as we have done here, cf. J. Grassi, "The Letter to the Colossians," *JBC* (1968) II.338. It would seriously run counter to Paul's whole argument if, after he had defended the fullness of Christ's atonement in the cross, he here contradicted himself by saying that it was not yet full.

⁴²The word *oikonomian* (rendered "commission" in the NIV) is capable of a rather wide range of meanings, including plan and arrangement as well as stewardship, management, and administration over a household. The *oikonomia* (= household community), a major social structure of the Greco-Roman world, was a large inclusive and socially cohesive unit bound together under the authority of a family head, and it became Paul's sociological model for the church as the household of God, cf. D. Tidball, *The Social Context of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1984) 79-86. Paul's role, then, was like that of a servant in God's family, and as a member of that family he had been commissioned to preach the mystery of Christ.

⁴³The term *mysterion* (= mystery) appears more than twenty times in Paul's letters, and he seems to use it to denote an eschatological mystery, that is, a future development in God's plan that lies hidden for a long period but then is made known, cf. G. Bornkamm, *TDNT* (1967) IV.814-815.

⁴⁴The exact expression in the Greek text is "to fill [or fulfil] the word of God to you," which the NIV renders as "to present to you the Word of God in its fullness."

⁴⁵H. Carson, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) 53-54.

⁴⁶The first verb, *katangelo* (= preach), refers to the missionary proclamation of the good news, while the other verbs, *noutheteo* (= warn) and *didasko* (= teach), refer to the discipling process that follows conversion.

teaching ministry of the church would provide "all" the necessary wisdom, and it would result in complete fullness and maturity.⁴⁷ It is toward this end that Paul expended himself as he ministered with the power that God gave.

Paul was very concerned that the Christians in Asia whom he had not met personally should understand that in Christ they had been given fullness! In order to help them understand this fullness, he was in a great spiritual conflict. Paul seems to see his letter as a weapon of that conflict, for in fighting against the notions of syncretism, mysticism and eclecticism that were being inculcated in Colossae, Paul saw himself as fighting against a spiritual enemy, the *stoicheia* (= elemental beings) and powers and authorities of this world (cf. 2:8, 15). This spiritual warfare was going on so that the Christians in Asia might understand their position in Christ and so avoid being deceived by the fine-sounding arguments of the mystics. The way in which Paul piles up phrases to emphatically assert the sufficiency of Christ is very forceful. He wants his readers to be encouraged in their hearts and joined together in love so they can present a solid front to their opponents. In Christ they already have "all riches" and "full certainty of understanding." They already possess "full knowledge of the mystery of God", which is Christ. They already have come to the one in whom are hidden "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." In view of this fullness in Christ, where is the sophistry of the mystics?

Though he never had met them personally, and though because of his incarceration he was prevented from personally attending to their needs in this crisis, Paul sensed that he had a very personal investment in the Colossian church. His spirit was in fellowship with theirs as common members of the body of Christ, and he rejoiced in their "orderly array and firm front" (NEB).⁴⁸

Fullness in Christ (2:6-15)

Pressing his arguments home toward a very practical end, Paul now intends to urge the Colossians to remain faithful to the Christian message. There is an inner connection within his thoughts extending over the next several paragraphs that can be seen in the introductory phrases at 2:6 and 2:20 and 3:1.

"As you therefore received Christ...walk in him!"

"Since you died with Christ to the elemental beings of the world, why...do you still submit to the world's rules?"

"Since you therefore were raised with Christ, seek the things above!"

⁴⁷Again, Paul's use of the word *teleios* (= complete, perfect, mature, full) probably is aimed directly at the false teaching that fullness is to be found beyond Christ.

⁴⁸The vocabulary Paul uses in 2:5 is probably drawn from the military, and in effect, he rejoices in what he perceives as the Colossians' intention to close ranks and steadfastly resist the propaganda being foisted upon them.

These phrases demonstrate Paul's concern that the theology of the Christian message not be resigned to merely an abstraction. It must issue in a Christian way of life!

The opening phrase in 2:6 introduces the Colossians to the whole concept of Christian tradition. The verb *paralambano* (= to receive by tradition) indicates that the acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord was the Christian tradition.⁴⁹ The lordship of Christ must not be preempted by some other lordship, and the tradition of Christianity must not be preempted by some other tradition. The Colossians must take care not to be deceived by hollow and deceptive philosophy, but rather, they must continue in the growth process that had begun in their conversion. The *stoicheia*, which also are mentioned in 2:20, probably refer to personified spiritual forces, such as, angels, demons and pagan gods as they were paid homage in astrology and believed to exert control over the universe.⁵⁰ The syncretism and mysticism which were being urged upon the Colossians was nothing more than a human tradition, and it certainly was not compatible with the true tradition of Christ.

Against any syncretistic voices that called for a recognition of the *stoicheia*, Paul forcefully asserted that Christ alone was Lord, and in fact, all the fullness of the Deity resided in him. To have accepted Christ was to have accepted the fullness of God and to have given allegiance to the one who was Lord over every other power and authority, whether angel, demon or otherwise.

In 2:11, Paul raises the issue of circumcision. It is difficult to see why he should do this other than that the eclectic religion being inculcated in Colossae included Jewish elements. We know, of course, that the so-called Judaizers, whom Paul said had "infiltrated" the Christian ranks (Gal. 2:4), maintained that in order for one to become a Christian, it was necessary also to become a Jew (Ac. 15:1; Gal. 6:12). The threat to the Colossians seems to have been more complex than the

⁴⁹Paul understood the gospel as both a product of revelation and also of tradition. The revelational side had to do with his experience on the Damascus Road, and the traditional side had to do with what he learned about Jesus from the community of disciples who knew him, cf. F. Bruce, *Paul and Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974) 27-54.

⁵⁰The term *stoicheia* has received a fair amount of attention, because it was used in rather different ways in the Greco-Roman world. At a simple level, it might refer to elements of order, such as the sequence of alphabetic letters or the graces and manners which were socially appropriate. At a philosophical level, the *stoicheia* were the basic substances believed to underlie all reality, such as, earth, air, fire and water. At a religious level, these elemental substances were believed to be inhabited by spiritual entities. The *stoicheia* could even refer to the constellations and the zodiac which were believed to be controlled by deities, cf. H. Esser, *NIDNTT* (1976) II.451-453; J. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930) 591; *BAG* (1979) 768-769. Some translators opt for the more simple level of meaning, that is, that Paul is merely referring to worldly traditions, and as such, they render the term *stoicheia* as "basic principles" (so NIV, JB, NASB, KJV). Other translators read Paul's reference to the *stoicheia* in light of the mysticism mentioned in 2:18 and render the term as "elemental spirits" (so RSV, NEB, Moffat). The majority of scholars seem to understand the expression in this latter way, cf. O'Brien, 129-132.

Judaizing tendencies of the false teachers who came to Galatia, but it may well have included such tendencies. In any case, the call by these outsiders for the Colossians to strive for fullness in mysticism or eclecticism was fundamentally the same error as the call of the Judaizers for the Galatians to strive for fullness in circumcision. Both implied that Christ alone was not enough.

Far from conceding that circumcision added anything to one's standing with God, Paul asserted that those who were believers already had received a Christian counterpart to circumcision, that is, baptism. Their baptism was not merely a physical act, such as circumcision in which the foreskin of flesh was removed by surgery, but it was a spiritual act by which the weakness of the flesh⁵¹ had been removed by Christ.⁵² Baptism, then, was indeed a kind of circumcision, and since it actually removed human weakness which was dominated by sin, it was far superior to the Jewish ritual. Just as Christ died, was buried and rose to live a new life, the baptismal candidate descended into the water and emerged to live a new life (cf. Ro. 6:4). In this Christian ritual, the believer symbolically reenacted the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.⁵³ Before the Colossians came to faith in Christ, they had been dead in their sins,⁵⁴ a state that spiritually corresponded to the uncircumcised pagans of the Old Testament who were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel. But God made the Colossians alive by forgiving their sins and canceling the condemnation which had been leveled against them.⁵⁵ The indictment had been

⁵¹Paul's actual phrase is that "the body of the flesh" was "put off." Paul uses the terms flesh and spirit in his writings to describe two spheres of power. The flesh is not merely the body in and of itself nor yet even the lower nature, but rather, a characterization of the whole self in distinction from God. Flesh is not only the material side of the human person, it is the arena of weakness which becomes the tool of sin, cf. L. Keck, *Paul and His Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 100-108.

The above understanding, then, reads the phrase "the putting off of the body of the flesh" to refer to what happens to believers, particularly as expressed in water baptism. On the other hand, some commentators take the phrase to refer directly to Christ's passion when he stripped off the body of his own flesh in death, though this interpretation seems less likely, cf. Moule, 993.

⁵²When Paul says *peritome tou Christou* (= circumcision of Christ), the expression probably should be taken as a subjective genitive, that is, the spiritual circumcision which Christ accomplished for us all in his sacrificial work (so NIV). If so, the circumcision of Christ refers to the circumcision done *by* Christ rather than the circumcision done *to* Christ. If one takes it as an objective genitive, that is, as the circumcision done to Christ, then the phrase is a gruesome figure for Christ's death itself, cf. G. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 152.

⁵³Since Christian baptism is used here as a counterpart to the practice of circumcision in the Old Testament, many Christians argue that this implies and in fact endorses the baptism of infants, cf. O. Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 56-70. Others argue that this is not the case and that the analogy should not be carried so far, cf. P. Jewett, *Infant Baptism & the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978). A mediating position between infant baptism and believer baptism may be found in D. Bridge & D. Phypers, *The Water that Divides* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1977).

⁵⁴Many manuscripts read "our sins" rather than "your sins," and if so, then Paul is including himself in the company of those who had been delivered in Christ's atonement. The textual question is moot.

⁵⁵Paul's use of the word *cheirograpson* (= handwritten document) refers to a certificate of indebtedness, and it is an image derived from the legal practice about debts, cf. BAG (1979) 880. It could refer to a signature, as in a bond,

nailed to the cross, and as F. F. Bruce has said, it was "an act of triumphant defiance in the face of those blackmailing powers who were holding it over you as a threat."⁵⁶

In his death, Christ was like a conquering general who led in his train of captives the spiritual forces arrayed against the Colossians. He had disarmed these enemies and publicly exposed them to shame in his victory procession (1 Co. 2:8). The cross of shame and weakness had become God's vehicle of triumph and power! Paul takes his imagery, of course, from the well-known processions of triumph in which Roman generals paraded their captives of war in chains through the streets of Rome at the conclusion of a foreign campaign. If this was what Christ did to the "rulers and authorities," how could the Colossians think that by turning to these mystical forces they could hope to reach a fullness greater than that of Christ?

The Call to Avoid the Practices of the Syncretistic Mystics (2:16-23)

Here Paul provides some indication of the practices of the false teachers, practices that the Colossian Christians must reject. As is not unusual in such cases, the mystics apparently indulged in spiritual intimidation toward the Colossian Christians, because they were not following certain rituals and taboos. Paul instructs the believers to be unmoved by such intimidation. No one has the privilege of condemning God's people because they do not join in these eclectic rituals.

The first area of Paul's concern, when one surveys his statements in light of our knowledge of 1st century culture, may stem from either the Jewish world of kosher food laws and calendar celebrations or similar pagan rituals. The expression "what you eat or drink" may well have to do with the dietary rules in Mosaic law. Alternatively, this same expression might refer to asceticism in general, such as was practiced in the pagan world to avoid the transmigration of souls or the ingesting of demons. Similarly, the observance of holy days could refer to the various Sabbaths and annual festivals described in Torah or else to pagan religious festivals.⁵⁷ Scholars are divided over which circle of influence is most significant here, Jewish or pagan, but in the larger sense it matters little. Whether Jewish or pagan, such rituals could not make anyone closer to God. At the same time, the fact that Paul describes these rituals as a shadow of coming things in God's plan tips the balance toward a Jewish

similar to an I.O.U., cf. J. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930) 687. Specifically what Paul has in mind is debatable. To say that he has in mind an I.O.U. from Adam to the Devil, a view espoused by some of the church fathers, is probably too imaginative, cf. O'Brien, 124. Others see it as a reference to God's heavenly indictment of the human race, and still others as the law of Moses which condemned all who violated it. Paul does not identify it specifically, and in any case, his general intention is not in doubt. He obviously means that as sinners the Colossians were indicted and guilty, and in the cross, their indictment was cancelled.

⁵⁶Simpson and Bruce, 238.

