

# **Paraenesis and Didacticism in Colossians**

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**The Colossian letter was written to correct behaviour. How do the paraenetic sections of the epistle relate to the more didactic sections?**

Colossians, as with every book of Scripture, was written to correct behaviour. It is entirely practical theology. Notwithstanding that broad statement, there are sections within the letter that are more theologically focussed (didactic) and others that are more overtly practical, addressing issues not of how to think but of how to live (paraenetic). This distinction is somewhat arbitrary, since all the doctrine of the letter comes as an ‘exhortation’ to the Colossians to think in a particular way, even the prayer of chapter 1. If not pressed too far, though, the distinction is still useful.

The question is, how do the paraenetic and didactic sections relate to each other? It is a reasonable question, given that the letter moves from the most exalted theologizing about the Son, to the most mundane matters, such as the obedience of children to parents. How does the whole letter hang together? Does it cohere as a logical whole?

**1. Outline**

Quite apart from whether there is found exhortation at a grammatical level (in the use of an imperative), an outline of Colossians can be made as follows, marking most sections rather roughly as either exhortation or doctrine. This is done rather roughly, since it very quickly emerges that doctrine and exhortation are intertwined. For example, 3:1–5 alternates from doctrinal precept (‘you have been raised with Christ’), to exhortation (‘seek the things above’, imperative), to doctrine (‘where Christ is...’), to exhortation (‘Set your minds...’, imperative), to doctrine (‘you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God’), staying with doctrine (‘When Christ who is our life appears’), but then turning to exhortation (‘Put to death...’, imperative).

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## An outline of Colossians

### Chapter 1

Salutation and commendation (1:1–2; 3–8)

Exhortation: Prayer about growth in knowledge and works (1:9–12a)

Doctrine: In the kingdom (1:12b–14)

Doctrine: The firstborn Son, the head of the kingdom (1:15–20)

Exhortation: The need for steadfastness (1:21–23)

Doctrine: Paul, minister of the mystery (1:24–29)

### Chapter 2

Exhortation: Wisdom found in Christ (2:1–8)

Doctrine: The power of the Cross (2:9–15)

Exhortation: False religion (2:16–23)

### Chapters 3–4

Exhortation: Think heavenly thoughts (3:1–4)

Exhortation: Put off and put on (3:5–17)

Exhortation: Social relationships (3:18 – 4:1)

Exhortation: Prayer and public life (4:2–6)

Concluding remarks (4:7–18)<sup>1</sup>

It is noted that the book moves in the typical direction of Paul's writings, from a doctrinal focus in the earlier sections, to exhortation in the later sections.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Paul's answer to the question

How do the paraenetic and didactic sections hang together? The key text in this regard is in Colossians 1:9–11. Paul himself answers the question. He says that he prays for the Colossians,

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<sup>1</sup> As in most studies of Colossians, the concluding remarks will receive little attention in this paper. To counterbalance this oversight, see Bonnie Bowman Thurston, "Paul's Associates in Colossians 4:7-17," *Restoration Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1999). 45–53.

<sup>2</sup> The outline is not intended to indicate the forward movement or overall logic of the letter. For that, see S. Lewis Johnson, "Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 118, no. 471 (1961). 249, who has four sections in the letter overall: doctrinal, polemical, practical and personal (1:1 – 2:3; 2:4 – 3:4; 3:5 – 4:6; 4:7–18 respectively).

...in order that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to walk worthily of the Lord, to all favour, bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God, being empowered in all power, according to the strength of his glory, to all patience and endurance.

ἵνα πληρωθῆτε τὴν ἐπίγνωσιν τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ καὶ συνέσει πνευματικῇ,  
**10** περιπατῆσαι ἀξίως τοῦ κυρίου εἰς πᾶσαν ἀρεσκείαν, ἐν παντὶ ἔργῳ ἀγαθῷ  
καρποφοροῦντες καὶ ἀξινόμενοι τῇ ἐπιγνώσει τοῦ θεοῦ,  
**11** ἐν πάσῃ δυνάμει δυναμούμενοι κατὰ τὸ κράτος τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ  
εἰς πᾶσαν ὑπομονὴν καὶ μακροθυμίαν.

