

Doctrinal Issues in Colossians  
Part 3 (of 4 parts):

**THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION  
IN COLOSSIANS\***

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The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, painted an exquisite portrait of Jesus Christ. The apostle, however, did not complete his painting without also depicting the importance of Christ's Person and work in relation to eternal salvation. The basis of that salvation is the death of Christ on the cross, by which He has given an eternal inheritance to believers. As heirs, saints possess abundant salvific treasures, including redemption, reconciliation, sanctification, and ultimate glorification. Salvation flows from the headwaters of the eternal plan of God the Father and its actualization through the work of the Son in time and space. By the Son, believers have been transferred from the tyranny and destruction of the kingdom of darkness to the blessing of the kingdom of light. Moreover, they are presently being transformed by the work of God. In Colossians, salvation is a multifaceted doctrine, made up of many threads woven together in relation to Christ and His work.

THE BELIEVER'S INHERITANCE

QUALIFIED BY GOD THE FATHER

In Paul's opening prayer he praised God the Father as the One who initiates the salvation of Christians (1:12), a salvation given to them in the form of an inheritance. Paul clearly established the fact that salvation is wrought in a family context. Salvation comes through God "the Father, who has qualified us" for an in-

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heritance. Inheritances, and specifically in this case salvation, are awarded on the basis of family qualification. Salvation, then, is not something that believers have obtained by merit; inheritances are given to heirs and sons, not to workers. God the Father qualified believers for a "portion of the lot" (τὴν μερίδα τοῦ κλήρου) by virtue of His predestined plan to adopt them (cf. Eph. 1:5). The verb ἱκανόω means "to make sufficient or to qualify,"<sup>1</sup> and ἱκανώσαντι is a consummative aorist emphasizing a past completed action. Thus, according to Paul, God caused believers to be qualified for inheritance. Again an inheritance is only for those who are duly authorized heirs.

In Colossians 1:21 Paul demonstrated that before conversion the believer's relationship with God was anything but familial. Paul did not equivocate when he stated that sinners were alienated (ὄντας ἀπηλλοτριωμένους) and enemies (ἐχθρούς). The present participle ὄντας depicts an ongoing breach between God and sinners. The idea of being enemies of God coincides with Romans 5:10. As an enemy, one is not entitled to anything. Mercy and grace for a captive foe are purely at the discretion of the conqueror. And though God owed sinners a fiery payment, He forgave them and qualified them for an inheritance through Jesus Christ and brought them into His household.

When was this action of "qualifying" (Col. 1:12) consummated? In one sense the believer was "qualified" by means of God's election in eternity past. As Ephesians 1:4 states, believers were chosen "in Him before the foundation of the world" (πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου<sup>2</sup>). Thus the qualification has already come about in eternity past.<sup>3</sup> Then through the sacrifice of His Son God the Father qualified them to receive this inheritance. The Cross was the outworking of God's eternal plan, which was initially ratified "before the foundation of the world." Ephesians 1:11 further emphasizes that the inheritance comes by virtue of God's predestination: "in whom we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined (προρισθέντες) according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will." The aorist participle προρισθέντες indicates that God's predestining work is the basis by which "we have obtained an inheritance"

<sup>1</sup> Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 374.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase πρὸ καταβολῆς is also used of Christ in 1 Peter 1:20.

<sup>3</sup> Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 26.

(ἐκληρώθημεν). Therefore this inheritance is a matter of God's grace, since God's election is apart from any counsel or persuasion other than His own.

The concept of inheritance was commonplace to those familiar with Jewish history. God promised the Israelites an inheritance in the land of Canaan (cf. Gen. 15:13-21; 48:3-44; Exod. 3:8), and as He led them out of Egypt He delivered them into the Promised Land. The right of the Jews to this inheritance came by virtue of their being descendants of Abraham. However, the inheritance promised to the Colossians "belongs to a higher plane and a more enduring order than any terrestrial Canaan."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, rather than having Abraham as their "father," believers today have God as their Father.

