

Households in Focus

A Christology for Frontier Mission: A Missiological Study of Colossians

by Brad Gill

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I would like to reaffirm our strategic cooperation in frontier mission by examining a rather uncommon portion of scripture for missiological reflection. Cooperation emerges from the objects we love, those purposes and goals we share, and I believe that in the epistle to the Colossians the Apostle Paul offers us a christological vision that grounds our mission in a common love.¹

Colossians as a Missiological Statement

Recently I was plowing through a new book by John Flett entitled *Apostolicity: The Ecumenical Question in World Christian Perspective*.² The author explained how the growing pluriformity of world Christianity should reorient our understanding of the apostolic continuity of the church. I don't usually read books on ecumenical unity, but this one had come in the mail (since I'm an editor) and something in the review had caught my eye: that the rationale for ecumenical unity over the past century had placed limits on cross-cultural engagement and the appropriation of the gospel. Those words have missiological implication.

At one point towards the end of his book, in his chapter on Jesus Christ as the ground of our apostolic mission, he refers the reader to Colossians.

If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. (Col. 3:1-4, NASB)

This particular portion of Colossians had never occurred to me as a basis for mission, and if it were not for the previous 320 pages of Flett's book, those few verses would not have made any new impression on me. But it became the genesis of my personal study of Colossians for some weeks, and I now see it contains a fundamental orientation for the extension of God's kingdom into sensitive inter-religious frontiers. So, I would like to offer this article as a short missiological reading of Colossians, one that respects both sound exegesis and a realistic grasp of the religious challenges we face in our modern world.

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The Colossian Predicament

Let me refresh your memory on this epistle. The entire letter has a typical Pauline flow from initial theological statements to more practical guidance for the local believers, with a particular passage in 3:1–11 acting as a hinge passage between Paul’s theology and Paul’s pastoral injunctions.

In chapter 1, Paul introduces an apologetic that includes one of the highest christological statements in all of scripture.

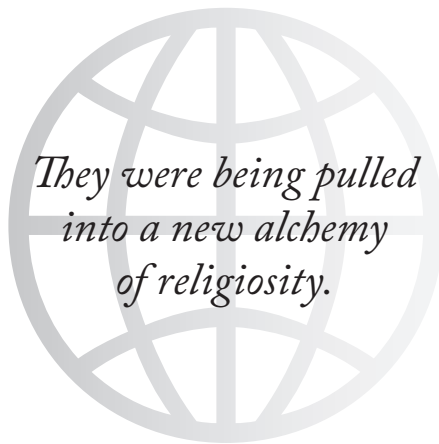
And He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation. For in Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on the earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church, and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything. 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. (Col 1:15–20a)

Paul establishes both the supremacy and the fullness of Christ in response to news that has arrived with Epaphras. It’s apparent that certain alternative religious notions are growing in Colossae and their propagation is “deluding” (2:4), “capturing” (2:8), and “defrauding” (2:18) the believers there. A cultural and religious blend of philosophy, tradition and *stochia*—those “elemental principles or spirits of the world”—have diminished the place of Christ (2:8, 20), and Paul is concerned for the discipline and stability of their faith (2:5).

As you, therefore, have received Christ Jesus as Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude. (Col 2: 6,7)

Colossae was a fairly typical cosmopolitan city, with a Hellenistic blend

of philosophy and religious elements that Paul had confronted on other occasions, such as the invitation to address a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers on that hill in Athens (Acts 17). Philosophical speculation and skepticism had created a religious vacuum in the Greek world, one not too different from our own modern pluralistic age. Oriental religions of all sorts were rolling in and generating new religious sects. Temples were on every corner, and idolatry was normative. Paul’s concern was that this young Colossian fellowship of disciples would be susceptible to false religious orientations which could easily attach to their old and familiar worldview. Something false but resonant with



their cultural ethos had a certain plausibility—“the appearance of wisdom”—and they were being pulled towards a new alchemy of religiosity, one with severe body rituals (2:23).