⁵⁷O'Brien, xxx-xxxviii, 138-139.

orientation. It seems unlikely that Paul would make such a statement about pagan rituals. In fact, as one scholar has said, the Letter to the Hebrews can be looked at as an extended commentary on this idea that the Jewish rituals of the Old Testament are foreshadowings of the reality that has come in Jesus Christ.⁵⁸

The second area of Paul's concern was with mysticism. The exact nature of this mysticism is unclear. It could possibly be connected with the Jewish cult of *merkavah* (= chariot), a form of mysticism in which the worshiper, when reaching a peak of ecstasy, was believed to have been caught up in the fiery chariot of Elijah into the heavenlies where he associated with angels.⁵⁹ Whatever it involved, the false teachers at Colossae were engaging in a misdirected humility (probably a form of self-denial similar to that of eastern ascetics who attempt to empty the mind and body of impurities in the preparation for transcendence) and the worship of angels. Due to their ecstatic visions, the worshipers became inflated with pride over their mystical experiences as though such things placed them at a higher spiritual level than their fellows. Paul's response was blunt. If the Colossians fall into such practices, they will cheat themselves out of their prize! Such mystics had lost connection with Christ, the head of the church, who is the source from which all members in the body of Christ must gain their nourishment and growth. Like a cancer that expands as an aberrant growth in the body, this eclectic religion would destroy them in the end.

Finally, Paul directly addresses the practice of asceticism. How could the Colossians think to submit themselves to the rigors of asceticism as an avenue to fullness when already they had died to the influence of the *stoicheia* (cf. 2:8)? These cosmic forces no longer held any power over believers who had been transferred from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of God's Son (1:13). The buzz words of the ascetics, "Don't handle this, don't taste that, don't touch the other," must be ignored.⁶⁰ Such demands for abstinence, while at a superficial level might seem very pious, in fact were forms of self-designed worship⁶¹ and misdirected humility. All such rules were based on human notions, they ultimately would come to nothing, and more to the point, they did not work! One cannot control human appetites by

⁵⁸E. Ashby, "Colossians," *The International Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Bruce (England/Grand Rapids: Marshall Pickering/Zondervan, 1986) 1457.

⁵⁹E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 432. *Merkavah* transcendentalism included not only the mystical ascent into heaven, but also the joining of the worshiper in singing with the angels. This mysticism that began in Palestine spread into other Jewish communities. The mystic, in preparing for the ascent in the chariot, made himself ready by fasting, eating special food, or bathing. Magical formulae were repeated to gain entry through the guarded gates of heaven, cf. P. Alexander, "3 (Hebrew Apocalypse of) Enoch: A New Translation and Introduction," *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983) I.223ff.

⁶⁰The NIV quite appropriately puts these statements in quotation marks, since Paul is merely parroting the clichés of the false teachers.

⁶¹Lit., "would-be religion" or "self-made religion," cf. *BAG* (1979) 218.

making more rules; self-control comes only through the power of the indwelling Christ, which the Colossians already had received (1:27b; 2:6-7, 19). Religious prohibitionism does not lead to true holiness; it only leads to superficiality.

The Christian Alternative (3:1-4)

The Christian alternative to eclectic mysticism, ritualism and religious prohibitionism is a full and consistent devotion to Christ himself. The Lord Jesus must be the object of focus. If the believer has been resurrected with Christ into a new life, a life of faith symbolized by the emergence of the convert from the baptismal waters (2:12), then he/she must keep the ascended Christ as the object of worship and hold him as the source of all spiritual growth. Paul is striking for a careful balance here. He does not reject asceticism and mysticism only to leave the believer in an ethical and spiritual vacuum. He does not wish to leave his readers with the impression that living a holy life is unimportant. He does not intend to champion Christian freedom so that believers can live lives of self-indulgence. Rather, he directs the Colossian believers to set their hearts firmly toward Christ. In Christ, the old life has died and a new life has begun which has its source in the risen Lord. Here is true spirituality and the basis for sound ethics. This new life may not be immediately apparent to the surrounding world, since it is hidden with Christ in God, but it is real just the same. Its reality will become apparent at the manifestation of Christ at the end of the age, when he will come for his people.

The Paraenesis: 3:5--4:6

The paraenesis in Paul's letters, that is, the ethical section which follows and is based upon his theological exposition, often contains conservative, traditional materials drawn from the Old Testament, other Jewish literature, the teachings of Jesus, and at times even Hellenistic moral traditions.⁶² These sections are intensely practical, and they issue to the Christian communities an urgent call for them to live the Christian life. Paul's pattern was to deliver a doctrinal exposition that was relevant to the situation of the community to which he was writing, and he followed this with moral instruction and exhortation. This pattern is somewhat similar to the two kinds of instruction in Rabbinic Judaism, the *Haggadah*, which addressed doctrinal matters, and the *Halakah*, which addressed moral matters.⁶³

⁶²Doty, 38.

⁶³Cannon, 65-66. It should be noted that the rabbinic *Halakah* (from the Hebrew verb *halak* = to walk) formed the oral tradition or unwritten Torah of Judaism. The *Haggadah*, on the other hand, developed the stories of the Hebrew Bible rather than its law, cf. D. Russell, *Between the Testaments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) 67.

Vices to Avoid (3:5-11)

Paul gives two vice lists, each with five vices, which the Colossians must avoid. The first list recalls the holiness code in Leviticus 18, since the vices are all associated with sexual sins. Paul's use of such lists seem intended to be suggestive rather than exhaustive. The items in these lists, and other similar vices, are to be found in various other New Testament lists of wrongful behaviors (cf. Ro. 1:29-31; 13:13; 1 Co. 5:10-11; 6:9-10; 2 Co. 12:20; Ga. 5:19-21; Ep. 4:31; 5:3-5; 1 Ti. 1:9-10; 6:4-5; 2 Ti. 3:2-5; Tit. 3:3; 1 Pe. 2:1; 4:3-4; Jude 8, 16; Rv. 9:20-21; 21:8; 22:15).

Specifically, Paul exhorts the Colossian believers to "put to death the earthly members," a metonymy that refers to their bodily appendages which were actively involved in committing sin.⁶⁴ The first vice is *porneia* (= fornication, sexual immorality). In a society that viewed pre-marital intercourse and extra-marital intercourse as natural, necessary and as justifiable as eating and drinking,⁶⁵ such a prohibition was essential. The second vice is *akatharsia* (= impurity), and while it is more general than the previous one and can refer to viciousness and immorality in general, it often carries a sexual overtone.⁶⁶ The third vice is *pathos* (= passion), and here it refers to the disgraceful passions of illicit sexual excitement. The fourth is *epithymia* (= desire) with the modifier *kakos* (= bad), an expression that frequently carried the nuance of wrongful sexual desire.⁶⁷ The fifth is *pleonexia* (= covetousness, insatiableness),⁶⁸ which in the context of the foregoing words, probably refers to an obsession with sex. Such a fixation on sex in desiring more in both quantity and variety is a form of idolatry, for it displaces God. It is due to just such sins that God's wrath will come. Such practices, which characterized the Colossians before they came to Christ, must now be rejected.

The second list, also containing five vices, seems to concentrate on personal and social relationships, and especially, those sins that create alienation. The first vice is *orge* (= anger), followed by *thymos* (= passion, rage), *kakia* (= malice, malignity), *blasphemia* (= slander, abusive speech),⁶⁹ and *aischrologia* (= obscene speech).⁷⁰ In addition to these vices, Paul warns against lying, which along with the other vices, are practices of the old life that have been "put off" in baptism (cf. 2:11). The beginning of new life, which was symbolized in baptism (2:12-13), was both a

⁶⁴Elsewhere, Paul uses the vocabulary of "members" to refer to bodily parts, cf. Ro. 6:19; 7:23.

⁶⁵TDNT (1968) VI.582-583.

⁶⁶BAG (1979) 28.

⁶⁷BAG (1979) 293.

⁶⁸BAG (1979) 667.

⁶⁹In the Bible, blasphemy is not only something one speaks against God; it also can be what one speaks against another human being, as in the modern curse, "Go to hell."

⁷⁰BAG (1979) 25.

"putting off" and a "putting on." The new life that was "put on" is always in the process of renewal in full knowledge so as to bring the believer closer and closer to the image and character of Jesus Christ. Paul's expression, "after the image of him that created him," is an obvious reference to Genesis 1:27, where God created the first humans in his own image. But the first humans, who rebelled against God, must now be viewed as the "old humanity" which must be discarded so that the "new humanity," which is of Christ, can be embraced. Just as Adam was the beginning of the old creation, so Christ is the beginning of a new creation (cf. 1 Co. 15:45-49). In this new creation, the old lines of alienation and hierarchical prejudices have been abolished. National, ethnic, and class divisions have no place in the body of Christ. Jews are not better than Greeks, and Greeks are not better than the uncultured barbarians who live on the frontier.⁷¹ Free persons are not better than slaves. Rather, Christ is the common ground for everyone. He is all that matters, and he indwells all believers, regardless of race or status.

Virtues to Practice (3:12-17)

Just as Paul gave two lists of five vices, he now provides a list of five virtues followed by several other exhortations toward living the Christian life. As believers, the Colossians were God's elect, his holy and beloved people. Therefore, they should be characterized by compassion,⁷² kindness,⁷³ humility,⁷⁴ meekness⁷⁵ and patience.⁷⁶ They must show tolerance for each other⁷⁷ and forgiveness toward each other over their mutual grievances. Most important, they must demonstrate love as the bond of completeness, for love is the highest virtue (cf. 1 Co. 13:13), and it is the primary force that preserves the unity of the church.

Since the various Christians are members of one body, the body of Christ, they must live in peace with each other. Fighting Christians can never have been Christ's purpose, and when they degenerate into such behavior, they already have been defeated (cf. 1 Co. 6:7). The Colossian believers also should cultivate an attitude of

⁷¹The terms barbarian and Scythian are set in contrast with Greeks, and they refer to cultural divisions. The Greeks were the intellectuals and cultural elite. Scythians and barbarians were culturally illiterate, cf. Simpson and Bruce, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 276.

⁷²Quite literally, Paul speaks of "bowels of compassions." *Splanchna* (= entrails) in the Greek world was figuratively used to refer to the seat of human emotion, particularly love, sympathy and mercy, cf. BAG (1979) 763. For them, the bowels were the figurative equivalent of the way we refer to the heart in modern parlance.

⁷³Or goodness or generosity

⁷⁴Or modesty

⁷⁵Or gentleness

⁷⁶Or steadfastness or endurance or forbearance

⁷⁷The verb *anecho* means to endure, to bear up with or to put up with, cf. BAG (1979) 65.

thankfulness. They must deeply treasure the teaching about Christ⁷⁸ which they had received, and they must continue to teach and admonish each other by means of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs as an expression of thanksgiving.⁷⁹ In fact, all life was to be lived under the authority of the Lord Jesus, and every spoken word and performed act was to be done in his name.⁸⁰ A life so lived was an expression of thanks to God the Father through Jesus Christ his Son. This latter expression points toward Jesus the Son as the mediator between God and humans.

The Christian Household Code (3:18--4:1)

Turning from the vices and virtues listings, Paul now delivers a series of exhortations to wives and husbands, children and fathers, and slaves and masters. This sort of ethical list was headed by the German word *haustafel* (= household table) in Luther's German translation of the New Testament, and the term has stuck as a technical expression for the New Testament household codes or catalogues of domestic duties.⁸¹ Such lists were common in both the Jewish and the Greco-Roman world, and they regulated such things as family relationships, social relationships, duties, and hierarchical relationships.⁸² The code here is a station code, that is, a code in which the stations of life are addressed with the subordinate member of each reciprocal relationship mentioned first (see also Ep. 5:21--6:9; 1 Pe. 2:13--3:7; Ro. 13:1-7).⁸³

It should be observed that the Greco-Roman social institution of the *oikonomia* (= household community) forms the significant social background for the *haustefel*.⁸⁴

⁷⁸I understand the expression *logos tou Christou* (= word of Christ) to be an objective genitive, hence, the word about Christ.

⁷⁹It is probably not wise to attempt rigid distinctions between the three expressions, but at least it can be pointed out that the term psalms is borrowed from the Old Testament and the synagogue service. Since the verb *psallo* means to pluck a stringed instrument, it may be that psalms included the singing of songs from the Old Testament Psalter accompanied by a musical instrument, though it should not be restricted to such. Hymns, on the other hand, may refer to Christian compositions. We know that the early Christians produced poetic compositions of praise, teaching and exhortation, cf. R. Martin, "Approaches to New Testament Exegesis," *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 235-241. The term "songs" is probably adapted from the Greco-Roman world, in which songs were sung to celebrate battles, harvests and festivals, cf. *TDNT* (1972) VIII.489ff. For Christians, songs may have been celebrations of Christian experience. Paul uses the modifier "spiritual" to denote that the songs are motivated by the Holy Spirit.

⁸⁰The expression *en to onomati* (= in the name) carried the idiomatic value of acting on behalf of someone or acting by the authority of someone. To speak or act "in the name of Jesus" was to recognize his lordship, cf. R. Abba, "Name," *IDB* (1962) III.507.

⁸¹O. Seitz, "Lists, ethical," *IDB* (1962) III.137-139.

⁸²Cannon, 111-121.