There are four steps in thought. First, there is the praying that they would be filled with knowledge. ‘Knowledge’ is always primarily cognitive. ‘Knowledge of his will’ is not merely knowledge of ethical standards, but refers to God’s will as it relates to the ordering of all things, particularly the events of redemption history. Paul is an apostle ‘by the will of God’ (1:1).

This prayer can be taken as a *de facto* exhortation. Paul not only says that he prays that the Colossians will be filled with knowledge, but is implicitly exhorting the Colossians to be filled with knowledge. In this way, everything that follows in the letter is covered by this implicit command.<sup>3</sup> The whole letter gives the knowledge, both doctrinal and ethical, with which the Colossians are to be filled.

Secondly, the infinitive, περιπατῆσαι, could be taken as a parallel purpose statement to the first, or the argument could be progressive, so that Paul is giving the purpose of his prayer that they would be filled with knowledge. In either case, the connection between being filled with knowledge and walking worthily is obvious, even if initially implicit. Knowledge bears fruit.

<sup>3</sup> ‘...this gift is related to the body of the epistle and is not a general petition.’ Richard C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1937 [repr. 1961]). 34.

The fruit that is borne of knowledge is that of ‘every good work’ and ‘growing in the knowledge of God’. ‘Every good work’ covers all the ‘practical’ instructions given in the letter. The paraenetic sections are directly connected with the doctrinal sections, and subordinated to them. Knowledge leads to works. Faith leads to obedience (cf. Rom. 1:5, ‘the obedience of faith’, as a subjective genitive). ‘Doctrine, while basic to duty, must also result in duty’.<sup>4</sup>

If that is unclear, the latter part of the statement parallels ‘every good work’ with ‘growing in the knowledge of God’, as though these were the two halves of the same fruit. Paul cannot countenance that knowledge will exist without works, or that works will exist without knowledge. Colossians 2:2, 5 give a similar picture, with parallel lines about love and an assured understanding, and about ‘good order’ and faith.

The same connection is found in Colossians 3:8–11. The new man is put on, ‘who is renewed in knowledge...’, but this is in the context of the putting off of the old man ‘with his deeds’, such as ‘anger, wrath, malice...’ It is as though the deeds are replaced by the knowledge. Strictly, Paul does not explicitly say that, but for him, knowledge and works are so inextricably bound together that he can speak of one as though speaking of both. Thus, the full thought of 3:8–11 is that the old man has bad knowledge and deeds, and the new man comes with new knowledge and deeds.

To return to the steps of 1:9–11, the third step speaks of the concurrent power of God (taking the aorist participial clause as attendant circumstances), for Paul does not mean to say that good works are entirely driven by the intellect of the individual, as though all one needs is cognitive therapy. Instead, the filling with knowledge and the growing in works and knowledge comes in conjunction with the empowering from God.

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<sup>4</sup> Johnson, "Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians." 240.

In Paul's statements elsewhere, this concurrent power of God is that from which growth in knowledge and works comes. It is not that right practice is rooted in right knowledge, *but that right practice and knowledge are together rooted in the power of Christ*. Colossians 2:6–7 is adamant that the Colossians must 'walk in him' (ἐν αὐτῷ περιπατεῖτε), and this walking is concurrent with being 'established in the faith as you were taught' (βεβαιούμενοι τῇ πίστει καθὼς ἐδιδάχθητε, using a present participle). The walking is 'in him', though, and the establishment is passive—'be established'. The words in between those two expressions make the point that all this comes from 'having been rooted and being built up in him' (ἐρριζωμένοι καὶ ἐποικοδομούμενοι ἐν αὐτῷ, alternating from a perfect passive participle to a present passive participle, but in both cases the believer is passive, the object of the power of God). It is that personal, spiritual indwelling from which understanding and Christian practice flow.<sup>5</sup>

The fourth step in 1:9–11 is the end point of all this, which is 'all patience and endurance'. Despite the punctuation of UBS, the ensuing participle of v. 12 is best connected with that which proceeds, so that there a fifth step, namely, 'with joy giving thanks to the Father'.