The concept of inheritance in the Old Testament applied not only to the land but also to the Israelites themselves. Deuteronomy 4:20 refers to Israel as "the people of His inheritance." Moreover, in addition to God's claiming individuals as His inheritance, people referred to God as their "portion" or "lot." For example the psalmist claimed God as "his portion" (יְקָרְבִּי) or inheritance (Ps. 73:26). The notion that inheritance sometimes referred to spiritual as well as physical possessions is well attested in the Old Testament (cf. Deut. 7:6; 32:9; Ps. 16:5; Lam. 3:24).

#### THE INHERITORS AND THEIR KINGDOM

God's inheritance is for His people, those mentioned in Colossians 1:12 as "saints" (τῶν ἁγίων). The saints are the people of God, not angels.<sup>5</sup> Certainly the Christian community is called by God to participate in the angelic realm, and as they are "in the light" they partake in the realm of the heavenlies. However, the context seems to dictate that the ἁγίων mentioned above are believers (cf. Rom. 12:13; 1 Cor. 6:1; Eph. 3:8), and the light in which they are qualified to share is the kingdom of light, the home of God in His full glory. This is the polar opposite of the domain or kingdom' of darkness, referred to in Colossians 1:13. This term "darkness" (σκότος) has an ominous tone of doom and destruction. Those in darkness are without salvation: "you were formerly darkness" (Eph. 5:8). Such individuals are also "children destined for wrath" (2:3). The Bible uses this contrast

<sup>4</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Epistle to the Colossians, Philemon and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 50.

<sup>5</sup> Lohse, building on his study of the parallels between Colossians and Qumran literature, says ἁγίων refers to angels (Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, Hermenia [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971], 36).

between light and darkness as a theme in many passages, not the least of which is 1 John, which develops the difference between light and darkness. In the literature of Qumran, "light and darkness are determinative spheres but also paths one can take."<sup>6</sup> Light is indicative of goodness and righteousness, and the culmination of this way of life is salvation, which is contrary to darkness, which culminates in "eternal perdition in the fire of dark places (1QS 4:12 f. cf. 2:8; 1 QH 3:29 ff.)."<sup>7</sup>

The inheritance of the saints is said to be "in the light" because God removed them from the power of darkness. "He delivered us from the domain [ἐξουσία] of darkness and transferred [μετέστησεν] us to the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Col. 1:13). The use of ἐξουσία here has the idea of the "domain of darkness" as the antithesis of Christ's kingdom. The domain of darkness refers to the spiritual realm where evil reigns. The phrase ἐξουσία τοῦ σκότους is also found in Luke 22:53, which states that Christ, when He was being betrayed said He knew that "the power of darkness" was at hand. The term ἐξουσία was also used by Paul in Ephesians 2:2, where the believer's former life is said to be controlled by the prince of the domain (ἐξουσία) of the air, whose spirit is working in the lives of unbelievers.<sup>8</sup>

Leaving the domain of darkness involves both a present lifestyle pleasing to the Lord (consisting of "goodness and righteousness and truth," Eph. 5:9) and an eternal existence of being "in the light" (ἐν τῷ φῶς, Col. 1:12).

### CHRIST'S REDEMPTION OF HIS PEOPLE

As is well known, the theological term "redemption" (ἀπολύτρωσις) means "'setting free for a ransom,' and is used of prisoners of war."<sup>9</sup> Slaves or captives could be "redeemed" or "purchased" in the marketplace. Israelites would envision even more in the word, for it would recall God's redeeming work in Egypt on behalf of His chosen people. Corresponding to this redeeming work is the "forgiveness of sins" spoken of by the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel as they predicted the New

<sup>6</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "φῶς," by Hans Conzelmann, 9:326.

<sup>7</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "πνεῦμα," by Eduard Schweizer, 7:432.

<sup>8</sup> Ernest R. Campbell, *A Commentary on Colossians and Philemon* (Silverton, OR: Canyonview, 1982), 37.

<sup>9</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "ἀπολύτρωσις," by F. Bichsel, 4:352.