⁸³D. Schroeder, "Lists, ethical," *IDBSup* (1976) 546.

⁸⁴A Greco-Roman household was a large inclusive and socially cohesive unit, usually composed of a number of families and individuals who were bound together under the authority of the senior male member of the principal family. There was no limit to the size of the household, providing that the householder was able to support its

The very fact that some members of pagan households became Christians, and in some cases entire households became Christians (cf. Ac. 11:14; 16:15, 31; 18:8), meant an upsetting of the Greco-Roman household structure. Such abandonment of the normal structures would have been perceived as an outright rebellion against society, and by the 2nd century, the situation gave rise to the slander that Christianity destroyed the household by attracting women, slaves and young people.⁸⁵ At best a severe tension would have developed between the Christian community and the pagan patriarchal household. Wives and slaves normally were expected to practice the religion of their husbands and masters and to preserve the religious ancestral customs of the household.⁸⁶ Because the household was a paradigm for the state, such abandonment of cultural structures would be considered a political threat as well.

In thus adopting and Christianizing the Greco-Roman household codes, it seems that Paul was aiming at some kind of social stability. Granted, such exhortation qualifies as an accommodation ethic, that is, an instruction that falls short of the ideal called for by the liberating implications of the gospel. These exhortations create a tension within Paul's own letters. On the one hand, Paul can say that in the new creation there is neither slave nor free but Christ is all and in all (3:11). On the other, he can instruct slaves to obey their earthly masters in everything (3:22). What saves Paul from being unprincipled in this accommodation ethic is his overriding concern that the gospel not be hindered, even if it meant yielding ground temporarily in other areas. To the Corinthians, Paul poses the question, "Am I not free" (1 Co. 9:1)? The answer, of course, is, "Yes!" However, Paul also is willing to limit freedom in order not to hinder the gospel of Christ (1 Co. 9:12-18). "Though I am free...I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible" (1 Co. 9:19). All this, the apostle says, "I do...for the sake of the gospel" (1 Co. 9:23).⁸⁷

The controlling idea in the household code of Colossians is the factor that all behavior, whether by a subordinate to someone in authority or vice versa, was to be performed as unto the Lord. The submission of wives to husbands is "as fitting in the Lord" (3:18). The requirement for children to obey their parents is because "this pleases the Lord" (3:20). Slaves must obey their masters "with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord" (3:22). Whatever one does, he/she must do it "as working for

members. Included in the household were friends, clients, relatives, slaves and so forth. As such, a household was a rather mixed community of individuals having various social positions. Since in the early church many of the congregations and house churches were actually made up of households, and since a basic premise of the gospel was that in Christ there was no longer to be any racial, social or gender prejudices (Col. 3:11; cf. Ga. 3:28), the issue naturally arose as to how household life was to be regulated, cf. D. Tidball, 79-86.

⁸⁵E. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 263.

⁸⁶Cicero, *Laws* II.7.19-27 (as quoted in Fiorenza, 263).

⁸⁷P. Richardson, *Paul's Ethic of Freedom* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979) 82-90.

the Lord" (3:23), for "it is the Lord Christ you are serving" (3:24), and the Lord both rewards and punishes (3:24-25). Masters of slaves must remember that they also have a Master in heaven, the Lord Jesus. Lloyd Ogilvie is quite correct when he says that the gospel is relational, and the test of one's relationship with God will be in the relationships he/she has with other people.⁸⁸ In limiting one's freedom in Christ by submitting to the social hierarchical expectations of Greco-Roman culture, Paul does not necessarily legitimize these hierarchical structures. He does not speak out in favor of slavery or male chauvinism. Rather, he adopts the position that these structures are of less importance than the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, and he tempers them by also giving advice to the persons which society had traditionally given authority. Harshness is inappropriate for Christians (3:19), and actions that cause bitterness must be rejected (3:21). Those with authority must be fair, since they are to follow the pattern of God, who does not show favoritism (3:25b--4:1).

Further Exhortations (4:2-6)

In a short paragraph of concluding admonitions, Paul urges the Colossian believers to steadfastly continue praying. Prayer is associated with watchfulness, though the apostle does not specify precisely for what one is to watch. It may be that he is thinking of the tendency toward drowsiness and so recalls the words of Jesus to the sleepy disciples, "Watch and pray" (cf. Mk. 14:38). Better, however, is the explanation that he refers to watchfulness for the return of the Lord (cf. 3:4), cogently expressed in the Aramaic prayer *maranatha*, that is, "Our Lord, come" (cf. 1 Co. 16:22). Their fundamental attitude in prayer should be thankfulness. Paul asks them to pray for him so that his ministry in preaching the gospel might be effective. Finally, they should behave themselves wisely toward unbelievers, capitalizing on whatever opportunities present themselves in order to share their witness about Christ. Daily conversation must be gracious, acting as a purifying and wholesome influence toward those who do not know Christ.⁸⁹ This gracious manner of communication in turn would open doors of opportunity to answer questions about the Christian faith.

The Closing: 4:7-18

Hellenistic letters usually concluded with two or three conventional formulae-- a wish for good health, a word of farewell, and sometimes a closing greeting.⁹⁰ Paul is less bound by such conventions, and instead of the standard farewells, he regularly

⁸⁸L. Ogilvie, *Loved and Forgiven* (Glendale, CA: Regal, 1977) 125.

⁸⁹The metaphor "seasoned with salt" was probably a common idiom based upon the use of salt as a preservative, cf. R. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, 128.

⁹⁰Doty, 39.

closes with a benediction or a doxology, and in several instances, he includes greetings from his fellow-workers and/or other persons in his company. Also, he sometimes indicates his travel plans or his plans to contact the church through intermediaries. This is the case here.

Future Contacts (4:7-9)

While Paul obviously would not be able to visit the Colossians personally, due to his incarceration, he intended to send to them Tychicus as his ambassador. Tychicus was originally a representative of the Asian churches who had accompanied Paul on his final trip to Jerusalem (Ac. 20:4). Paul would come to use Tychicus as a trusted ambassador on more than one occasion (cf. Ep. 6:21; Tit. 3:12; 2 Ti. 4:12), though this may have been his first mission as a courier. As Paul's representative, he would fill in the details of Paul's prison situation as well as be available to verbally explain any aspects of Paul's correspondence.⁹¹

Also coming would be Onesimus, a native of Colossae who had been converted under Paul's ministry while the apostle was imprisoned (Plmn 10). Other than explaining that Onesimus was to be accepted as a "faithful and dear brother," Paul saves any personal information about Onesimus for his short correspondence to Philemon.

Greetings from Companions (4:10-14)

Paul now includes greetings from other Christians who were with him at the time of composition, beginning first with his Jewish companions and then listing his gentile friends. Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica (cf. Ac. 19:29; 20:4; 27:2), is designated as a fellow-prisoner, though it is unclear whether this is merely a metaphor for one who is "Christ's captive" (so NEB) or one who actually was serving a prison sentence. John Mark, with whom Paul had been highly displeased because of his premature return home from a missionary trip (cf. Ac. 13:13; 15:36-40), was a cousin of the well-known Christian leader Barnabas, and the church already had heard of him, apparently from another source. Later, he would write the Second Gospel. Here, his relationship with Paul is on better grounds, since he receives the apostle's recommendation. Jesus Justus is the third member of the trio of Jews who was with Paul.

As for Paul's gentile companions, he lists Epaphras, apparently the pastor in the Colossian church who first had started the Christian work in Colossae and had

⁹¹The verb *parakaleo* (= to encourage, exhort, urge) in 4:8 may well suggest that Tychicus' role was to admonish the community in Paul's behalf.

come to visit Paul in his imprisonment (cf. 1:7). Epaphras' deep pastoral concern⁹² for the Colossian congregation and her sister churches in Laodecia and Hierapolis was expressed in his intense prayers for their steadfastness and maturity. Also, he sent greetings from Luke, a practicing physician and the author of the Third Gospel,⁹³ as well as Demas, later to become famous for abandoning Paul because he "loved this present world" (2 Ti. 4:10).

Final Greetings and Advice (4:15-17)

Paul now salutes the Christians in Laodecia, the sister-city of Colossae, particularly the house-church which met in the home of Nympha. Nympha is a feminine name,⁹⁴ and the fact that the church was in her house marks her as a leader in the Laodecian church. Paul also had prepared a separate letter for the Laodecian church, but he encouraged the two sister-churches to exchange their letters so that they could each benefit from both of them.⁹⁵ This instruction is significant, for it sets the pattern for the public reading of Paul's letters along with the other Scriptures as well as the exchange of his letters with other churches, a pattern that directly contributes to the idea of a New Testament canon. Paul gives an aside to Archippus, probably a member of Philemon's house-church (cf. Plmn 2), that he should discharge certain Christian duties to which he had been appointed, possibly the duties of assuming the pastoral responsibilities of Epaphras while the latter was visiting Paul.

Salutation (4:18)

Paul had several alternatives in composing his letters, including verbatim dictation to a secretary, dictation of the general sense to a secretary (who was then authorized to put the ideas in final form), and instructing a secretary or friend to write in his name without any specific contents. All of these forms were considered to be

⁹²The verb *agonizomai*, from which we derive the English word "agonize," carries the meaning of fighting for, struggling, and straining, and this betrays his passionate concern that the Colossians not be deterred in their new Christian faith by the infiltration of false teachers.

⁹³In the Muratorian Canon (170-190 A.D.), the Third Gospel is identified with Luke, and Irenaeus (185 A.D.) agrees, cf. V. Taylor, *IDB* (1962) III.180.

⁹⁴There are alternative textual readings here that yield a masculine instead of a feminine name, but Fiorenza is probably correct in saying these may be early attempts to eliminate the mention of women from apparent leadership positions, cf. Fiorenza, 51.

⁹⁵The Laodecian Letter has occasioned much discussion. The general consensus is that, like some of Paul's Corinthian correspondence (cf. 1 Co. 5:9), it has been lost. However, other suggestions have been made, such as, that it was actually the Ephesian letter, which in the Muratorian Canon (170-190 A.D.) was listed under the title "To the Laodecians." Others have suggested that Paul has in mind the letter to Philemon, cf. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, 138. During the Middle Ages, a pseudepigraphical letter in Latin began circulating beginning in about the 6th century, but it is not genuine and is merely a stringing together of Pauline phrases plagiarized mainly from Philippians, cf. A. Walls, "Apocryphal Epistles," *ISBE* (1979) I. 180.

legitimate in the Greco-Roman world.⁹⁶ It is likely that Paul used either or both of the first two methods, and when doing so, he made the final salutation in his own hand (cf. 2 Th. 3:17; 1 Co. 16:21). It may well be that Paul already had experienced the difficulty of letters forged in his name (cf. 2 Th. 2:2), and if so, his own unmistakable autograph was a sign of authenticity. With a call to remember his imprisonment, Paul signs off with the familiar, "Grace be with you."

⁹⁶Doty, 41.

Letter from a Christian Gentleman

Paul's Letter to Philemon

Paul's brief letter to Philemon, a member of the Colossian church, is his shortest correspondence, yet it is a masterpiece of sensitivity and tact. Perhaps here, more than any other place, Paul exemplifies the character of a Christian gentleman. The subject is an extremely sensitive one, since it addresses the conflict between the accepted customs of Greco-Roman society regarding slavery and the liberating dimensions of the gospel. The sharp contrast between Paul's intercession for the slave Onesimus and what might normally have been expected is to be clearly seen when comparing it with another letter, written in about the same period, but reflecting the conventional approach.⁹⁷

I commission you by this writ to journey to the famous city of Alexandria, and search for my slave by name [the name is lost] about 35 years of age, known to you. When you have found him, you shall place him in custody, with authority to shut him up and whip him, and to lay complaint before the proper authorities against any persons who have harbored him, with a demand for satisfaction.

Something very different motivates Paul. He knows that in Christ there is neither slave nor free, but Christ is all and is in all (Col. 3:11; cf. Ga. 3:28; 1 Co. 7:21-22; 12:13).

Introduction to the Letter

The authenticity of the Philemon letter has never been seriously questioned. It was included in Marcion's canon in the 2nd century, and it stands the closest of all Paul's letters to the ancient form of private correspondence in the Greco-Roman world.⁹⁸ Apparently, the letter to Philemon was written at about the same time as the Colossian letter, as is implied by the overlap of names mentioned in each letter.⁹⁹ As

⁹⁷This papyrus letter, unearthed in Egypt, is from a slave-owner Aurelius Sarapammon to his agent, cf. A. Hunter, *Introducing the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973) 146.

⁹⁸W. Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. H. Kee (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975) 349-350.