### 3. Specific relationships

Looking more specifically at the connections between the sections of the letter, it is possible that there are no direct relationships between the doctrinal and ethical sections. However, given human nature and the typical approach of Paul's writings, it is more probable that errors in practice are linked to error in thought, and so Paul would write to address the

<sup>5</sup> Marianne Meye Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). 75, puts it thoughtfully when, writing on 3:5-11, he says that the indicative of union with Christ does not merely lead to the imperative of putting on and putting off, but that 'the indicative already includes and entails the imperative. Paul's image of identification with Christ is his death and resurrection means that the "imperative" does not obligate one as a command external or alien to the believer. Rather, the imperative reflects and grows from the reality of being joined with Christ...'

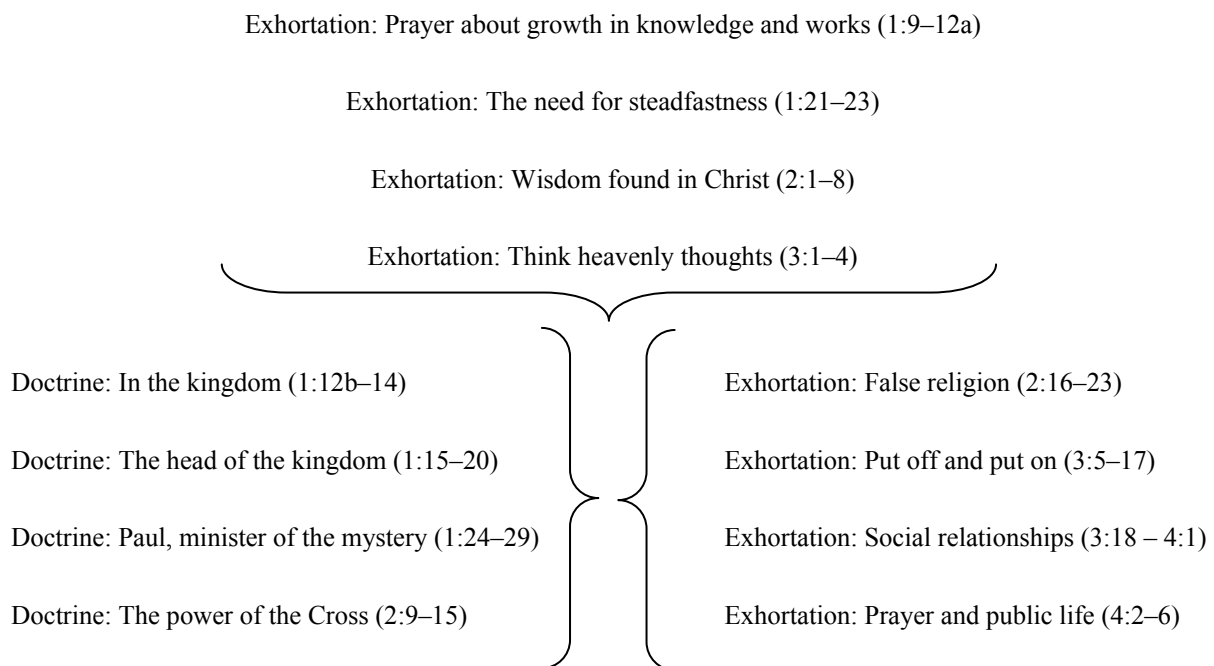
problems in a holistic way. It is reasonable to expect that there is a close relationship between the doctrinal and exhortational sections.

### 3.1 Macro-exhortational sections

In the first place, it has already been demonstrated that various exhortations call for adherence to right doctrine and right practice (1:9–12a; 1:21–23; 2:1–8; 3:1–4). These can be considered the macro-exhortational sections of the letter, which are somewhat generic, compared to the specific and detailed instructions to ethical living elsewhere in the letter. They sit above the doctrinal and specific exhortational sections, and unite the letter into a logical whole.

The task, then, is to demonstrate the links between the doctrinal sections and the specific exhortations. What is the relationship between the teaching about Christ the firstborn, the power of the Cross, etc, and the instructions with regard to religious practices, putting off and on certain ethical practices, and social practices?