These *stochia*, these “ABC’s of worldview,” were culturally specific to that Hellenistic context, but every cultural world has them. It can be argued that our modern Western world and its economic globalization represents a more materialistic set of *stochia*. Our biblical hermeneutic should at the very least suggest to us that any and every fellowship of believers is vulnerable to the more familiar *stochia* of its own socio-religious world. Examples spring to mind: the way in which a mature

German church fell under the spell of a Nazi ideology, or the way in which 18th and 19th century American churches in the South built a seemingly biblical rationale for chattel slavery. Paul is addressing believers in Colossae, but their context highlights a religious vulnerability common to us all.

The Relevance to Inter-Religious Contexts

I was in China this year for the wedding of my second daughter, and in preparation for that trip, I read widely on developments in China. One author, Ian Johnson in his book *The Souls of China*, surveyed what he calls “The Return of Religion After Mao.”³ Maybe those of you with ministries in Asia have witnessed firsthand this rise of religious interest. I had been trying to follow the growth of the Christian movement in China, but this was my first introduction to the way Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian dogma and rituals were attracting a new generation. On one occasion, I watched young people streaming into the Lama Temple, the Yellow Hat Tibetan Buddhist temple in Beijing. The theory that religion is being inundated and swallowed up by the flood of secularist ideology seemed completely inaccurate as I stood there watching hundreds of Chinese young people earnestly participating in Buddhist rituals. On the borders of churches across Asia, Africa, and the Americas, are populations where religious hunger is intensifying. Due to the modern diaspora of peoples, we find new religious communities on our doorsteps. The global religious landscape is changing and requiring a fresh application of our biblical hermeneutic.

So, I want to examine this Colossian predicament through a lens more relevant to frontier ministry. As you know, there are new incarnational movements emerging within other religious worlds (e.g., Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist). Like that young

group of believers in Colossae, these movements must contend with the “elemental principles” of their own traditional socio-religious worlds. And herein lies the genesis of the suspicion of these movements today. There is a skepticism and a fear among certain churchmen and missiologists that these new believers, who remain situated in their old socio-religious worlds, will be unable to withstand the pull of their original religious worldviews. They must get free of them. They must extract themselves out of that socio-religious world and “convert” to another. It appears dubious that a fellowship of believers can remain in an old and familiar socio-religious world and follow Jesus as true disciples. Can they survive and maintain a vibrant faith? Won’t they be as susceptible as those believers in Colossae to false religious trends in their society? Don’t they need a clear apostolic “outsider” like Paul to secure them in their faith? Paul responds by applying his christological teaching to this missiological predicament.

Grounded in the Risen Christ

In the first four verses of chapter three, Paul offers these Colossian believers a further supplement to the grand christological vision in this epistle. He wants Christ as “the Head” (2:19) to lead them amidst the judgment and pressure of their socio-religious world (2:16).

If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. (Col. 3:1-4)

I was reminded of an experience some years ago when my son was a Boy Scout and his troop was learning orienteering. Each of the boys had his compass on our hike into the mountains, each trying to determine north, south, east and west. One of the

Paul’s primary orientation here is “above,” to that which is “beyond.” He wanted to ground this young church in the risen Christ.

fathers pulled out what was one of the initial handheld GPS sets being sold in the commercial sector. I had never seen one. As we stood there overlooking the Los Angeles valley, he was looking at his instrument, and he said, “My car is parked 12.3 miles in that direction.” Wow! That was a new kind of orientation for me!

In the same way, Paul was offering a new christological compass to a young movement of believers that was experiencing a kind of religious vertigo. He wanted them to know where they stood, and that meant getting a clear theological orientation. First, embedded in these verses is a sense of what is behind them and what is before them. We do need to appreciate our past and our future. In the previous chapters Paul has reminded them that they’ve been “buried with Him in baptism” and “raised up with Him in faith,” (2:12)—and, effectually, they should have “died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world” (2:20). Now in 3:3 he again says, “you have died with Christ and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” A death and resurrection is behind them, but in front of them is a coming revelation that should orient their faith: “*When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory*” (3:4). In contrast to the a-historical quality of other religious worlds, Paul is establishing that temporal sense of orientation: history is important. The believer has experienced a divine transaction, a death, and a resurrection, and yet he looks forward to a full revelation of that glory in Christ.