⁹⁹Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke and Archippus, not to mention Timothy as the cosponsor of the letter

is clear from the opening verse, Paul was incarcerated at the time he wrote the letter, and the same options for the location of his imprisonment are debated as for the other prison letters, i.e., Caesarea, Rome, and Ephesus.¹⁰⁰

Occasion

The motive behind this letter can be gleaned from several things Paul says within the text. The letter is addressed to Philemon (1), the owner of a home in which an assembly of believers met for worship (2).¹⁰¹ From Colossians 4:9 it is often assumed that Philemon was a member of the church at Colossae.¹⁰² Apparently Philemon had owned a slave, Onesimus, who either had run away or had been sent on a mission from which he had not returned, perhaps intentionally.¹⁰³ In any case, during Paul's incarceration he had come into contact with this slave and had been instrumental in converting him to Christ. Now Paul was seeking a reconciliation between Onesimus and his master. If the connection between the Colossian letter and the Philemon letter is as close as it seems, then both letters probably were carried by the same courier and at the same time (Col. 4:7).

The Characters

The three main characters who play a role in this drama are strikingly different. Paul was a Pharisaic Jew of the dispersion. Philemon was a Gentile of Asia Minor and presumably wealthy. Onesimus, at least in popular estimation, was at the bottom of the social scale--a slave. The interaction between these three people exemplifies Paul's proclamation that believers are "all one in Christ Jesus" (Ga. 3:28). Racial, ethnic and social segregation is abolished in the gospel!

Slavery in the Roman Empire:¹⁰⁴

Slavery was economically and socially organic to the Roman Empire. Generally speaking, slaves were not considered to be persons. They were under the

and Onesimus himself, are listed in both correspondences (Col. 1:1, 7, 9-10, 12, 14, 17; Phlm. 1-2, 10, 23).

¹⁰⁰Acts does not record an Ephesian imprisonment, but Paul does mention his frequent imprisonments (2 Co. 6:5; 11:23), and the Marcionite prologue to Colossians from the 2nd century describes an Ephesian imprisonment, cf. R. Martin, *New Testament Foundations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) II.219.

¹⁰¹The word *sou* (= your) in the phrase "the church at your home" is singular and refers directly to Philemon.

¹⁰²This view is still generally accepted, though it has been questioned by some scholars in Europe, cf. R. Fuller, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1971) 39.

¹⁰³It is customary for commentators to assume that Onesimus was a runaway, but the text does not specifically say so. That he was a slave is not in doubt (cf. 16), but that he had fled is an assumption.

¹⁰⁴W. Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 270; E. Judge, "Slave, Slavery," *NBD* (1982) 1124-1125; H. McDonald, *Colossians and Philemon* (Waco, TX: Word, 1980) 168-169.

absolute power of their masters who could use, abuse and even execute them at will. Pliny tells how that for breaking a crystal goblet a master had his slave immediately thrown into a fish pond where the poor fellow was eaten alive by lampreys, an eel-like carnivorous fish. There were some 60 million slaves in the empire, and about one person in five was a slave. (The ratio in Rome itself was about one to three.) Caesar's household contained some 20,000 slaves, and the average lower middle class family owned about eight. At best, slaves might enjoy a reasonably good life under a benevolent master; at worst, their lives could be a living nightmare. They possessed no legal personality. While it may be noted that the lot of slaves was not as severe as at some other periods of history, the institution was still dehumanizing and degrading. Rebellious slaves were usually executed, frequently by crucifixion, and runaway slaves who were not executed were branded in the forehead with the letter "F" (for *fugitivus* = runaway). Aiding a runaway slave was no small matter. Roman law required that anyone harboring a runaway slave was liable to pay the owner for each day's work that had been lost.

The Text of the Letter

In spite of its brevity, the Philemon letter is a very carefully constructed communication that attempts to hold in tension the legalities and social norms of the Greco-Roman world with the Christian ethic of freedom. Since it is intensely personal, it shows a side of Paul not encountered elsewhere--a Christian leader who is diplomatic, polished and even witty. Paul certainly needed all the diplomatic skills at his disposal. He was bound, on the one hand, by the legal rights of Philemon, and on the other, by the spiritual ethics of the gospel. The Greco-Roman institution of slavery collided with the gospel's call for freedom, and Paul carefully tried to do justice to each without compromising his Christian convictions. The letter is a fascinating window through which shines brightly Paul's character as a Christian gentleman.

The Address (1-3)

There is no direct information about Apphia or Archippus, but Apphia was possibly Philemon's wife or sister or another leader in the house church.¹⁰⁵ Archippus has been supposed by some to be a son, but inasmuch as Paul describes him as a

¹⁰⁵ Because her name immediately follows Philemon's, it has been assumed from earliest times that she was his wife, cf. P. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon [WBC]* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982) 273. However, the Greek expression is simply "the sister," and some scholars read this as though Apphia was Philemon's sibling, cf. Kummel, 348. Others read the term "sister" as an affectionate Christian title, i.e., a "sister in the faith," cf. *BAG* (1979) 15 (followed by the NIV, NEB, NAB). Still others see her as a leader in the church, cf. E. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 177.

"fellow-soldier," it seems more probable that he was a minister, perhaps a pastor (cf. Phil. 2:25). The fact that Paul includes the church in his address may indicate that he wishes to solicit the congregation's interest in his case for the former slave, but this also may be nothing more than a convention of speech.¹⁰⁶

The Commendation (4-7)

As is his custom, Paul remarks upon his regular prayers for the believers. Faith and love are consistently commended among the Christian congregations (cf. Ro. 1:8; Ep. 1:15; Col. 1:4; 1 Th. 1:3; 2 Th. 1:3).

The Greek phraseology of Paul's prayer in verse 6 is especially difficult. A major question is how to understand the word *koinonia* (= participation, sharing), which in this case might mean either a willingness, prompted by faith, to share the good news with unbelievers (so NIV, NAB) or else a participation and partnership in the Christian community (so ASV, TCNT, JB, TEV, NEB, Weymouth). In either case, Paul wishes the congregation's *koinonia* to become active and operative.

In Greek thought, the emotions, especially kindness, compassion and benevolence, were associated with the *splanchna* (= bowels, entrails) and were often thought, quite literally, to have been generated in that part of the body.¹⁰⁷ Paul will use the word *splanchna* twice more to describe his deep feelings in the matter (7, 12, 20). The NIV gives the dynamic equivalency of "heart" to render this word, and it is probably the best modern option.

The Situation and the Plea (8-22)

Paul's words are remarkable in their appeal to Christian love. Because Philemon already has demonstrated the Christian ideal of love, indicated by the word "therefore" (8), Paul feels free to appeal to him on the basis of love rather than on the basis of his authority as an apostle. To be sure, Paul is quite aware that as the senior apostle in Asia Minor he could simply order Philemon to accept Onesimus as a new Christian brother, but this is not the approach that he takes. Paul was not an egotist; he used his authority when necessary, but he quite cheerfully laid it aside when possible. Thus, he appeals on the basis of love, as an "old man"¹⁰⁸ and a prisoner of Jesus Christ (9).

The appeal for Onesimus contains a whimsical and elegant pun based upon the

¹⁰⁶O'Brien, 267-268.

¹⁰⁷H. Koster, *TDNT* (1971) VII.548-557.

¹⁰⁸There is some uncertainty as to how the word *presbyteres* (= old man) should be taken. In common parlance, it would be the description of an old man (so NIV, NASB, JB), but if it is emended to *presbeutes* (= ambassador), as some prefer, then it is used here in a religious sense and carries the nuance of a Christian leader (so NAB, TCNT, TEV, NEB, RSV).

name Onesimus (10), which means "useful" or "profitable." This is juxtaposed with the statement that formerly "he was useless to you" (11). In English, the pun might run as follows, "I appeal to you for my son Profitable... Formerly he was unprofitable, but now he has become profitable."¹⁰⁹ That Onesimus had become Paul's "son" is a figurative way of saying that Onesimus was converted to Christ through Paul's ministry (cf. 1 Ti. 1:2; 2 Ti. 1:2; Tit. 1:4). Onesimus probably was not incarcerated when he met Paul, since the technicalities of Roman law would have prevented Paul from directly sending back a fugitive slave under such circumstances. Paul's arrangements were unofficial.¹¹⁰

A second pun appears based on the term *splanchna* (= bowels). Earlier Paul had said that Philemon had "refreshed the hearts (*splanchna*) of the saints" (7), and now he says that he is sending back the slave Onesimus, "who is my very heart (*splanchna*)" (12). Still later, Paul will reinforce the pun by urging Philemon, "Refresh my heart (*splanchna*) in Christ!" (20).

It was no small thing for Paul to send Onesimus back to Philemon. In addition to the harshness which Philemon might be inclined to show toward his slave, Paul himself could not claim impunity, and in fact, might even have been liable to prosecution under Roman law for harboring a runaway, if, in fact, Onesimus had indeed run away. Roman law required that anyone giving hospitality to a fugitive slave was obliged to pay for the value of the labor lost for each working-day. In any case, Paul was very sensitive in handling the matter. We may suppose that he felt no personal danger of prosecution from a fellow-believer, but still he was deeply concerned that Onesimus be received back in good standing.

Christianity had introduced a new relationship between persons. Paul knew that the solution to slavery and prejudice must be an attitudinal change. While Paul does not ask outright for Onesimus' manumission, he does attempt to make clear to Philemon the implications of freedom that arise from the gospel. Onesimus and Philemon were no longer just a slave and a master; rather, they were fellow-humans and, more importantly, brothers in Christ (16). Still, Paul very well knew the self-contradiction implicit in a forced freedom between brothers, because freedom in Christ is based on mutual love, not law. Philemon must come to the correct viewpoint apart from intimidation and the use of coercion (12). Thus, Paul assures Philemon that Onesimus has indeed served his master well in that he has taken

¹⁰⁹There may even be a further pun in the two Greek terms *achrestos* (= useless) and *euchrestos* (= useful), since phonetically the sound *chrestos* suggests *Christos* (= Christ). If this is so, then formerly Onesimus was *a-Christos* (= without Christ) but now he was *eu-Christos* (= good Christian), cf. L. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 355.

¹¹⁰A. Rupprecht, "Philemon," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelein (Grand Raids: Zondervan, 1978) XI.455.

Philemon's place in helping Paul when Philemon was incapable of doing so (13). Paul even speculates that the entire situation might very well have been a product of the providence of God (15).

In the end, then, Paul appeals to Philemon to accept his fugitive slave as he would accept Paul himself (17), and the implication, of course, is that Philemon would scarcely treat Paul as a slave. If Onesimus owed any debt, Paul would repay it himself (18). The mention of the possibility of debt may be taken in two ways. Some interpreters suggest that Onesimus may have robbed his master, an act common enough in runaways. It is equally possible that Paul is here referring to the lost labor incurred by Onesimus' delinquency. Either way, Paul affirms his readiness to settle the debt, but he tactfully reminds Philemon that Philemon himself owed his salvation to the evangelistic mission of Paul (19).

Thus, Paul went out of his way to avoid pressuring Philemon with apostolic authority. To what then does he expect obedience? To the love of Christ! By adding that he expects "some benefit" from Philemon, by urging Philemon to "refresh my heart," by asserting his confidence in Philemon's "obedience" [to Christ's love], and by suggesting that Philemon will do "even more than asked," Paul gives an unpressured, gentlemanly call for restored relationships between Philemon and Onesimus as well as a broad hint toward possible manumission (20-21).

As a final gentle nudge in the right direction, Paul mentioned that he intended to visit Philemon if he should be released from incarceration. If Paul indeed was able to make this visit, he would have ample opportunity to see for himself the outcome of his plea (22)!

The Closing (23-25)

Paul closes with a salutation from Epaphras, the founder and minister of the Colossian church (cf. Col. 1:7). He also sends greetings from several others before adding a final benediction.

Postscript

One more intriguing point is worth mentioning regarding Onesimus, and it comes from one of Ignatius' letters to the churches in Asia Minor some fifty years or so later. Ignatius names the bishop of Ephesus as Onesimus, a believer "whose love passes utterance."¹¹¹ In this reference by Ignatius, there is also a pun on the name Onesimus.¹¹² Whether or not this is the same Onesimus who appears in the Philemon letter, of course, cannot be known, but it is at least possible, even though Onesimus

¹¹¹ Ignatius, *To the Ephesians*, 1.

¹¹²W. Moulder, *ISBE* (1986) III.604-605.

would have been well advanced in age by this time and probably would have originally been associated with Paul when only a youth. The idea that the former slave could eventually have served as the senior leader of a Christian congregation is attractive, and if so, it indicates that the gospel's ethic of freedom had a very practical result.

Joy in a Prison Cell

Paul's Letter to the Philippians

*Just after Martin Niemoller had been thrown into a concentration camp because he chose to obey God rather than Hitler, I was privileged to hear a letter which he wrote to an Oxford friend. One sentence of it stuck in my memory: 'In the old days I used to be a bearer of the gospel,' wrote Niemoller, 'now that gospel is bearing me.'*¹¹³

These words, though penned in the 20th century, might very well have been penned by Paul in the 1st century. The circumstances were much the same. The Philippian letter forms part of Paul's prison correspondence while he was enduring an incarceration. One of the strongest notes of the letter is Paul's unparalleled joy in the midst of uncertain and foreboding circumstances. No less than sixteen times in the Greek text does Paul use the word *chara* (= joy) or its cognates (1:4, 18, 25; 2:2, 17, 18, 28, 29; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10). The fact that he was imprisoned makes such vocabulary all the more striking!