#### Diagramme of exhortation-doctrine interplay in Colossians



### 3.2 False religion (2:16–23)

Colossians 2:16–23 calls for freedom from various religious practices. The things mentioned are to do with ‘regulations’ (δογματίζω) about food, drink and touching, with a festival, new moon and Sabbath, with self-abasement (presumably expressed in regulations about food and drink) and with the worship of angels.

#### (a) The problem

Some of these points are about Jewish practice arising from the Hebrew Scriptures, evidenced in the mention of ‘Sabbath’, and in Paul’s response that these things are a ‘shadow’ (σκιά) of the substance (body, σῶμα), Christ (admittedly, taking ‘shadow’ in the sense of Hebrews 8:5; 10:1). The worship of angels is not sanctioned by Jewish Scripture, but was a practice to which some Jews seemed to have a disposition (cf. the exaltation if not worship of angels spoken of in the letter to the Hebrews). It is possible that this practice had arisen in an eclectic approach to religion, in which Jewish Christians had adopted a proto-gnostic view of aeons and demi-gods (and perhaps seized upon self-abasement as a way of escaping the evil of physicality), although it is not necessary for the purposes of this paper to make this determination.<sup>6</sup> The important point is that for Paul, these things, whether

<sup>6</sup> It is best not to attempt to be too precise in identifying the nature of the problem of the Church at Colossae. J.B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London: Macmillan, 1886). 96, related it to Essenism. Johnson, "Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians." 245, argues for a Gnostic Judaism. Ian Keith Smith, *Heavenly Perspective: A Study of the Apostle Paul's Response to a Jewish Mystical Movement at Colossae* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2006). 73, argues for Jewish mysticism. Troy Martin, "But Let Everyone Discern the Body of Christ (Colossians 2:17)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114, no. 2 (1995). 104, has it as Cynic philosophy. Other suggestions include synagogue Judaism, Platonism, Phrygian folk religion, etc. F. F. Bruce, "Colossian Problems, Pt 3 : The Colossian Heresy," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141, no. 563 (1984). 195–208, works through various options. Harry O. Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27, no. 3 (2005). 323–349, cogently argues that the background is the cult of the emperor, although it does not explain the explicitly Jewish elements of ch. 2. Cf. Harold Van Broekhoven, "The Social Profiles in the Colossian Debate," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, no. 66 (1997). 73–90; Roy Yates, "Colossians and Gnosis," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, no. 27 (1986). 49–68. To make the matter more complex, some propose that the letter was written for a wider audience than just Christians at Colossae (Charles M. Nielsen, "The Status of Paul and His Letters in Colossians," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 12, no. 2 (1985). 104, following Meeks). In that case, there might not be a uniform ‘enemy’. For the purposes of this essay, it is possible to demonstrate that the parts of the letter work together as a literary-theological whole, without demonstrating unity within a speculative theory derived from mirror reading of the text. I.e. contrary to Johnson, "Studies in the Epistle to the



regulations sanctioned by the Hebrew Scriptures or Jewish-syncretistic, proto-Gnostic flavoured beliefs, are the ‘elements of the world’ (στοιχεῖον).<sup>7</sup>

### (b) **Hermeneutics**

The doctrinal foundation for the rejection of these things is readily apparent in the letter. The section itself is peppered with teaching. Colossians 2:17 says, ‘These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.’ Although today the language of ‘shadow’ and ‘substance’ or ‘fulfilment’ are quite familiar, this manner of speaking about Old regulations is startling. ‘Shadow’ refers to something as lacking in substance—something that is empty. It is not completely worthless, since in this case, the shadow has dignity as being the shadow of the ‘body’, which is ‘of Christ’, and no doubt is Christ. Still, it is transitory. Philo had used *skia* to refer to the excellence of Mosaic revelation, which was the archetype, overagainst other prophetic revelation in Israel’s history.

This is a familiar hermeneutic in the New Testament. The Old regulations point forward to Christ and the New dispensation, only have the significance in that relationship, and cease to be in force once the fullness has come. Paul does not think he needed to indicate here *how* these things are a shadow of that which is coming.

The use of *sōma* in connection with *skia* is hardly accidental. Instead of the attempt to escape the physical world through self-abasement, there needs to be the embracing of ‘the body of Christ’: not the body, the Church, but belief in Christ in His incarnation, in whom the

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Colossians." 245, there is no need to or intention of arguing that ‘The Colossian Epistle effectively refutes both the doctrinal and the practical errors of the [Gnostic Judaic] heresy.’