Yet, in these verses, Paul’s primary orientation here is “above,” to that which is “beyond.” He wanted to ground this young church in the risen Christ. His life is their life (3:4), and that life is

hidden with Christ in God (3:3). “*Set your mind on the things that are above, not on the things that are on the earth*” (3:2). It’s a transcendent orientation, a direction that a secular age finds irrelevant, but across the world there are both old and new stirrings of religious life that actually share this same transcendent orientation. That seemed to be the case in Colossae. The inter-religious mix of philosophy, tradition and stochia could confuse and delude. So, Paul prioritized a certain vital reciprocity for these believers—it was between themselves and the risen Christ. They were to be grounded outside of themselves. That was to be their primary orientation.

Missiological Implications

Understanding Paul’s christological orientation is missiologically crucial for us especially as we encounter inter-religious frontiers today. First, note that *resurrection* is not *extraction*. We are raised with Christ, and our life is hidden with him, but there is no sense in which Paul is telling these believers to separate from their “place-world.”⁴ Yes, there is a kind of spiritual disembedding⁵ from their socio-religious world, for their citizenship is in heaven. There is a new groundedness to their identity, and it is above, where Christ is seated. But there is no immediate implication of being displaced, only of being reoriented to the risen Christ. This heretical religiosity had placed Christ somewhere in the ladder of spiritual beings, somewhat analogous to the way Christ is situated today as “just one of” the prophets, avatars, or spiritual beings; but Paul’s Christology, as exclusive as it is, does not expect a total disembedding of the believer from his socio-religious context.

Secondly, Paul is grounding the authority of his own apostleship in the risen Christ. All of his injunctions for

sorting out potentially deceptive or injurious religious matters (chapter 2) were given a primary reference point in the risen Christ. Any inter-religious encounter tends to generate a “situational logic” that is competitive,⁶ and in chapter 2 Paul has certainly addressed those false religious tendencies in Colossae that violate the gospel. But he doesn’t get caught in a reflexive logic that compares religious traditions. His orientation is not to impose a religious paradigm that prescribes a new set of institutions and rituals in which they as believers need to be enculturated into; it’s more a matter of orientation than imposition.

It’s a dynamic orientation that provides Paul the space to emphasize fresh themes that speak to this particular christological crisis. He brings a new emphasis on Christ being the “head” of the church, and as such, over all rule and authority (1:16,18; 2:19). His resurrection and seat “at the right hand of God” establishes his supremacy over all the elemental principles that bind mankind and diminish the rule of Christ.

Paul further develops a unique theme in Colossians on the “fullness” (*pleroma*) of Christ, and how that fullness is available to believers.

For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him. (1:19)

For in Him all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete (full). (2:9)

This supremacy and fullness of the risen Christ speaks to the spiritual need that drives this false religiosity, to Christ’s ability to free one from the karma-like stranglehold of other spiritual beings. This primary orientation and groundedness in the resurrected Christ allows for a generative and creative relevance (what Dyrness has labeled a “hermeneutical space”)⁷ in any encounter between a Christ and other religious worlds.