Introduction to the Letter

That the letter was written while Paul was imprisoned is clear from internal references (1:7, 13, 16, 17). It is also clear that he regarded the outcome of his trial to be a matter of life or death (1:20; 2:17), though he seems to have had some hopes of being acquitted (1:25; 2:24). On the one hand, if one attempts to fit this information into the scheme of the Book of Acts, he can with reasonably place the writing of the letter during Paul's imprisonment while awaiting an imperial hearing (Ac. 21:33). Because Paul was a Roman citizen (Ac. 22:23-29) and because his life was in danger, he was given military escort to Felix, the procurator in Caesarea (Ac. 23:23-35). After a two year incarceration at Caesarea and a change in administration (Ac. 24:27), Paul appealed to Caesar rather than be returned to Jerusalem for trial (Ac. 25:9-12). His trip to Rome was a perilous one (Ac. 27-28), and when he arrived Paul

¹¹³ A. Hunter, *Introducing the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973) 131.

was incarcerated in Rome under house arrest for another two years (Ac. 28:16, 30).

On the other hand, it is not mandatory to fit Paul's imprisonment into the scheme of Acts. Paul himself admits that he was imprisoned more than once (2 Co. 6:5; 11:23), and in an early 2nd century Christian document, the statement is made that Paul "had been seven times in bonds"¹¹⁴. If the Philippian letter is to be set within one of these other imprisonments, then Ephesus is sometimes suggested as a possible place of composition.¹¹⁵ Hence, it is clear that Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter. It is not clear whether he wrote it during his two year stay in Caesarea, during his two year stay in Rome, or during some other imprisonment. A setting in the Roman imprisonment is the traditional view, but given the lack of precise information, we can only say that the letter was composed within the time frame of about the mid-50s to the early 60s at an unknown place.¹¹⁶

The Philippian Church

The planting of the Philippian church resulted from Paul's mental searching for his next evangelistic preaching point when he had reached the coast of the Aegean Sea during his second missionary journey. Intending to turn back toward the East, Paul and his companions were restricted from doing so, a restriction which they understood to be from God (Ac. 16:6-8). Instead, on the basis of a vision, they crossed the Aegean into the province of Macedonia and arrived at Philippi (Ac. 16:9-12). Luke records three outstanding incidents which figured in the founding of the church there: the welcoming reception at a women's prayer group (Ac. 16:13-15), the exorcism of a demon spirit of divination (Ac. 16:16-18), and the subsequent flogging, imprisonment and miraculous release of Paul and Silas (Ac. 16:19-40). We may be able to infer that Luke stayed behind in Philippi when Paul and Silas left, inasmuch as the narrative changes from "we" to "they" at that point. Paul revisited the Philippian congregation at least twice (Ac. 20:1, 3, 6; cf. 2 Co. 2:13) and sent Silas and Timothy there as well (Ac. 18:5).¹¹⁷

During his church-planting efforts in Macedonia, the Philippian church had sent Paul money to ease his burden of self-support (Phil. 4:15-16), though one may conclude that he did not receive offerings from them while he was actually in

¹¹⁴ J. Lightfoot, ed., "The Epistle of S. Clement to the Corinthians," *The Apostolic Fathers* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 15 (chapter 5).

¹¹⁵ See discussion in W. Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. H. Kee, 17th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973) 329-332.

¹¹⁶ Chronologies for Paul's life vary considerably, and it is beyond the scope of this work to address the subject here.

¹¹⁷ "God-fearers" apparently designates a class of gentiles who, while not prepared to enter the Jewish community as full proselytes, nevertheless accepted the Jewish way of life, cf. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 215-216, 331.

Philippi, since his pattern was not to do so (1 Co. 9:6, 12-18; cf. 1 Th. 2:9; 2 Th. 3:8). Later, when Paul was in Corinth, they sent more (2 Co. 11:9).

The congregation of the Philippian church was made up of God-fearers, like Lydia (Ac. 16:14), gentiles, like the Philippian jailer and his household (Ac. 16:34), as well as other names that point toward a predominantly gentile church.¹¹⁸

The Occasion of the Letter

It is possible that Paul wrote to the Philippians more than once.¹¹⁹ If so, we do not know which letter our canonical document represents. We do know that the Philippian church had sent Paul a gift by Epaphroditus, an envoy from the church (2:25-30). During his mission, Epaphroditus became seriously ill, an illness that nearly cost him his life. Following his recovery, Paul was sending him back home to Philippi as the courier of the letter. Paul's intent was shortly to send Timothy to Philippi to upbuild the church and to report back (2:19-23), after which Paul himself intended to visit (2:24).

Along other lines, Paul was concerned about the influence of Judaizers who might distort the Christian gospel by requiring circumcision of the Gentile believers (3:2). Also, he gives a mild reproof to certain perfectionists (3:15), warns especially against materialists and sensualists (3:18-19), and rebukes the tendency toward disunity created by complaining, bickering (2:14-15) and a difference of opinion between two prominent female members (4:2). Outside opposition, also, gave reason for comment (1:27-30), as well as inside opposition which added to Paul's troubles (1:15-17).

Personal Character of the Letter

In spite of the above concerns, Paul's Philippian letter, unlike his Galatian one, is warmly personal. Paul frequently uses what might be termed "friendship language" in the letter.¹²⁰ Not only is the term *koinonia* (= sharing) a prominent one, he attaches the prefix *syn* to many words, a root meaning "together with."

¹¹⁸ The names Epaphroditus, Euodia, Syntyche, Clement and (possibly) Syzygus are all non-Jewish names, cf. D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1970) 522. Furthermore, since Paul initially spoke to a women's prayer group rather than in a synagogue, it is to be presumed that there were not enough Jewish families in Philippi to establish a synagogue, for which at least ten Jewish males were necessary.

¹¹⁹ A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., "The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians," *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 1:33 (chapter 3). The reference to Paul's correspondence in the Greek text is *epistolai* (= epistles, plural), though sometimes this is taken as a convention of speech to mean just one epistle, cf. Kummel, 333.

¹²⁰ L. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 341-342.

Koinonia (= sharing, fellowship)

- “partnership in the gospel” (1:5)
- “fellowship with the Spirit” (2:1)
- “sharing in Christ’s sufferings” (3:10)
- “sharing in financial resources” (4:15)

Syn (= fellow- or co-)

- “contending as one” [*synathleo*] (1:27; 4:3)
- “rejoicing together” [*synchairo*] (2:17, 18)
- “becoming like Christ” [*symmorphoo*] (3:10)
- “coming to the aid of” [*syllambano*] (4:3)
- “participating with” [*synkoinoneo*] (4:14)
- “partner or fellow-sharer” [*synkoinonos*] (1:7)
- “harmonious or one in soul” [*sympsychos*] (2:2)
- “fellow-worker” [*synergos*] (2:25; 4:3)
- “fellow-soldier” [*systratiotes*] (2:25)
- “fellow-imitator” [*symmimetes*] (3:17)
- “similar in form to Christ” [*symmorphos*] (3:21)
- “yokefellow” [*syzygos*] (4:3)

In addition to this rather specific friendship vocabulary, Paul expresses his affection for the Philippians with a variety of tender phrases (1:7, 8; 2:18; 4:1, 14). The fact that he uses the first person singular “I” some fifty-two times, much more than normally, demonstrates his personal openness to this congregation.¹²¹

Paul’s Introduction: 1:1-11

Letter writing in the Greco-Roman world had achieved a more-or-less standardized form with standardized verbal formulae, not unlike the English formulae “Dear Sir/Ma’am” and “Sincerely yours.”¹²² The introduction included the name of the sender, addressee, greetings, and often additional greetings or a wish for good health. The body or text of the letter often was introduced with characteristic formulae followed by a conclusion which included greetings, wishes--especially for persons other than the addressee, a final greeting or prayer sentence and sometimes a

¹²¹ E. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 342.

¹²² W. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973) 11-27.

date. While Paul's letters do not follow this pattern slavishly, they reflect it in many respects.

Paul's basic letter form is an adaptation of the Hellenistic letter. It was constructed as follows:

- ♦ *Opening* (sender, addressee, greeting)
- ♦ *Thanksgiving/Blessing* (often with intercession and or an eschatological climax)
- ♦ *Body* (introductory formulae; often having an eschatological conclusion and/or an indication of future plans)
- ♦ *Paraenesis* (ethical exhortations)
- ♦ *Closing* (benedictions, greetings, sometimes a mention of the writing process)

Opening (1:1-2)

Paul names himself and Timothy as the senders of the letter. However, the mention of Timothy is probably no more than a courtesy inasmuch as Paul will refer to himself in the first person (1:3) and Timothy in the third person (2:19). He categorizes both himself and Timothy as *douloi* (= slaves) of Jesus Christ.¹²³

The letter is being sent to the congregation at Philippi, both the members at large (*hagioi* = "saints" or "the holy ones") and especially the leadership. Paul uses two terms for the Philippian leaders, bishops (*episkopoi* = "overseers") and deacons (*diakonoi* = "servants", "assistants" or "helpers"). It is worth noting that in the various titles of church leaders given here, Paul categorizes himself and Timothy in the least authoritarian role as a gesture of modesty.

The wishes for grace and peace are typical Pauline constructions. Of interest is the fact that in the normal Greek letter, the expected word would be *chairein* (= greeting). Paul has shifted it to a different word with similar spelling but a Christian meaning, *charis* (= grace). The salutation of *shalom* (= peace) is a carry over from Paul's Jewish heritage.

Thanksgiving (1:3-8)

Thanksgiving for the congregation to which he is writing is typically Pauline,

¹²³ Two Greek words are commonly translated "servant" in the English versions as references to ministers of the gospel, *diakonos* (= servant) and *doulos* (= slave). The emphasis of the former is on the relationship of the person to his/her work, that is, one who performs the task of serving. The emphasis of the latter is on the relationship of the person to his/her master, cf. R. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (1880 rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 32.

but this one is especially warm. Paul's joy stems from the Philippians' *koinonia* (= "participation" or "sharing") in the gospel, possibly in sharing their substance with Paul and his co-workers as they preached, and certainly in the fact that they had confessed Christ themselves. The Philippians' response to the gospel was a work of prevenient grace, that is, God's grace that takes the initiative in arousing faith in those who hear. That same dynamic would continue to work in the lives of these Christians until the end. The phrase "day of Christ Jesus" (see also 1:10; 2:16) refers to the *parousia*, the coming of Christ at the end of the age, and it corresponds closely to the Old Testament phrase "Day of Yahweh." Perfection is a progressive work, and while Christians are perfect in Christ due to the transfer of Christ's righteousness to them (cf. 1 Co. 1:30), they also are daily in the process of being changed from "glory to glory" (cf. 2 Co. 3:18).

The closeness that Paul felt to the Philippians was certainly justified. They shared God's grace regardless of Paul's circumstances, imprisoned or free. The two terms Paul uses for his ministry are *apologia* (= "defense" or "answer," from which we derive the English word "apologetics") and *bebaiosis* (= "confirmation" or "making secure"). Paul's use of the words *kardia* (= "heart") and *splanchnon* (= "bowel") are intended to convey the intensity of his feelings. Internal organs in the ancient world were perceived as the seat of the mind and emotions rather than merely the origin of bodily functions, and the mind was not necessarily associated with the brain, as in modern times. The fact that Paul refers to his own deep feelings as issuing from the bowels of Jesus Christ indicates the mystical union which all believers share in the church. This unity is reinforced by the three-fold use of the phrase "all of you" (1:7-8; cf. 1:1, 4).

Prayer (1:9-11)

Paul's prayer for the Philippians emphasizes the classic goals of Christian maturity, the growth of love, deep knowledge, insight, sincerity and lack of offense.

agape (= love, particularly altruism)

epignosis (= knowledge, the prefix *epi* intensifies the word, hence, deep knowledge)

aisthesis (= deep insight or experience, from which we derive the English word aesthetics)

eilikrines (= pure, unsullied or sincere)

aproskopos (= blameless, unoffending)

These are certainly quite different from the more frequently encountered

modern ideals of material comfort, emotional uplift and good times. Knowledge and depth of insight provide the Christian with the capacity to make proper evaluations, and the fact that Paul urges them toward the things that make for good evaluations assumes that the Christian is free to make choices. This way of speaking is somewhat different from the sometimes devotional obsession to “find the will of God” in every decision. Granted, Christians should be concerned to do God’s will, but at the same time, they must not think that God gives specific communication about every decision they must make. Believers are both free and responsible to make choices in life. Therefore, they need the Christian maturity which enables them to make good ones.