<sup>7</sup> The ‘world’, being humanity in rebellion against God, and the ‘elements’ being the basic principles and commandments according to which that rebelliousness operates. Smith, *Heavenly Perspective*. 87, helpfully points out that it would have been understood that angelic powers stood behind these principles, so that ‘elements’ cannot be divorced from a personal dimension. Cf. P.T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1982). 148, has it as ‘elemental spirits’. The overall focus of vv. 20–21 is still on the impersonal dimension, hence ‘regulations’, ‘commandments’, and ‘doctrines’.

fullness dwells, and a living connection with Him. There is no shame for Paul in the doctrine of incarnation and in all that the incarnate Son accomplished in and for the physical world.<sup>8</sup>

### (c) **Epistemology**

There is yet further teaching in 2:16ff. Paul explains that false doctrine and practice is attached to a proud spirit. He also discusses the epistemology of these opponents: they have drawn on visions, and teach ‘human’ doctrines (τῶν ἀνθρώπων).

Overagainst that, from where is the teaching of the New dispensation sourced? The connection can be made back to the doctrinal section, 1:24–29, in which Paul speaks about himself as the minister of the mystery. It is not immediately obvious there why Paul moves to discussion of his own apostleship after speaking about the gospel and the need for steadfastness in it.

The shift comes in 1:23b, in which Paul explains that the gospel ‘has been preached to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.’ He proceeds to explain that he suffers for the Colossians, and in that ‘fills up’ (present tense) Christ’s sufferings for the Church. He continues to speak of his ‘divine office’ to make known the ‘mystery, which is ‘Christ in you, the hope of glory’. He adds further comments about his responsibility and diligence in his task.

The reason why he speaks in this manner is to procure from the Colossians faithfulness to his own teaching, overagainst the temptation to follow the teaching of others. His is a ‘dispensation from God’ (κατὰ τὴν οἰκονομίαν τοῦ θεοῦ), and so his words are of divine origin. Nothing else in Colossian society can compare with that.

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<sup>8</sup> For a torturous treatment of the grammar of the passage, see Martin, "But Let Everyone Discern the Body of Christ (Colossians 2:17)." 254, who counters the almost universal understanding of the passage to give a translation thus: ‘Therefore do not let anyone critique you by [your or her/his?] eating and drinking or by [your or her/his?] participation in a feast, a new moon, or sabbaths, which things are a shadow of future realities, but let everyone discern the body of Christ by [your or her/his?] eating and drinking or by [your or her/his?] participation in a feast, new moon, or sabbaths, which things are a shadow of future realities.’

Moreover, the strange statement that he ‘fills up in turn’ the sufferings of Christ<sup>9</sup> is both an emotional appeal to the Colossians to remember that Paul is personally committed to them (how do the teachers of other doctrines compare on that standard?), and again a demonstration of the link that exists between Paul and the divine Christ.

In sum, the Colossian problem is attacked at a personal-epistemological level, so that 1:24–29 makes sense when read with 2:16–23.<sup>10</sup>

#### (d) **Soteriology to authority**

Returning to Colossians 2:16ff, the introductory οὖν signifies that the preceding doctrinal section is directly relevant to the freedom from regulation. Freedom from regulation comes by the cross. The Colossians do not have to keep regulations, since Christ has blotted out the χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν, the ‘handwriting of regulations’.<sup>11</sup> These are the ‘regulations’ spoken of in v. 20, and so are the Jewish identity markers, as it were, of cultic ceremonies.

With the mention of circumcision in v. 11, it implicitly includes that rite, although in speaking of ‘the circumcision of Christ’ (i.e. sanctification<sup>12</sup>), it appears that the regulations are broader than just the identity markers. Paul also has in mind the ethical regulations, which

<sup>9</sup> [T]here is at the root of his thinking a commitment to suffer on behalf of the church to the extent that Christ suffered (without, of course, any idea of atoning value); and that what’. Andrew C. Perriman, "The Pattern of Christ's Sufferings : Colossians 1:24 and Philippians 3:10-11," *Tyndale Bulletin* 42, no. 1 (1991). 77. For an overview of the passage in interpretive history, see John Henry Paul Reumann, "Colossians 1:24 ("What Is Lacking in the Afflictions of Christ") : History of Exegesis and Ecumenical Advance," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 17, no. 6 (1990). 454–461.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Richard E. DeMaris, *The Colossian Controversy: Wisdom in Dispute at Colossae* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994). 141–142, ‘His Christocentric understanding of revelation has clear implications for the question...: how does one acquire divine knowledge?’