Covenant (Jer. 31:31, 34; Ezek. 36:16-36).<sup>10</sup> The concepts of redemption and forgiveness (τὴν ἄφεσιν) in Colossians 1:14 are closely related, perhaps even appositional.<sup>11</sup> Lexically both terms can be used in a commercial environment, ἄφεσις carrying the notion of "cancellation of an obligation"<sup>12</sup> and ἀπολύτρωσις conveying the idea of "buying back."<sup>13</sup> Paul heralded this same truth in a similar construction in Ephesians 1:7. Redemption, as a work of salvation, is inseparable from the idea of forgiveness. Redemption is "from the wrath and punitive justice of God."<sup>14</sup> This redemption can be accomplished only by forgiveness. The relationship between these two concepts has been a source of dispute since the times of the early church fathers. Some said salvation is a two-stage process, namely, forgiveness of sins at baptism and redemption at a later state when the person receives perfection (corresponding to Christ's baptism and the supposed later descent of the Christ on the human Jesus), but Irenaeus argued against this false notion.<sup>15</sup> Calvin advanced that "the apostle defines the redemption in Christ's blood as 'the forgiveness of sins' [Col. 1:14]."<sup>16</sup> Redemption has connotations for both the present and the future. "All present spiritual possessions are simply installments on the inheritance, which will consist in the whole existence of man being given up and made conformable in the Spirit."<sup>17</sup>

### THROUGH CHRIST

When the believer is delivered from the domain or power of Satan, he is transferred (μετέστησεν) into the kingdom of Christ, God's beloved Son.<sup>18</sup> Citizenship in this kingdom is procured by the purchase of Christ: "in whom we have redemption, the for-

<sup>10</sup> N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 63.

<sup>11</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 28.

<sup>12</sup> Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 96.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Charles J. Ellicott, *The Epistles of St. Paul* (Boston: Draper, 1866), 2:133.

<sup>15</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 50.21.2, cited in William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964), 65.

<sup>16</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeil, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:533.

<sup>17</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "ἀπολύτρωσις," by F. Buchsel, 4:352.

<sup>18</sup> The aorist tense reiterates the truth in Ephesians 2:6 that believers are positionally in heaven (Robert G. Gromacki, *Stand Perfect in Wisdom: An Exposition of Colossians and Philemon* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], 55).

givenness of sins" (1:14). The preposition ἐν, though often rendered "by," should here be translated "in" (cf. Eph. 1:7, 10, 13; Col. 2:3, 11-12; 2 Tim. 1:9). Clark thinks differently since Christ is the agent by which redemption is accomplished.<sup>19</sup> However, the idea of the saints being in the light and being placed into the kingdom adds force to the view that redemption is in Him. Romans 3:24 weaves together the ideas of redemption and the believer's position in Christ: "through the redemption which is in Christ."<sup>20</sup> With this interpretation is the conclusion that "forgiveness of sins" is indeed appositional to redemption (as already suggested).<sup>21</sup> It further defines and clarifies redemption, not fully or exhaustively, but enough to carry the intended meaning to the reader. This identification is the crux of the issue for the believer. Whatever "in Him" means, it at least speaks to the inseparable identification of the believer and his Lord. It most likely is a locative of sphere (of Jesus Christ),<sup>22</sup> and since this passage focuses on the believer's spiritual destiny, the spiritual union of the believer and Christ seems to be emphasized (cf. Col. 3:1-3).<sup>23</sup>

#### REDEMPTION PARALLELS

Most commentators agree that Colossians 1:14 could have been a specific rejoinder against a false Colossian view on the work and efficiency of Christ in relation to the true gospel message (see 2:18). Colossians 1:14 is strikingly similar to Ephesians 1:7, "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses." The sin that has clung to mankind since the Fall in Genesis 3 was not a mere triviality, not something to be passed over without a second glance. God is a just God, and sin carries a price. That debt was obtained by one man, Adam, and its consequence was death (Rom. 5:12). The progeny of Adam are carriers of this debt, this burden. Christ was the lifeline, the only means of rescue, in the sea of sin. In the syncretistic religious culture of Colossae, the uniqueness of Christ's all-sufficiency was a central issue for the Apostle Paul. Any theological aberration that undermined the all-sufficiency of Christ also jeopardized the verity of the redemption "in Him." A Chris-

<sup>19</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Colossians: Another Commentary on an Inexhaustible Message* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 30.

<sup>20</sup> The second attributive position allows the phrase ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ to modify the leading noun (τῆς ἀπολυτρώσεως), thus pointing to the quality or kind of redemption:

<sup>21</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Nashville: Broadman, 1931), 4:477.

<sup>22</sup> Campbell, *A Commentary on Colossians and Philemon*, 40.