The collective “fruit of righteousness” parallels Paul’s list to the Galatians concerning the fruit of the Spirit (Ga. 5:22-23), though here he says that it comes through Jesus Christ. The ultimate goal of the Christian lifestyle is not to be happy or to feel good; it is to bring glory and praise to God.

Paul’s Circumstances in Prison: 1:12-26

Even though Paul was in prison facing the possibility of execution, the gospel was being proclaimed boldly, both by Paul and by others.

Preaching of the Good News (1:12-18a)

Paul viewed his imprisonment as an avenue for the advancement of the gospel. Even among the prison guards the message of Christ was being spread¹²⁴ as well as among “everyone else,” a phrase that takes in an even larger group. Other Christians, emboldened by Paul’s courage during his incarceration, were becoming more outspoken with the message about Jesus.

Paul’s reference to *desmoi* (= “chains,” “fetters” or “bonds” which prevent cripples and mutes from using their members) may quite literally refer to actual shackles, or they may be understood as a metonymy in the broader concept of imprisonment (cf. 1:7, 13-14, 16).

Unfortunately, there were mixed motives among those who were preaching. Some preached out of envy and rivalry, that is, they preached from motives of partisanship and disdain for Paul. Perhaps they considered Paul’s imprisonment to be

¹²⁴ The word *praetorian* (NIV = “palace guard”) may refer to either the provincial governor’s official residence or a detachment of the praetorian guard, an elite corps of imperial soldiers. Most scholars concur that the latter meaning is the one intended here, that is, that the word refers to persons rather than a place, and that it approximates what Paul later calls “those who belong to Caesar’s household” (4:22). It is to be noted, however, that this vocabulary does not necessarily point exclusively to Rome as the place of incarceration, cf. F. Gealy, “Praetorian Guard” and “Praetorium”, *IDB* (1962) 3.855—856.

a sign of weakness. (After all, if he was really an apostle attested with miraculous powers, why could he not get out? If he did so once through a divinely-sent earthquake, why not again?) Others, however, were loyal to Paul and preached the gospel while recognizing that Paul's incarceration was due to his own loyalty to the gospel. In summary, then, Paul magnanimously concludes that as long as Christ was preached, he would rejoice.

Expectations for Acquittal (1:18b-26)

Both the uncertainty of the future and the hope for acquittal are evident in Paul's discussion about his imprisonment. Phrases such as "whether by life or by death" (1:20), "whatever happens" (1:27) and "as soon as I see how things go with me" (2:23) suggest that Paul was fully aware of the desperate possibilities that lay ahead. Nevertheless, Paul's confidence was that due to the prayers of God's people and the aid of the Spirit of Jesus, he would be given vindication at court. Regardless of the outcome, Paul determined to face the verdict with courage so that Christ would be exalted. If the future brought release, Christ would be praised for his delivering power. If the future brought execution, Christ would be honored by the faithfulness of his martyr.

In his discussion, Paul muses over the possibilities, taking each in turn. To be allowed to live was to be allowed to continue his Christian life. To be executed was to gain the resurrection life promised to all who believe. Yet to "go on living" was to continue in an effective ministry. The options were both so meaningful, although each for a different reason, that Paul was not sure which would be the best if the choice were his to make alone. On the one hand, there was an inner urging to pass beyond death so as to be united with Christ, a state that in the ultimate sense was surely the best. Still, his ministry called him back to the people who needed his leadership, and from that perspective, Paul deemed it better to hope for release. Acquittal, then, was Paul's desire, not so much for his own sake as for the sake of the Philippian Christians.

The concept of being with Christ after death merits some special attention. Paul certainly believed that the Christian would be "with the Lord" at the *parousia*, the coming of Christ at the end of the age (1 Th. 4:17; 5:10). However, here Paul does not seem to be referring to the end *per se*. Rather, his words seem closer to what Jesus said to the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Lk. 23:43). The New Testament does not go beyond the statement that the redeemed enjoy fellowship with Christ in the intermediate state between death and resurrection, a state that Paul describes elsewhere as being "away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Co. 5:8). The intermediate state is a time of "nakedness" (2 Co. 5:2), a metaphor that seems to suggest a disembodied spirit. However, it is not the final

state, which is resurrection.¹²⁵

Instructions for the Community: 1:27--2:18

The next section of Paul's Philippian letter is an extended discussion about how Christian fellowship should shape the community's identity. Paul shows deep concern that the Philippians demonstrate in their lives the true character of Christianity, particularly in terms of unity and humility. The church must maintain solidarity when it is opposed from the outside; its members must show deference to each other when threatened by diverse opinions from the inside.

Solidarity Toward Outside Opposition (1:27-30)

Exactly what form the outside opposition took in Philippi is unknown. Perhaps there were still residual effects from the bitterness incurred during the original mission (Ac. 16:19-24). However the persecution came, Paul was concerned that the Philippian Christians conduct themselves "in a manner worthy of the gospel" (1:27).¹²⁶ It was not the persecution *per se*, but the Philippians' response to it that mattered most. He encouraged them to stand for the Christian faith *en henī pneumati* (= in one spirit)¹²⁷ and *mia psyche* (= with one soul).¹²⁸ Furthermore, it is the "faith of the gospel" that becomes the basis for solidarity, that is, the unity of the church is built upon the core of the Christian faith having to do with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus to which believers have responded in deep commitment (cf. 1 Co. 15:1-4). Solidarity based upon the faith of the gospel is not the same thing as uniformity where everyone thinks exactly alike on all issues (cf. 3:15). In fact, it is precisely in the persecuted church where secondary differences become less important and the central areas of the Christian faith become the highest priority.

¹²⁵ For a fuller discussion of the intermediate state, see G. Ladd, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 29-39.

¹²⁶ The KJV translation of 1:27, "...let your conversation be as becometh the gospel," is so archaic as to be seriously misleading. The verb *politeuomai* does not refer to verbal dialogue, but rather, to how one conducts him/herself within a community. It is related to *politeia* (= citizenship), the Hellenistic ideal of a city community in which citizens can enjoy the rights and privileges of belonging to a city state, cf. D. Tidball, *The Social Context of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 76-79.

¹²⁷ The use here of the word *pneuma* (= spirit) is one of those instances when it is difficult to determine if it should or should not be capitalized in translation. (There is no capitalization in the Greek New Testament.) Paul may be referring to the Holy Spirit, though most translators do not think so but regard his expression as referring to human attitudes. Either way, the fact remains that Paul's plea is for solidarity.

¹²⁸ The Pauline concept of *psyche* (= soul) is not taken from Greek ideology as much as from Hebrew ideology. For the Greeks, *psyche* was considered to be something other than the body, that is, the essence of the true self. However, the Hebrew concept of soul (*nephesh*) refers to the animating principle which gives life to the body, cf. G. Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 97-101. Thus, to speak of being "one in soul" refers to a harmony expressed in the life of the church (cf. Ac. 4:32, Gk. text).

Paul briefly presents a theodicy for Christian suffering. When Christians stand together and maintain their faith in the midst of suffering, they become a sign to a hostile society that the world stands under divine judgement and will be destroyed.¹²⁹ Similarly, Christian solidarity and steadfast faith become signs that the believing community¹³⁰ will be saved by God in the end. Suffering for Christ is a privilege and a grant just as the ability to believe is a privilege and a grant (cf. 3:10; Col. 1:24).¹³¹ To view suffering as a gift of God's grace is unpopular both to the secular mindset and to that stream of philosophy which adopts PMA (Positive Mental Attitude) as its world view. Paul's understanding of suffering as a privilege for which he could rejoice was no doubt originally stimulated by his Damascus Road call in which he was promised suffering as part of his Christian future (Ac. 9:16). These same views of suffering Paul holds forth to other Christian communities (cf. 1 Th. 1:6; 2:2, 14-16; 2 Co. 1:6; Ga. 3:4; 2 Ti. 1:11-12). Suffering for Christ is never viewed by Paul as signifying a lack of faith, but rather, as the arena in which true faith can be validated.

The Call for Church Unity (2:1-4)

Paul's concern for Christian unity is interwoven throughout his letters. Turning from the opposition that threatens the church from the outside, Paul now turns to the equal threat of a church divided from within. He appeals to the Philippians on the basis of four central realities of Christian life. His use of the construction "if...any" is intended to focus attention on the self-evident characteristics of Christianity. In other words, if any of these things are true at all (and they are), then they emphatically call for Christian harmony.

Encouragement in Christ

The key word here is *paraklesis* (= encouragement or comfort). The NIV translators have understood the phrase "in Christ" as describing the typical Pauline concept of the union of believers in the body of Christ, hence, "being united with Christ." If the notion is true at all that there is encouragement from such a union with other believers in the body of Christ....

¹²⁹ The word *apoleia* (= destruction) means utter ruin and is a favorite Pauline word for the destiny of the unregenerate world (cf. Ro. 9:22; Phil. 3:19; 2 Th. 2:3).

¹³⁰ That Paul is thinking of the community is indicated by his use of the plural *hymon* = you).

¹³¹ The verb *charizomai* (= to give or grant freely as a favor) is cognate with the noun *charis* (= grace). The ability to believe is an act of grace, and the privilege of sharing in Christ's suffering is equally an act of grace.

Incentive from His Love¹³²

If the notion is true at all that there is any incentive for Christians in the love that Jesus Christ has demonstrated toward the church....

Participation in the Spirit

The important word *koinonia* (= sharing) is associated with the Spirit.¹³³ Paul may be referring either to the fellowship that the Spirit creates (subjective genitive) or to the experience of the Spirit that all believers share (objective genitive). The latter seems preferable,¹³⁴ and if so, then Paul is saying that if the notion is true at all that all believers share in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit....

Tenderness and Compassion

Once more Paul uses the word *splanchnon* (= bowel) as an idiom for deep feelings of affection, here coupling it with *oiktirmos* (= pity or mercy). That both words are plurals suggests the abundance of these characteristics that issue from Christ. Thus, if the notion is true at all that Christ has demonstrated to us his abundant tenderness and compassion....

The four consecutive “if” clauses are climaxed by the imperative “complete my joy...” If the things mentioned in these “if” clauses are true (and they are), then the Philippians ought to be in harmony with each other by thinking the same things, by demonstrating love in the same way, by being harmonious,¹³⁵ and by having a common purpose. In short, Paul calls for them to be one in mind, one in love, one in accord and one in direction. Their actions must not stem from selfish ambition or empty conceit. Rather, Christians are to exhibit humility by reckoning their fellow Christians as surpassing themselves. Each believer should defer to the interests of his or her brother or sister.

Paul exhorts each of the Philippians to avoid being preoccupied with the cultivation of his/her own experience. Christians who contend for their various tastes and personal rights are denying in action what the church is supposed to be. True Christian fellowship can never be achieved by *eritheia* (a party spirit) or *kenodoxia*

¹³² The Greek text simply reads *paramythion agapes* (= incentive of love). The idea seems to be that such incentive arises from Christ’s love. Though the word *paramythion* may be translated “comfort,” the idiomatic idea is not merely consolation but stimulation and encouragement, cf. M. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) III.428-429; J. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians* (rpt. Lynn, MA: Hendrickson, 1981) 107.

¹³³ As in 1:27, there is ambiguity as to whether or not *pneuma* (= spirit) should be capitalized. Most translators say “yes” (RSV, NIV, KJV, NEB, NASB, JB) though not all (NAB). If *pneuma* is to be capitalized, then Paul is referring to the common experience that all believers share in that they are filled with the Spirit.

¹³⁴ See discussion in R. Martin, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 86-87.

¹³⁵ lit., “one in soul”

(conceit). Rather, true Christian fellowship arises out of *tapeinophrosyne* (= modesty or humility).

The Humility of Christ (2:5-11)

Paul reinforces his call for humility as the ground of unity by citing an early hymn. This hymn,¹³⁶ written in the style of antiphonal Hebrew parallelism, may be analyzed as follows:¹³⁷

Divine Pre-existence

Who, [though] subsisting in God's form,¹³⁸ (antithetic)
 Did not deem equality with God a prize to be seized;¹³⁹

Humiliation of Incarnation

But divested himself¹⁴⁰ [of his rank], (synonymous)
 Taking a slave's form,
 Becoming like humankind; (synonymous)
 And being found in outward appearance as a human,

Humiliation of Death

He humbled himself, (synonymous)
 Becoming obedient unto death,
 even death upon a cross!

¹³⁶ That 2:6-11 is poetic is generally agreed upon by scholars and reflected in several English Versions (Cf., NAB, JB, NIV). Many scholars understand it to be an early Christian hymn, possibly composed by someone other than Paul but employed by him because of its familiar content and applicability to his subject, cf. R. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 39-50; R. Martin, *Carmen Christi*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); J. Fitzmyer, "The Letter to the Philippians," *JBC* (1968) 11.250.