<sup>11</sup> Strictly, the text does not say that regulations ought not to be kept, but speaks of freedom from having to obey them. This does not *logically* lead to the conclusion from this text that ‘we can keep days and diets, or forget them’, contrary to R. Kent Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon: The Supremacy of Christ*, Preaching the Word (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1989). 83. Paul does not say here whether that is the situation. The tenor of the passage is that it would be wrong to subject oneself to regulations *as regulations*, that is, as rightly imposed law, but leaves open the possibility of whether a Christian is permitted to follow regulations for some other reason.

<sup>12</sup> Symbolized in baptism, 2:12. On the question of infant baptism, see J. P. T. Hunt, "Colossians 2:11-12, the Circumcision/Baptism Analogy, and Infant Baptism," *Tyndale Bulletin* 41, no. 2 (1990). 227–244.

by breaking, ‘stood against us’. It is not mere external ritual that is the enemy, but the very ‘body of flesh’ (v. 11), and ‘trespasses’ in general (v. 13).

The ethical element is dealt with by forgiveness, coming via the cross, but the cross has a more radical effect, apparently, upon the ritual requirements, removing not just their ‘standing against us’ nature, but removing them as requirements.

What exactly is the logic of this? What does it mean to say that the cross brings freedom from regulation? The answer is found in the concept of identification between the believer and the crucifixion-resurrection event of Christ. In dying and rising with him, legal demands are abolished and new life is found. There is ‘fullness of life’, according to v. 10. In this fullness of life, one is joined to him who is ‘the head of all rule and authority’. This, ultimately, is the basis of believers’ freedom. They belong to Christ, not to the world. Thus, v. 20 asks the question, ‘...why do you live as if you still belonged to the world?’ The cross brings freedom, because through the cross comes union with Christ, the head. Soteriology leads to a new principle of authority being operative in believers’ lives. It is he who commands that old regulations be unobserved, treating them as elementary principles of the world. Paul still has not explained just why the old regulations of the Hebrew Scriptures needed to be annulled, but the point as the Colossians needed to hear it was that the matter was about obedience to Christ: about living correctly in the kingdom of the Son.

This leads back, then, to the primary theological concern of chapter one, which in two doctrinal sections speaks of the new kingdom in which believers find themselves, and the head of the kingdom, Christ (1:12b–14; 1:15–20). The Colossians must choose whom they will follow. Paul exhorts them to live as ones who belong to Christ, not to the world.

In summary, the four doctrinal sections found in chapters 1–2 all feed into the first section of specific exhortation.

### 3.3 Put off and put on (3:5–17)

The second section of specific exhortation gives a list of sins to ‘put off’ and attitudes and actions to ‘put on’. This is a typical Pauline approach to paraenesis, which fits seamlessly into the Colossian letter. The section has numerous links with the teaching that has preceded.

a. First, the concept of putting off and on relates to the verses that speak of having been crucified and raised with Christ (in the section, 2:9–15). The believer is principally dead to sin and alive to and in Christ. The actual expression of life must conform to this spiritual reality.

b. Secondly, the sins that are to be put off are those which belong to ‘the members which are on the earth’ (τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς). It looks as though Paul has succumbed to the popular ideology that had a low opinion of things physical. It is not a rigid vertical dualism, however, for although the believer’s life is hid with Christ above, the whole point of the ethical instruction is to make the heavenly reality present on earth, as it were.<sup>13</sup> The believer’s life is certainly anchored with Christ in heaven, but Christ is present with the believer on the earth. It is as the doctrinal sections of chapter 1 say, that the believer is currently in the kingdom of the Son, and he rules over heaven and earth, both in Creation and the Church. Paul’s instruction in 3:5–17 is not for believers to leave this world for heavenly realms, but to exclude all that which is not consistent with the rule of Christ over all things. Christ brooks no rivals.