<sup>23</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, 65.

tology that lessens Christ and His power lessens His role in salvation and the integrity of that salvation.

In another parallel on the theme of redemption, Paul wrote, "But by His [God's] doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). The context of this passage states that Christ's work and the gospel were seen as foolishness, and to Gentiles, redemption carried little of the meaning it would have for Jews. Greek philosophy did not include a Judeo-Christian concept of sin, wrath, and atonement. Deities in the Greek pantheon were too fickle and involved in their own affairs to adhere to any sense of a perfect justice, as is presented in the Scriptures. Any type of redemption in the pagan mythology was motivated by petty jealousy or some type of law that even the gods were under.

### REDEMPTION AND FORGIVENESS

The end of Colossians 1:14, which speaks of Christ's power to forgive sins is a direct statement in support of His deity. In fact it was this claim (though not exclusively) that spurred the wrath of the Pharisees, and contributed ultimately to His crucifixion. In healing a paralytic man, Christ first demonstrated His ability to forgive sins (Mark 2:5-12). The scribes whispered among themselves in essence, "Blasphemy, who does this man think he is? Only God forgives sin!" (v. 7). This was Jesus' exact point. He can forgive sins because He is God in the flesh. Colossians 1:19 affirms the glorious truth that in Him all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form. The Pharisees could not bear the idea of God in the flesh usurping their religious power over the populace; and to the Colossians, who were delving into dualistic philosophy, this concept certainly did not support their ascetic presuppositions concerning flesh, spirit, and spirituality.

All these components of salvation—inheritance, deliverance, redemption, and forgiveness—are because of God the Father (v. 12), who in eternity past predestined and chose, according to His will, those who would believe. This is His prerogative and blessing bestowed on those who are undeserving.

### RECONCILIATION

Colossians 1:19-23 addresses several aspects of the subject of reconciliation.

For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. And although

you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach—if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.

#### THE DEFINITION OF RECONCILIATION

The term ἀποκατάλλαξις occurs in verses 20 and 22 and in Ephesians 2:16. The prefixed preposition ἀπο suggests intensity or completeness.<sup>24</sup> In both passages it is important to note that this type of reconciliation is not simply concession after mutual hostility. It is used strictly in reference to man, not God. In 2 Corinthians 5:18-19, another passage on reconciliation, which uses the term καταλλάσσω, Paul wrote of sin not being reckoned to believers. This barrier of sin is truly a problem in man's relationship to God. Scripture leaves no doubt as to the corruption of mankind and the fact that this corruption, which is an effrontery before God, required reconciliation.<sup>25</sup> This reconciliation occurred through the Cross. The Cross not only brought reconciliation and an end to enmity between God and sinners, but it also is the means of reconciliation between individuals (Eph. 2:16).

#### THE INITIATOR OF RECONCILIATION

Colossians 1:20 depicts God reconciling all things to Himself. The unsaved are incapable of seeking reconciliation. No one seeks God (Rom. 3:11), and all the unregenerate are enemies of God (5:10). The depraved state of sinful humanity renders individuals spiritually dead, incapable, and unworthy. Despite all these accusations, God the Father, through the blood of Christ, reconciled sinners, while they were yet His enemies. Reflecting on one's former state before God, a believer can more fully appreciate the truth of salvation by grace. Enemies do not deserve grace. The fact that grace is unmerited makes it a beautiful yet confusing thing to the human mind.

#### THE EXTENT OF RECONCILIATION

Because God reconciles sinners to Himself, by means of the blood of His Son, its effects are all inclusive. The Cross thus affects not only mankind but also the entire cosmos: "and through

<sup>24</sup> S. Lewis Johnson, "From Enmity to Amity," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 121 (April-June, 1964): 143.

<sup>25</sup> Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 229.



Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven" (Col. 1:20).