¹³⁷ The following translation is my own.

¹³⁸ Much discussion has gone into the attempt to decipher exactly what the phrase "form of God" means. Normally, the expression *morphe theou* (= form of God) in the Greco-Roman world was used to describe the external (usually human) form of a god in a theophany. This, however, will simply not do for a Jewish thinker such as Paul. Rather, Paul may be referring to the Hebrew equivalent of God's external form, that is, his *kavod* (= glory). As such, the hymn refers to Jesus' divine status, cf. Fitzmyer, 250; G. Braumann, "Form," *NIDNTT* (1975) 1.705-708.

¹³⁹ The KJV translation "robbery" is not a good rendering. Gingrich goes so far as to say it is "next to impossible," cf. F. Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1965)28.

¹⁴⁰ The verb *kenoo* (= to empty) has likewise received much theological attention. What is meant is that Christ did not selfishly exploit his divine form and mode of being, but he changed modes of being. He did not empty himself of his divinity but of the status of glory which was his by right, cf. *TDNT*, 3.661-662; Fitzmyer, 251.

Exaltation by God

And for this reason God exalted him (synonymous)
to the highest degree
And granted him the name above every name,

Adoration by the Universe

So that before¹⁴¹ the name of Jesus every knee (synonymous)
should bend,
Of heavenly [beings] and earthly [beings]
and subterranean [beings],

The New Name

And every tongue should acknowledge that Jesus
Christ is Lord to God the Father's glory.

Paul's point is quite clear: if Jesus Christ, who was pre-existent with God in the beginning, could willingly experience the humiliation of incarnation and a violent death, should not the Philippians be able to get along with each other? Does not the attitude of Christ exemplify a humility that, if emulated by the Philippians, would become the ground for a deep sense of unity? Christ did not look to "his own interests." He did not respond to his mission with "selfish ambition" or "vain conceit." Exaltation for Jesus was not self-exaltation--it was exaltation by the Father after the humiliation of condescension. This was the attitude that Paul sought in his Philippian friends.

The Christian Witness (2:12-18)

Beyond the need for internal unity as an expression of the Christian faith, Paul shows concern for unity as an outward expression of the Christian faith. His words are very much in the tone of Jesus' "new commandment" (Jn. 13:34-35). Paul challenges the Philippians to "work out" their salvation. This verb, *katergazomai* (= achieve, accomplish, do), should not be taken in the sense of working in order to gain salvation, but rather, in the sense of making salvation operational.¹⁴² Paul has made

¹⁴¹ The preposition *ev* with the dative, the most widely used preposition in the New Testament, is capable of a variety of syntactical meanings.

¹⁴² H. Kent, Jr., "Philippians," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) XI.128.

clear how salvation was achieved in the hymn he has quoted. Now it is up to the Philippians to demonstrate the implications of that salvation in the life of the church. They must continue their obedience to the pattern that Christ set before them, motivated by reverence and holy fear. At the same time, Paul assures them that they are not alone in their Christian venture. God is also at work in them (cf. 1:6), and in fact he himself creates in them the desire to live the Christian life and the power to carry out its obligations. As in other of Paul's writings, there is a paradoxical character to his statements. He calls upon the Philippians to "work out" their own salvation, and in the same breath, he assures them that it is God who directs their will and enables them to respond appropriately. Paul consistently maintains a tension between divine sovereignty and human freedom.

This "working out" of salvation has a decidedly outward perspective, a perspective which envisions how the Christian faith will be perceived by those who are not believers. If the Philippians are to be *amemptos* (= blameless, faultless), *akeraios* (= pure, innocent) and *amomos* (= unblemished), shining like lights before a society full of darkness, then they must live their lives without complaining and arguing. The complaining and arguing of Christians among themselves cancels the effectiveness of their witness to the world. As Paul says elsewhere, it demonstrates that they already are completely defeated (cf. 1 Co. 6:7).

Paul was concerned that he had not wasted effort in his Philippian mission. Two of his favorite metaphors, running (1 Co. 9:26-27; Ga. 2:2; 5:7) and working (Ro. 16:6, 12; 1 Co. 15:10; 16:16; Ga. 4:11; Col. 1:29; 1 Th. 5:12), lend themselves to the concept of wasted effort. As a tent weaver, Paul would know only too well how a piece of badly woven cloth would be rejected. Similarly, an Olympic runner might run the course but still be disqualified and his efforts go for nothing. Paul considered the perseverance of his churches to be determinative as to his own reward for ministry (cf. 1 Th. 2:19-20), and this reward could not be decided upon until the *parousia* of Christ.

Paul's final metaphor calls for the Philippians to live joyously, regardless of the present trial. In spite of the uncertainty of his own future, Paul still calls for joy. His life might even be poured out as a libation, a figure for the real possibility of his martyrdom for Christ, but still there was cause for rejoicing.

Paul's Relationship to the Philippians Through His Fellow-Workers: 2:19-30

On various occasions Paul delegated ministerial responsibilities to trusted fellow-workers, often with the comment that he intended eventually to pay the congregation a visit himself (Ro. 15:22-33; 1 Co. 4:17-19; 2 Co. 12:14-18; 13:1, 10; 1 Th. 2:17-3:6, 10-11; Phlm 22). His letters served as a substitute for his presence,

and they were intended to reflect apostolic authority just as if he were there himself (cf. 2:12).¹⁴³ Similarly, he respected the delegations that were sent to him from these churches. Here, the reader catches a glimpse of that relationship preserved by the use of intermediaries. In terms of Greco-Roman letters, this section is part of the standardized form known as a “travelogue.”¹⁴⁴

The Intention to Send Timothy (2:19-24)

Though Paul’s incarceration prohibited him from personally visiting the Philippians, he had determined to send Timothy to act in his stead. Such a visit would be therapeutic, serving both to encourage the Philippians in their difficult circumstances and to glean news of their situation to report back to Paul.

Paul was quick to recommend Timothy as a trusted leader, one who would have the Philippians’ best interests at heart. The Philippians would have known Timothy personally, since he had joined Paul’s company shortly before the Macedonian mission (Ac. 16:1). Furthermore, Timothy had stayed behind in Macedonia for some time while Paul had gone on toward the south (Ac. 17:14; 18:5). Later, Paul had sent Timothy back to Macedonia to prepare the Macedonians for another visit from him (Ac. 19:21-22). Thus, it is highly likely that the Philippians were as well acquainted with Timothy as with Paul himself. In the midst of Paul’s fears that “some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry” (1:15), he was confident that he could rely on Timothy’s character and ethics as one who had “proved himself.” As soon as the outcome of his hearing was known, Paul intended to come to Philippi also.

The Return of Epaphroditus (2:25-30)

Epaphroditus had come to Paul from the Philippian church bearing the Philippians’ financial gift to aid him in his distress (cf. 4:14-18). As such, he bears the title “apostle,” though here the title is probably used in a different sense than of an apostolic office.¹⁴⁵ During the course of his visit to Paul, Epaphroditus had fallen dangerously ill. The circumstances of this illness are not given except to say that they were incurred during his mission to help Paul (cf. 2:30). His sickness may have been due to the exertions or the hazards of the trip, or alternatively, to some sickness

¹⁴³ Note that Paul invariably begins his letters with *Paulos apostolos...* (Paul, an apostle...). Furthermore, he specifies that he is an apostle of Jesus Christ, a qualification that separates his apostleship from any kind of ambassadorship of congregations (cf. Gk. text of 2:25).

¹⁴⁴ Doty, 37, 43

¹⁴⁵ The word *apostolos* (= apostle) is rendered “messenger” in the NIV. It is unlikely that Paul means anything other than that he was an ambassador of the Philippian church, though the other titles given, *synergos* (= fellow-worker) and *systratiotes* (= fellow-soldier) and *leitourgos* (= religious minister of a priestly nature) probably indicate that he was a leader in the Philippian church.

contracted in the city where Paul was incarcerated. Fevers were notorious problems in many ancient cities. Whatever the precise details of the illness, Epaphroditus had clearly risked his life.¹⁴⁶ Just as clearly, God had extended mercy to Epaphroditus so that he was able to recover. There is no indication of a divine healing here, at least in the sense of a sudden and miraculous recovery such as sometimes accompanied the ministry of Paul (cf. Ac. 14:8-10; 19:11-12; 20:8-12; 28:7-10). Nevertheless, all recovery, even the gradual recovery of a convalescence, is to be regarded as a gift of divine grace.

The news of Epaphroditus' illness somehow filtered back to the Philippians, and Epaphroditus was distressed because he knew his friends were worried. Furthermore, Paul probably was concerned that those in Philippi who were taking advantage of his imprisonment might use Epaphroditus' illness as a further cause to undermine Paul's ministry. The sending of Epaphroditus back to Philippi was the best course of action for all concerned. Paul counseled the church to receive their friend back as a hero of the faith.

The Judaizers and the Gospel: 3:1-11

The verb *ioudaizo* (= to judaize) occurs only once in the New Testament (Ga. 2:14), where it is rendered "to follow Jewish customs" (NIV) or "live like Jews" (RSV). However, the early church's struggle with those who urged Gentiles to follow certain religious practices and customs of Judaism is woven throughout the fabric of the New Testament, particularly in Acts 15 and in Paul's Galatian letter. It surfaces in a number of other New Testament documents and becomes the primary impetus for Paul's next set of comments. Whether or not Paul knew of specific problems with Judaizers in Philippi or whether he is here taking a preventive measure is unclear, but from other sources, we know that the Judaizing faction was an aggressive one, traveling between congregations in order to disseminate their views (cf. Ac. 15:1, 5; 2 Co. 11:20-22; Ga. 1:7; 2:4, 11-13; 3:1; 4:17; 5:2, 7-12; 6:12).

The New Circumcision (3:1-4a)

The fact that Paul uses the transition to *loipon* (= finally) plus the abrupt change in tone in 3:2 has led some scholars to question whether perhaps the

¹⁴⁶ The expression *paraboleuomai* (= risking) in 2:30 originates as a gambler's word which means to stake everything on the throw of the dice. Later, in the third century, there was a Christian group of men and women called the *parabolani* (= gamblers), people who risked their lives to visit and aid prisoners and plague-stricken victims with infectious diseases, cf. W. Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 50.

Philippian letter was a composite of two or more Pauline letters or fragments.¹⁴⁷ Since Paul is just halfway through the letter, it seems a bit early to introduce a closing remark. This question may not be answered with certainty, though most evangelicals argue for the unity of the book. Assuming such a unity, Paul begins his discussion with another call for rejoicing. He explains that he is repeating things that he told them previously, and his language may very well indicate that he previously communicated such things to them in an earlier writing.¹⁴⁸

Paul's tone when he uses the word *blepo* (= beware) is scathing. He calls the Judaizers "dogs," an epithet that metaphorically compares them to the wild, vicious and homeless mongrels roaming the streets. This term is also an irony, since the Jews themselves often used the term "dogs" to refer to Gentiles.¹⁴⁹ Paul further labels the Judaizers as evil workers and *katatome* (= mutilation). This latter term is a caustic sarcasm toward the practice of circumcision.¹⁵⁰ By contrast, Paul declares that the Christian body of believers is the true circumcision, that is, the true Israel of God (cf. Ga. 6:16).¹⁵¹ Members of the true circumcision worship by God's Spirit, glory in Jesus the messiah, and do not trust their salvation to fleshly rituals.

The Single Most Important Thing--to Gain Christ (3:4b-11)

To reinforce the contrast between the Judaizers and true Christianity, Paul discusses his own natural advantages in his Jewish heritage, advantages that he would have been foolish to renounce if they were truly effective in earning favor with God. All of the important trappings of Judaism belonged to Paul. He was a child of the covenant through circumcision, born of pure Jewish descent from the tribe of Benjamin (from which he probably derived his Jewish name),¹⁵² and a Hebrew of Hebrews. This latter description is probably used in contradistinction from the term Hellenists, that is, those Jews who to some degree had accepted Greco-Roman culture. As a "Hebrew" Jew rather than a "Hellenistic" Jew, Paul would have attended a synagogue where the services were conducted in Aramaic rather than

¹⁴⁷ Fitzmyer, 248

¹⁴⁸ See the previous discussion under "The Occasion of the Letter." There are suggestions of other "missing" Pauline literature (cf. Col. 4:16; 1 Co. 5:9).

¹⁴⁹ Kent, 138.

¹⁵⁰ Paul's use of the word *katatome* forms a pun (paronomasia) with the normal word for circumcision, *peritome*.

¹⁵¹ The contrast between the old Israel and the new Israel, the true versus the apparent, is a recurring theme in Pauline literature (cf. Ro. 2:28-29; 4:16-18, 22-24; 9:6-8, 24-26; Ga. 3:26-29).