c. Thirdly, 3:5 has three highly significant words, which give assurance that the interpretation of the letter given above is correct. Paul writes of covetousness (if not the preceding sins as well), ‘which is idol-worship’ (ἥτις ἐστὶν εἰδωλολατρία). The word for ‘idol-worship’ elsewhere in the New Testament is used literally. Here, it is metaphoric,

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<sup>13</sup> ‘A believer’s “members” (NIV, “the parts of your body”) can be offered to sin as instruments of wickedness or to God as instruments of righteousness and holiness (Rom. 6:13, 19).’ David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998). 203.

but indicates just what is concerning Paul about the Colossians. There is a brief mention of the worship of angels, with the implication that the Colossians were attempting to approach God other than through Christ,<sup>14</sup> but even more concerning to Paul is that in a host of other ways, they were effectively engaged in idolatry. The fact that idolatry is linked to covetousness may be a deliberate allusion to the original sin, in which by covetousness, the man and woman submitted themselves to the serpent. Only one is due worship, namely the icon of the invisible God. The letter to the Colossians is about idolatry.<sup>15</sup> (Cf. Col. 3:15, in which the peace of God must ‘rule’, βραβεύω, in your hearts, and 3:16–17, which not only proscribes the new way of Christian worship, which speaking in hymns is about mutual edification as well as the worship of the deity, but says that all is to be done ‘in the name of the Lord Jesus’, ἐν ὀνόματι κυρίου Ἰησοῦ.)

d. Fourthly, 3:9–10 speaks of the ‘old man’ (‘man’ could reasonably be translated as ‘person’ in the modern context) and ‘the new’ man. This fits with the whole flow of the letter to date, that there is a new dispensation of salvation history, a time of the revelation of the mystery, a new kingdom of Christ, even a new creation, ruled over by the firstborn of the dead.

e. Fifthly, 3:11 says that ‘Christ is all, and in all’ (ἀλλὰ πάντα καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν Χριστός). This returns directly to the main thought of chapter 1, that all things were created through him and to him, etc. Paul is still ‘on theme’.

f. Sixthly, 3:13 speaks of the need for forgiveness. This must have been a particular necessity at Colossae, since Paul has twice before mentioned the forgiveness of God (1:14; 2:13). Forgive as the Lord has forgiven, is the injunction.

<sup>14</sup> Holly Diane Hayes, "Colossians 2:6-19," *Interpretation* 49, no. 3 (1995). 285, suggests that Paul prioritizes the assertion of the supremacy of Christ (1:15–20), since the Colossians were seeking to find reconciliation with God ‘other than through Christ’, which would then be from things which ‘arise from within the created order established through him’.

<sup>15</sup> See Brian J. Walsh, "Late/Post Modernity and Idolatry : A Contextual Reading of Colossians 2:8-3:4," *Ex Auditu* 15 (1999). 1–17.

g. Seventhly, the list of sins, in conjunction with other statements in the letter regarding Sabbath and false worship, touch on almost all of the commandments of the Decalogue. Paul has previously looked at the relationship between the cultic law and the fullness of Christ, and is also wrestling with the question of how the Old ethical commands can be appropriated in the New dispensation. Without going into the difficulties of the subject, Paul's solution is to say that the ethical commands of the Old are still applicable, and so believers ought to worship God alone, not make idols (literal and metaphorical), honour parents and those in authority, not be angry (which equates with the command not to kill in the Decalogue), not lie, not be covetousness, etc.

Once again, it is seen that the specific exhortations of Colossians relate intimately to the doctrine of the letter.

### **3.4 Social relationships (3:18 – 4:1)**

The instructions with regard to social order are in touch with the main theme of the letter in two ways.

