

## COLOSSIANS: PAUL'S MESSAGE FOR TODAY

(Robert W. Wall)

As a religious Jew, Paul thinks of his faith as an ongoing story of God's covenant-saving acts. His core convictions retain the essential shape of the Old Testament story of God's salvation of Israel. God's story begins with the creation of all things and the call of a chosen people to come out of the evil world for the promised salvation. God's story will conclude with a final triumph over the evil powers that were responsible for creation's fall, and with God's full blessing of the covenant community that has remained faithful to the Lord. For Paul, the church must always find its present compass in the foundational truths of the biblical story, which has been retold and confirmed in the death and resurrection of the Lord Christ.

The purpose of Paul's letters is to chart the present orientation of the faith community: what are the present results of being a congregation of believers called out of Colosse (or Seattle!) by God for salvation? As a Christian, Paul is convinced that the promise contained in the biblical story was fulfilled by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (2:9-15). Given the emerging threats of facile intellectualism and legalistic asceticism in Colossian Christianity, Paul draws upon traditions that stress Christ's lordship over everything material and spiritual, external and internal (1:15-20). God's Risen Son is custodian of the created world as well as the world of ideas. As disciples of Christ, we must never see our life of faith in private or sectarian terms, nor should we be so arrogant as to suppose that God's salvation is based on the elegance of our theological formulations. If Christ Jesus is Lord over both the natural and the spiritual orders of human life, we his followers must engage ourselves in the world as agents of reconciliation.

Paul's understanding of Christ's ultimate importance in the present dispensation of God's salvation has two integral parts. First, Christ is Lord over God's old and new creations; he is Lord over the entire history of God's salvation. His "cosmic" lordship is an expression of God's triumph over evil and death; through Christ's lordship, God's good intentions for the now fallen creation are currently being worked out in the history of the new creation, the church. And the transforming grace of God, which believers are already experiencing, will bear its full fruit at Christ's return. Paul's message promises the experience of conversion, of human transformation. Every change from bad news to good news that takes place in human relationships—from the forgiveness of sin (1:13-14) that reconciles us with God (1:21-22) to the empowering of a "new self" (3:10) that reconciles us with each other (3:11)—marks a fulfillment of God's promise to restore all things and return them to the Garden.

Second, Paul justifies his claim that Christ is Lord over all things by appealing to the actual experience of God's transforming and empowering grace, which has practical effect in our daily relationships with God and each other. Paul repeats two phrases, "in Christ" and "with Christ," to underscore the vital importance of the church's ongoing relationship with Christ as the location of God's gracious action within human history. Given their tendency toward intellectualizing their Christian faith, this more practical emphasis is central to Paul's letter for the Colossians. It seems ironic to me that many commentators on this book fail to emphasize Paul's participatory Christology, preferring to discuss his cosmic Christology. While Paul is certainly concerned to establish the spatial boundaries of Christ's lordship (that is, over the entire cosmos), he is more concerned to press the status of the believer, who in partnership with Christ already experiences (that is, participates in) the various fruits of God's salvation. Thus the faith community is the "body" of Christ, who is its "Head" (1:18; 2:19); the church has been raised with Christ by God from sin and death (2:11-15) and made to live "with Christ in God" (3:3). That is, believers share in the totality of God's triumph in Christ!

There is nothing mystical or abstract in Paul's Christology; he does not overemphasize Christ's transcendent lordship. Rather, Paul draws on the traditions of Christ's status as Lord over all things to express and impress the larger truth that the community of faith participates with its triumphant Lord in God's continuing triumph over sin and death.

Paul's stress on the present fulfillment of God's promised salvation ("realized eschatology") and his softening of the importance of Christ's return ("futuristic eschatology") only add to this emphasis. Because God has already fulfilled the promise of salvation through Christ's death, the



transforming power of divine grace is relocated within the history of God's people (salvation is already realized) rather than at its end when Christ returns (salvation is not yet realized). Paul is quite careful when appropriating the "already/not-yet" and "hidden/revealed" motifs of Jewish apocalypticism (3:1-4) to focus on what God has already revealed and fulfilled. Christianity is not an esoteric religion of private morality, nor do its members sit passively and wait for the end to come. The grace of God has already been disclosed in the death and resurrection of the historical Jesus and is now transforming the believing community in the public square for all to see.

Surely Paul's extended comments in Colossians about his own missionary work (1:24-2:5), Epaphras's gospel ministry in Colosse (1:5-8) and others engaged in the work of the Gentile mission (4:7-17) seek in part to encourage the Colossians to measure devotion to Christ in terms of evangelistic zeal and public life rather than by a life hidden away in the inner self. God's grace transforms more than the mind and heart of the individual believer; it has its positive effect in various public arenas social (3:5-14; 4:2-6), familial (3:18 4:1) and worshiping (3:15-17). According to Paul, then, God's grace is currently mediated through Christ (2:9-10), who is Lord over everything (1:15-20); this confession is the eschatological reality that envisions the church's active and public response to every part of God's creation. Christianity is practiced not "on the side" but in the public square for all to see.

Contemporary Christianity is like Colossian Christianity in many ways. Especially in America, cultural myths of the self-sufficient individual lead to a private discipleship, interested in personal experience more than responsible action, in personal rights more than public morality, in personal benefits more than worship and witness to God. As a result, our preaching is typically centered on the personal blessings derived from a privatized relationship with God. And in turn, the consequence is that many congregations have an immature ecclesiology, gathering together to meet personal needs rather than to worship God as an inclusive community.

One of the fastest-growing religious movements in both America and Europe proclaims a "prosperity gospel," promising material wealth and physical healing to those whose spiritual life is also rich and healthy. The theological foundation of this heretical movement, which continues to flourish in some parts of the charismatic renewal (such as the "Word of Faith"), is dualistic, dividing human existence into spiritual and material realms. The two are in eternal conflict with each other at every level. Thus, according to this "gospel" we are liberated from material evil (physical sickness and economic poverty) as we participate in the "spiritual" realm through revelatory experiences. Such experiences are thought to provide a special knowledge of God that not only anchors faith but also provides the basis for God's gifts of healing and wealth. Recipients of this revelation see themselves as members of a spiritual elite within the church—an ecclesiology that leads to the very arrogance Paul warns against in Colossians 3:16-19.

In many ways, the Colossian heresy is analogous to this modern religious movement; thus Paul's response to the ancient falsehoods provides us with an important resource for today. According to Paul, a theology that makes the spiritual mutually exclusive of the material distorts the truth of the gospel and will contaminate its fruit (1:3-12). Foundational to both theological (2:4-15) and ethical (2:16-4:1) formation is the confession that Christ is Lord over both realms (1:15-20). Moreover, central to Paul's Christology is that the "spiritual" has been revealed to us within history and in the physical Jesus (1:18-20; 2:9).

Within other quarters of evangelical Christianity, legalistic asceticism is mistaken for devotion. Outsiders have noted our spiritual arrogance and theological triumphalism and called us self-righteous. We are often similar to the Colossian legalists, more interested in following a codified form of holiness than in nurturing a holy heart. In some quarters evangelicals champion their closed system of theological ideas, often specializing in minor issues and differences with other believers. New litmus tests other than the great fundamentals of the faith have been fashioned to measure the "orthodoxy" of the faithful. Rather than promoting a practical and practiced Christianity, intolerant believers view worship as a search-and-destroy mission, sermonizing against those who do not believe exactly as they do.

Paul's letter is for us too. We have become Colossian sophists, more interested in knowing theology than doing it, more interested in disqualifying others from the prize than in pressing on toward it ourselves. May God use Paul's letter to bring about our repentance and spiritual renewal.