¹⁵² Paul's Jewish name was Saul, after the Benjamite king who inaugurated Israel's monarchy. In Acts, he is called Saul when his work is among Jews, and he is called Paul, his Greco-Roman name, when his work is among Gentiles, cf. W. Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) 155. The popular assumption that Saul's name was changed to Paul when he became a Christian is unlikely to be correct.

Greek.¹⁵³ Furthermore, Paul was fluent in Aramaic, even though he had not been born in Palestine (cf. Ac. 21:40--22:2). With regard to Jewish sects, Paul was a Pharisee, previously an ardent persecutor of Christians as those distorting the Jewish faith. As to the legal requirements of Torah and its attendant traditions, Paul claimed fanatical impeccability.

In contrast to these multiplied advantages Paul now juxtaposes his new Christian life. All those advantages were nothing more than excreta¹⁵⁴ compared to gaining Christ. For Christ's sake, Paul had renounced all these things as worthless in seeking the favor of God. The most important thing was to gain Christ, to "be found in him," a phrase pointing toward his final vindication when Christ would judge the world. The only righteousness that would truly pass the test was that which was received as a free gift from Christ himself, independent of any religious acts which could be counted to one's credit. Previously, Paul was only in himself, that is, he had only his own advantages. Now, he was "in Christ," a position which insured that his righteousness truly came as the gift of God by faith. Thus, Paul's greatest goal was to "know" Christ. He is not here speaking merely of intellectual knowledge, but life-affecting knowledge. Such knowledge leads one to experience the resurrection power that gives eternal life. Such knowledge is undaunted in the face of suffering with Christ and for Christ, for it is truly a sharing of Christ's suffering. Such knowledge faces death¹⁵⁵ with unrelenting courage, just as Christ faced death. Such knowledge holds firm the hope of resurrection.¹⁵⁶ These latter two points are particularly significant in view of the uncertainty of Paul's personal future.

Perfectionism and the Christian Life (3:12-4:1)

Vital to a proper understanding of this section of Paul's letter is the word *teleios* which appears twice in the passage (rendered "perfect" in 3:12 and "mature" in 3:15, NIV). Quite literally, it means "having attained the end," but connotatively, it

¹⁵³ F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 42.

¹⁵⁴ The term *skybalon*, rendered "dung" (KJV), "rubbish" (NIV), and "refuse" (RSV), may specifically refer to human excrement or to decomposing food. It is an intentional vulgar term to emphasize the contrast, cf. F. Lang, *TDNT* (1971) VII.445-447.

¹⁵⁵ Paul's description of the resurrection is worth closer analysis. The phrase *exanastasin ten ek nekron* (literally, the resurrection out from among the dead) suggests a partial resurrection from among those who are dead. This phraseology probably reflects the distinction between the resurrection of the just and the resurrection of the unjust, such as appears in the Apocalypse of John (Re. 20:4-6), and it also is suggested in the sayings of Jesus (Jn. 5:28-29).

¹⁵⁶ Interpreters invariably take the phrase "becoming like him in his death" to refer metaphorically to death to sin, particularly as reflected in water baptism (cf. Ro. 6:1-11; 2 Co. 4:7-12; Gal. 2:12, 20; 3:1; 2 Ti. 2:11). Perhaps this is so, but in the context of the real possibility of Paul's death by execution, it seems that there is a very strong contextual case to be made that the phrase refers to Paul's facing of death with Christian courage, a matter in which by his own admission he wished to exalt Christ in his body (1:20).

means full-grown, mature, adult, or fully developed.¹⁵⁷ It does not indicate abstract perfection, but rather, something developed as opposed to being underdeveloped, someone mature in mind, or qualified in a subject. Paul uses the word to refer to a complete and mature Christian, one who has come to the fullness of life in Christ.¹⁵⁸

The immediate occasion prompting Paul to address the subject of perfectionism is his mention of “becoming like Christ in his death” and “attaining to the resurrection from the dead” (3:10-11). Death and resurrection, of course, issue in ultimate perfection. However, Paul is careful to point out that perfection is truly ultimate, not immediate. Perhaps there were those in the Philippian church who espoused the idea that they themselves already had reached a perfect state. Perhaps such an attitude lay at the root of their internal frictions, an attitude that was so severely against the humility for which Paul called. Perhaps it was this attitude which prompted Paul to warn against “selfish ambition” and “vain conceit” (2:3). Perhaps perfectionism contributed to the disagreement between Euodia and Syntyche (4:2).

The Process of Perfection (3:12-14)

Paul bluntly confesses that he himself had not obtained perfection. He fell short of the full knowledge of Christ in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his suffering. By implication, he suggests that if he, an apostle of Jesus Christ, had not obtained perfection, it would surely be presumptuous for anyone else to make such a claim. Nevertheless, perfection was his goal, his ideal. Perfection is that toward which he “pressed” (*dioko* = to hurry or run).¹⁵⁹

Paul employs a deliberate play on words by using three times the verb *katalambano* (= win, seize, attain or make one’s own). His goal was to lay hold of perfection, which was the very reason Christ laid hold of him on the Damascus road. Yet he did not reckon that as yet he had laid hold of this ideal. Rather, he was in the process; he was in the race toward the goal. The language of 3:13-14 is probably drawn from the Greco-Roman horse races that were run with light chariots. Paul “pictures himself in the chariot, bent over the curved rail against which the charioteer’s knees were pressed, and, with the reins round his body, stretching out over the horses’ backs and leaning his weight on the reins. In such intense preoccupation a glance at ‘the things behind’ would have been fatal.”¹⁶⁰ The *skopos*, the mark on the race course at the finishing post, was the only thing upon which Paul concentrated. The upward calling would be the summons given for the winner to

¹⁵⁷ Gingrich, 215.

¹⁵⁸ Barclay, 65-66.

¹⁵⁹ The verb *dioko* is a term that belongs both to the world of the hunter and the world of the athlete. Paul used the same word earlier when he described his persecution of the church prior to his conversion (3:6).

¹⁶⁰ E. Blaiklock, *NBD* (1982) 405-406.

appear before the judgment seat to be awarded the wreath of victory. The prize was the perfection to be realized when the upward calling would be completed at the close of Paul's life.

Tolerating Differences (3:15-16)

Paul's second use of *teleios* is probably a playful sarcasm, playful because Paul identifies himself with those who are "mature," and gently sarcastic because he already has plainly affirmed that he himself is not "mature". What Paul is saying, then, is that those who are really "mature," that is, those who are truly in the process of maturation, should view perfection just as Paul has described it--a process that will not end until death and resurrection. At the same time, Paul is aware that not all his readers will agree with him. Should they disagree on some isolated point, Paul is confident that God would clarify the point in time, and in the meantime, Paul demonstrates his willingness to be harmonious. He could hardly do less after speaking out so strongly that the Philippians should defer to each others' interests. Whatever their divergent opinions, all believers should exercise fully the level of maturity that he/she presently possessed. Each should be faithful to as much truth as was understood.

Ultimate Perfection (3:17--4:1)

Paul's charge to the Philippian Christians was that they should be fellow-imitators of his Christian example as well as the example of others who live the Christian life according to his teaching (cf. 1 Th. 1:6-7). They should avoid the bad examples of the ones who are enemies of the cross of Christ. Paul has in view professed Christians, not pagans. He wishes to warn the Philippians against those who claim the Christian life but who are obsessed with materialism, self-gain and an adoring audience. They are enemies of the cross, because they do not pick up the cross. Their destiny is not the prize of the upward calling, but destruction. Their god is not the Father of the Lord Jesus, but their own stomachs. Their goal is not to bring glory to God's Son but to bring glory to themselves, a shameful self-exaltation. It is these persons who are truly worldly, not those who are struggling to live the Christian life.

By contrast, Paul identifies himself with those whose true notion of commonwealth comes from heaven, not from the earth. The expression *politeuma* (= commonwealth), used only here in the New Testament, comes from the Greco-Roman idea of a special community within a large city-state, a sort of city within a city, a community within a large metropolis that was self-sufficient and self-governing, much as was true of the Jewish communities in many Greco-Roman cities. As such, Christians are not citizens of the world but resident aliens in the cities

of the world.¹⁶¹ While sojourning there, they eagerly await entry into their true home through the resurrection and transformation that will occur at the coming of Jesus Christ. In the resurrection, which is that final state of perfection, everything and everyone will submit unto the lordship of Jesus (cf. 2:11), and the bodies of believers will become like Christ's resurrection body (cf. 1 Co. 15:35-50). The hope of the believer is not a disembodied spirit, but resurrection. In this hope, Paul asserted, the Philippians should stand strong. By doing so, they would become part of Paul's reward, his *stephanos* (= wreath of victory).

Pastoral Problems and Advice (4:2-9)

Paul is now nearing the end of his letter in which he will give his parting advice to the Philippians in the form of pastoral exhortations.

Healing a Rift (4:2-3)

This passage is one about which we would certainly like to know more. As already indicated earlier in the letter, there was friction in the Philippian church, and here it is associated with two individuals, Euodia and Syntyche. The older KJV translated the first of these names as a masculine (Euodias), and there was an ancient conjecture that the tension was between the Philippian jailer and his wife. Now, however, scholars are certain that the two persons were both women.¹⁶² The precise nature of their quarrel is unknown, though it has been suggested that perhaps they each had a house congregation in their respective homes, and the rift was a congregational rivalry. In any case, because both of these women had "contended" for the gospel along with Paul and his other co-workers, their leadership roles were great enough that their dissension could do serious damage to the church. Paul pleads (*parakaleo* = urge or implore) with them to agree in the Lord and restore harmony.

As an aside, it is worth noting that the role of women in Macedonia was at a higher level than elsewhere in the Greco-Roman world. Paul's interaction with women in the establishment of the Macedonian churches (Ac. 16:13-14; 17:4, 12) plus the obvious leadership roles of the two women in question suggest that the situation in Macedonia was quite different than in places such as Corinth.

Paul also urges a third person to assist these women in their Christian work. The designation *gnesia syzyge* is unclear. It may simply be a nickname (loyal yokefellow) for someone whom Paul chose not to name. Equally, it might be a proper name (loyal Syzygus). Clement, a rather common name in the Greco-Roman

¹⁶¹ See discussion in A. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 184-185.

¹⁶² Barclay, 72-73

world, is mentioned only here in the New Testament.

The Marks of the Christian Life (4:4-7)

Once more Paul calls upon his Philippian friends to rejoice. Joy and gentleness (*epieikes* = gentle, kind or yielding) are clear marks of the Christian life, marks that dissension surely chokes out. So, too, anxiety and fretfulness are to be avoided. Prayer, thanksgiving and petitions to God are in order so that God's peace can guard the saints' hearts and thoughts in Christ.

The Reflections of the Christian Mind (4:8-9)

Once more Paul uses the word "finally" (cf. 3:1), indicating that he is drawing to a close. The categories that Paul lists as appropriate for the Christian mind are quite similar to other lists of moral and aesthetic virtues to be found in Stoic religion. All truth is God's truth, however, and because others have said similar things does not prevent Paul from emphasizing that their true sphere is in the Christian faith.

alethes (= true, dependable)

semnos (= worthy of respect, honorable, dignified)

dikaios (= upright, just, honest)

hagnos (= holy, pure)

prospiles (= pleasing, agreeable, lovely)

euphemos (= praiseworthy, appealing)

arete (= moral excellence, virtue)

epainos (= approval, worthwhile to praise or recognize)

Rather than maintaining individual rights and inducing frictions with other believers, the Philippians would do well to fill their minds with such things as these, imitating Paul's pattern of living (cf. 3:17).

Thanksgiving for the Gifts (4:10-20)

Paul saves till last his deep appreciation for the money which the Philippians sent to him in prison. Epaphroditus had apparently been the courier sent with the gift (2:25), and Paul's phrase "at last" (*ede pote* = now at length) suggests that it was not any too soon. If Paul's imprisonment was in Rome, then the money may have been used to lease the dwelling that Paul was allowed to have "at his own expense" (cf. Ac. 28:30, Knox).

There apparently had been a period of time in which the Philippians wished to send aid to Paul but had been unable to do so. What hindered them is not described. Perhaps no courier had been available. Perhaps Paul's own irregular itinerary in

recent years had thwarted their efforts. Now that the gift had arrived, Paul wished to assure them that his greatest goal was to be content in whatever situation he found himself. As always, Paul wanted to assure his friends that he was not greedy for their money (cf. 2 Co. 12:14). He had learned the secret of contentedness, whether experiencing deprivation or abundance. He could “do all things,” that is, he could survive whatever his circumstances through Christ’s help.

Paul has a special tenderness for the Philippians, because this gift was not their first one. Some time earlier, while at the other preaching points of the Macedonian mission (probably Thessalonica), the Philippians had sent aid more than once. Such generosity served as symbolic sacrifices.

Salutations (4:21-23)

Paul closes with a greeting to all the Christians, both from himself, his companions and the other Christians in his locality. Particularly the Christians in the imperial services sent greetings through Paul. He ends with a prayer for grace.