First, recurrent expressions directly relate back to the theme of the headship of Christ. These expressions are: 'as is fitting in the Lord', 'this pleases the Lord', 'fearing the Lord', 'as serving the Lord and not men', 'you are serving the Lord Christ', and 'you also have a Master in heaven' (noting the use of the unique expression, 'the Lord Christ', demonstrating that the Lord in the passage is not the Father). 'Christians should not submit to other religious authorities outside God in Christ'.<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, Paul believes that there has been or is the possibility of a breakdown in social structures of the Colossian Christians. The clue to this is not only in the specific instructions in chapter 3, but in the commendation of 2:5, in which Paul expresses his joy in the 'order'

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<sup>16</sup> Teresa Okure, "'In Him All Things Hold Together": A Missiological Reading of Colossians 1:15-20," *International Review of Mission* 91, no. 360 (2002). 71.

(τάξις) and steadfastness of the Colossians. These are precisely the two points that he thinks are in doubt in the Colossian Christians. Both, Paul believes, are tied to a misunderstanding of the authority of Christ. There needs to be a fresh understanding and practice of correct authority structures, from the top down. As has often been noted, the fifth word of the Decalogue is not solely about the relationship between children and parents, but is about authority structures in the covenant community, and so it is not surprising to see Paul reflecting the fifth command in the letter to the Colossians.

Wives and husbands must correctly relate to each other, and the relationship is expressed firstly in terms of hierarchy (wives are to ‘submit’, ὑποτάσσω). Children, likewise, are in a hierarchical situation with their parents, and are called to ‘hear’ or obey (ὑπακούω). Slaves are similarly bound to their *kurioi*, being called upon to obey (ὑπακούω).<sup>17</sup> All are called on to ‘serve’ as slaves (δουλεύω) the Lord Christ. Within those relationships, the dominating person (husbands, parents—quickly narrowed to fathers, and masters) has responsibilities of kindness, but the primary issue is undeniably hierarchical. The authority of Christ is worked out in this way in the sphere of the family (and workplace, although that workplace in mind was probably the home).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The passage thus seems ‘to justify oppressive structures in the family as well as in societies that tolerate slavery’. Angela Standhartinger and Brian McNeil, “The Origin and Intention of the Household Code in the Letter to the Colossians,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, no. 79 (2000). 117. The authors deconstruct the text to some extent, looking for inconsistencies that might indicate that Paul did not quite mean what he says, but finally Paul is left un-absolved. One surprising conclusion is that the text is said not to be integrated into the letter. This fails to see that authority is at the heart of the letter’s teaching.

<sup>18</sup> Thus, Walsh, “Late/Post Modernity and Idolatry : A Contextual Reading of Colossians 2:8-3:4.” 219, under the title of ‘An Ethic of Liberation’, speaks of the authority of parents over children as ‘an authority that subverts the principalities and powers of the culture and educates our children for discipleship.’



### **3.5 Prayer and public life (4:2–6)**

In the final exhortational section before the concluding personal remarks, Paul attempts to reorientate the Colossians towards the imperative of Gospel ministry in the world. Their prayer life is to be impacted by the knowledge of Christ that has been conveyed in the letter, so that they should pray steadfastly, with thanksgiving (4:2). More than that, though, they are to pray for Paul's ministry, which brings him back to the idea that he has been appointed 'to declare the mystery of Christ', even as 1:24–29 said. The Colossians are, implicitly, to imitate Paul's missionary endeavour, using their time wisely with 'outsiders', speaking graciously and giving an 'answer' (ἀποκρίνομαι) to each person. Paul has already spoken against speech-sins, including blasphemy and lies, and so the overall sense emerges that they are to be put off, and gracious Gospel-orientated language is to be put on.

The concern is, then, to bring people from the Old dispensation and the Old created order, into the kingdom of the Son and into submission to His rule. The knowledge of Christ with which the Colossians should be filled, should also fill the world. Once again, it is seen that the application of the letter is intimately related to the doctrinal sections of the letter.

## **4. Conclusion**

After a careful study of the letter to the Colossians, what initially looked like a patchwork of various doctrines and exhortations instead turns out to be a masterly piece of literature in which every section works together towards the one end. The problems at Colossae were theological and ethical, and Paul responds at both levels. In Paul's estimation, the practical problems of lack of order and lack of steadfastness in faith and practice existed as the fruit of faulty thinking, and so above all he calls them to set their minds back upon the sovereign Christ, the firstborn of Creation and the Church. He alone must be worshipped and served, and only in Him do right thinking, feeling and doing occur.

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