The phrase "through Him" (δι' αὐτοῦ) demonstrates that Christ is the intermediate Agent through whom God effected the reconciliation. Though God the Father is not mentioned in this passage specifically, contextual considerations indicate that He uses Christ to bring about His objectives. Through the Son's work the Father reconciles sinners.<sup>26</sup>

However, in what sense does God reconcile all things to Himself? One answer is that God, through Christ's death, has somehow fully reconciled all fallen humanity, and that therefore salvation has been procured for all. However, this view conflicts with other Scripture. Universalism, though taught by some, has never been a consensus of the orthodox church. The following ramifications logically emanate from such an interpretation: (1) Faith would be totally unnecessary. (2) The many biblical references to hell and eternal suffering would need to be reinterpreted. (3) Sin; forgiveness, and grace would be unimportant.<sup>27</sup>

The absurdity of these conclusions, when taken in light of all Scripture, shows that this view is untenable. The proper view is that reconciliation of all things means that God's legitimate reign over all creation will be restored. Through Jesus God will reign over all things because all things will be summed up in Christ (ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι τὰ πάντα ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ, Eph. 1:10).

#### THE OBJECT OF RECONCILIATION

The obvious target of God's reconciliation is fallen humanity. As He removed the barrier that stood between God and mankind, He took care of the wrath that comes on the sons of disobedience (Col. 3:6). The fact that the barrier has been removed does not mean reconciliation has been appropriated. As Walvoord states, "the act of reconciliation in the death of Christ does not in itself effect reconciliation for the individual, but rather . . . it is provisional and makes possible the reconciliation of the individual."<sup>28</sup> However, people by nature do not desire to take advantage of this situation on their own accord. This does not detract from the reconciling work of the Father, for it had to be in

<sup>26</sup> Clark, *Colossians: Another Commentary on an Inexhaustible Message*, 50.

<sup>27</sup> Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 406-8.

<sup>28</sup> John Walvoord, "Reconciliation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 120 (January—March 1963): 8.

place to be in accord with His nature. For this reason Christ became "sin on our behalf" (2 Cor. 5:21).

#### RECONCILIATION OF CREATION

Another aspect of the reconciliation of all things on the earth is the inclusion of all physical creation. The Fall had a definite effect on the physical creation. As Adam and Eve were being expelled from the Garden of Eden, God informed them that because of their sins, even the ground would be cursed (אֶרֶץ יִרְדּוּ וְהָאָדָמָה יִרְדּוּ), and it would produce thorns and thistles, along with their crops (Gen. 3:17-18). A New Testament witness to this fact is Romans 8:19-22, which addresses mankind's responsibility for nature's fall.<sup>29</sup> Creation waits with eager anticipation (ἀποκαρδοκία) to be set free from "the servility of corruption" (vv. 19-21). Moreover, creation "groans and suffers" (v. 22), while God, in reconciling τὰ πάντα ("all things") to Himself, prepares to put creation itself under His authority and rule, through the administrative reign of Jesus Christ. Colossians 1:15-20 proclaims Christ as the cosmic Head who is "before all things" (v. 17). When Christ is officially inaugurated as the cosmic Potentate at the beginning of the eternal state, the earth will have its day of reckoning and redemption, and will be transformed (2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 21:1).<sup>30</sup>

#### RECONCILIATION OF THE HEAVENS

The worshiping of angels was part of the heretical practice in the Colossian church (Col. 2:18). Christ's authority over all creation (1:16-17) suggests that there will be an end to the spiritual tension present in the heavenly places. Colossians 1:16 speaks of thrones (θρόνοι), dominions (κυριότητες), principalities (ἄρχαι), and powers (ἐξουσίαι), the potentates of the angelic realm (cf. Eph. 3:10).<sup>31</sup> Spiritual warfare in the heavenlies results in conflict in this life between the believer and satanic powers (6:10-18). However, Christ, at the right hand of the Father, possesses authority over the angelic realm, though at the present time that realm has not come under final judgment. In spite of the presence of evil in the heavenlies (cf. Job 15:15), the angelic realm will be subject to God's work of reconciliation.<sup>32</sup> Philippians 2:10 states that as a result of His work on the cross, Christ will be exalted, and that at His name "every knee shall bow, of those who are in heaven, and

<sup>29</sup> See Charles C. Ryrie, ed., *The Ryrie Study Bible* (NASB), note on Romans 8:20.

<sup>30</sup> Clark, *Colossians: Another Commentary on an Inexhaustible Message*, 51.

<sup>31</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 46.

<sup>32</sup> Gromacki, *Stand Perfect in Wisdom*, 74.

on earth, and under the earth." This is an all-inclusive statement, affecting all creation (cf. Eph. 1:10). Though this digression on the reconciliation of creation seems to wander from the soteriological examination of Colossians, it is necessary to demonstrate the complex nature of soteriology, which affects both mankind and the environment designed for their rule.

#### CONTRASTS IN MINDSETS ON RECONCILIATION

Former condition. Paul's message in Colossians 1:21 narrows in focus to the unbeliever's estrangement from God: "you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds." He contrasted the Colossians' former and present conditions by the words "formerly" (ποτε, v. 21) and "yet now" (νυνὶ δὲ, v. 22). This points up the dramatic change in the believer's quality of life that was accomplished by God (cf. Eph. 2:11-13; Col. 3:7-8; Phile. 11).<sup>33</sup>

"Formerly" they were "alienated" (ἀπηλλοτριωμένους) from God (cf. Eph. 2:12; 4:18). This alienation was born out of ignorance. This ignorance was a spiritual not an intellectual lack of knowledge (4:18). The same passage in Ephesians speaks of "the darkened mind" (ἐσκοτωμένοι τῆ διανοίᾳ) of the unsaved. As enemies (ἐχθρούς) of God (Col. 1:21), the unregenerate are definitely "hostile" toward God, and this relationship is in some way reciprocated by God.<sup>34</sup> In light of God's dealings with sin in the Old Testament and His dealings with His enemies in the New Testament (e.g., He will put "all His enemies under His feet," 1 Cor. 15:25), the wrath of God is an active element against His enemies, not just a passive attitude (Rom. 1:18). According to Romans 8:7, the mindset (φρόνημα) of the flesh is enmity against God, and this hostility manifests itself in deeds of wickedness.<sup>35</sup> Just as faith will manifest itself in a tangible way in the believer's overt actions toward others, so also will powerful and sinful states of mind be revealed by "evil deeds" (ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις τοῖς πονηροῖς, Col. 1:21; cf. James 2:14-26). This enmity is in the mind (τῆ διανοίᾳ). This word translated "mind" is used almost synonymously with καρδιά ("heart") in the Septuagint in referring to the totality of the individual (Gen. 8:21; Deut. 4:39).<sup>36</sup>

Present condition. "Yet He has now reconciled you in His

<sup>33</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 66.

<sup>34</sup> E. H. Gifford, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (London: Murray, 1886), 114.

<sup>35</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, 83.

<sup>36</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 66.

fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach" (Col. 1:22).

After establishing the extent of the believer's former condition (1:21), Paul then disclosed the purpose of the reconciliation ("to present," *παραστῆσαι*, a purpose infinitive giving the intended goal of the reconciliation<sup>37</sup>), along with a description of the means ("in His fleshly body through death"). By stressing the fact of Jesus' "body of flesh," Paul blatantly renounced any of the dualistic philosophies that might have seeped into the Colossian church and fully upheld the integrity of Christ's Person, by linking the Incarnation and the Atonement.<sup>38</sup> As Eadie wrote,

The whole phrase makes plain that the reconciliation of the Colossians was accomplished by one who was truly incarnate (against a docetic understanding of Jesus' historical life) and who really died (*διὰ τοῦ θανάτου*; against a gnostic[like] interpretation which glossed over his death as unreal (cf. Eph. 2:14, 16).<sup>39</sup>

The prepositions Paul used support this interpretation: *ἐν* speaks to the issue of the sphere of the uniting operation before death, and *διὰ* points to the instrumental cause.<sup>40</sup> By identification, believers are positionally holy (*ἁγίους*), blameless (*ἄμώμους*), and beyond reproach (*ἀνεγκλήτους*). And they are to manifest these qualities in their Christian walk. The three adjectives together indicate faultlessness, in a somewhat liturgical formula.<sup>41</sup>

### PERSEVERANCE

The conditional clause in verse 23 ("if indeed you continue in the faith") at first glance may seem difficult to reconcile with the truths Paul presented in the preceding verses. God the Father reconciles sinners to Himself, based on His own sovereign will. It is He who redeems believing sinners, qualifies them for an inheritance, transfers them to His Son's kingdom, and through Christ presents them holy, blameless, and beyond reproach.

Does verse 23 place believers in the position of determining their own destiny? The "if" clause has been rendered variously:

<sup>37</sup> Bruce, *Epistle to the Colossians, Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 78.

<sup>38</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 68.

<sup>39</sup> John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians* (1856; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 82.

<sup>40</sup> This verb can suggest presenting a sacrifice or it can convey a legal placement of a case before a court (Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Jr., *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980], 569).

<sup>41</sup> Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 65.

"if indeed you continue" (NASB), "if you continue" (NIV), "if ye continue" (KJV), "provided that" (RSV), "as long as you persevere" (Jerusalem Bible). What most commentators agree on is that the words εἴ γε ("if indeed") do not express doubt. This conditional clause does not undermine the efficacy of the work of God, and certainly the apostle did not oscillate between a theocentric grace-oriented theology and an anthropocentric works-based theology. The conditional clause is a first class condition, which assumes the statement of the protasis to be true for the sake of argument. The reality or actuality of the protasis cannot be determined by the mere presence of the first class condition.<sup>42</sup> Writing from a pastor's heart, Paul assumed that those who respond to the call of the gospel will continue in it. The basic idea here is that "continuance is the test of reality."<sup>43</sup> "The call is to a steadfastness in the face of the danger of being drawn away from the apostolic gospel."<sup>44</sup>

Paul never vouched for his audience's salvation without good reason, and he seems to have sufficient reason to be encouraged by the Colossian believers' development of faith (2:5). Though the gospel was flourishing at Colossae, it would be naive to say that Paul assumed everyone in the church was saved, especially among those who were proliferating the heresy. In fact in this epistle several crucial doctrinal questions are discussed that indicate some source of tension. Even at Galatia, Paul worried whether he had labored over some of them in vain (Gal. 4:11). As Charles Spurgeon said, "I believe not so much in the perseverance of the saints as in the perseverance of the Saviour."<sup>45</sup>

The conditional clause in Colossians 1:23 seems almost rhetorical, expecting a positive answer. O'Brien paraphrased it in this way: "at any rate if you stand firm in the faith, and I am sure that you will."<sup>46</sup> The clause expresses the idea that if they were reconciled, then their faith would in fact continue. Paul did not hesitate to sort those who merely professed Christ from those who evidenced their possession of faith in Christ. The latter are those whose faith is "firmly established and steadfast" (τεθεμελιωμένοι καὶ ἑδραῖοι). In Jesus' analogy in Matthew 7:24-27, the house built on solid rock stood "for it had been founded"

<sup>42</sup> Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* (Rome: Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963), 103.

<sup>43</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 69.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Cited by Johnson, "From Enmity to Amity," 147.

<sup>46</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 69.

(*τεθεμελίωτο*) on firm material. Similarly believers, those who are in God's house, will stand firm, because its unshakable foundation is Christ (1 Cor. 3:10; 2 Tim. 2:19).<sup>47</sup> The Colossians were exhorted to continue in "the faith" (*τῇ πίστει*). Their confidence was to be in the objective apostolic doctrine of the gospel, not some subjective experience. In other Pauline literature (cf. Rom. 6:1; 11:22-23; 1 Tim. 4:16) *ἐπιμένω* ("continue") with the dative indicates "to persist in or persevere."<sup>48</sup> Faith then is used in the sense of a place to stay or remain, more than just an activity.<sup>49</sup> As doctrinal heresies crept in through religious syncretism, it was important that their faith remain undaunted, firm in Christ's work. Though the Colossian heretics tried to minimize the Person and work of Christ, the believers knew their salvation depended on the gospel they had obtained.<sup>50</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The doctrine of salvation is the core of Christianity, not a side issue or a trivial theological subject. With passionate fervor Paul wrote about the Person of Christ and described in detail the means, methods, and motives of salvation. Salvation is a work of the Father, accomplished by the Son of God, and is evidenced through the faith and faithfulness of believers. The motivation is the Father's love, and nothing else. All these theological tenets intertwine in the marvelous doctrine of grace. In answer to the false teachers and religious syncretism, Paul presented the only means of salvation, namely, Christ's redeeming work wrought on the cross. Thomas asked the Son of God Himself, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?" He replied, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:5-6).

<sup>47</sup> Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 66.

<sup>48</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 69.

<sup>49</sup> Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 84.

<sup>50</sup> Gromacki, *Stand Perfect in Wisdom*, 79.

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