Conformed to the Image of Christ

I believe Paul is answering one of the underlying questions in the minds of those skeptical of any Christward movements which continue to identify with their former socio-religious worlds, and that question is, “Has there been a *real* and *genuine* death and resurrection in their lives?” In the next verses (vv. 5–10) Paul gets specific with clear imperatives about what the phrase “be put to death” should mean in lives that are hidden in Christ: no more immorality and impurity (v. 5), no more anger and slander (v. 8), and no more lying (v. 9), to suggest just a few. The term used here for “putting to death” (*nekrosate*) had a long history of



religious meanings that were foreign to what Paul intended. Translation often demands we fill terms with new meaning, and that’s exactly what Paul is doing. This “putting to death” was not to be a self-inflicted bodily pain, or a gaining control of the body through abstinence, or a flagellation as practiced by ascetics.⁸ This type of mortification and abstinence had become culturally and religiously plausible to believers in Colossae (2:23). But Paul meant something very different, something more akin to devotion, more like a “taking up your cross and following Christ.” Again, our incorporation into the risen Christ means there is a genuine dying, but in Christ there is also a transforming power to assist our

growth in devotion. It will enable us to also “put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (3:12).

The missiological priority of this transformative reality in the lives of believers must not escape us. In what have often been confrontational encounters with other religious worlds, our priority has typically been dogmatic, propositional formulations, but this personal death and transformation must be recognized as the greater apologetic.

I recall the life of a Muslim head of a household, let’s call him Sam, who had turned to Christ after a long journey of spiritual prompting and mission witness. On a few occasions, I was able to witness his leadership in a small gathering of believers that began to join with him, those from his family and friends across the city. What was so interesting was that the structure of that fellowship was still typically Arab and patriarchal. In that world, power always flows from someone powerful at the center (whether domestic, political, or religious). Sam was the senior member and he ran that meeting. That believing network was ego-centric, focused in and around one man’s decisions. Now, my colleagues in town were nervous about this form of leadership. It didn’t have the “elder-ship” they felt was required in a church structure. He was acting more like a “bishop.” That was true, but what was so apparent to all of us who knew Sam was the personal transformation of the power he exercised. The humility and gentleness of Sam’s manner, his capacity to foster interaction, and to defer to the council of others, was obvious. There had been a death and resurrection in this man. Jesus was modifying and transforming his will, his whole attitude. There had been a radical shifting of the center of his personality from self to Christ. Death to selfishness had taken place, and it pervaded the spirit of that small fellowship. Freedom, joy, and many of the

gifts of the Spirit were present in that fellowship—all because of the authentic transformation of power in Sam’s leadership. This genuine experience of Christ’s death and resurrection is fundamental to our missiological discernment in socio-religious contexts like Colossae or in my case, North Africa. It will speak louder than any religious rhetoric or philosophical formulation.

Paul stretches the personal transformation he expects to see in believers to universal proportions in the next verses. He intimately links two commands together: “putting to death of the old man” with a second, positive theological picture of “putting on the new man”:

... since you laid aside the old man with its evil practices, and put on the new (self) who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him. (3:9, 10)

This picture has tremendous missiological importance for inter-religious encounter, not only because of what Paul says, but because of what he does not say. The picture here (of a new man being renewed) is a collective one, and the term “man” or “humanity” is preferred here to the term “self” (which carries more of an individual connotation).⁹ This new humanity (or fellowship of believers) is being progressively transformed into the image (*eikon*) “of the One who created him.” This is a reference to the original creation of Adam “in God’s own likeness,” but commentators understand Paul to be referring to Christ, the new man, the image of God (see 1:15). It is the *image of Christ* that renews our knowledge by the actualization of a new humanity that is conformed to his image.

Image versus Culture

Paul understands that we are being conformed to an image, not a culture. This is an important distinction in inter-religious contexts. Paul draws a picture of a new humanity being conformed by their knowledge of the image of Christ, and it is not the

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cultivation of an ecclesial culture with all its external forms: liturgies, teaching, polity, architecture, music, etc. It’s the image of Christ to whom we conform rather than some prior historic church culture. It’s an image that causes us to “put to death” certain things, and to “put on” other things. It’s primarily the transformation of life. No doubt the experience and forms of a historic church can operate as a splendid resource, but the Spirit of Christ must be allowed to impact each socio-religious context with the image of Christ. That image, that new man, is actualized in the particular history of a unique people and they join the history of Jesus Christ—they become the people of God.

This vision is not anti-structure. Just like I witnessed in Sam’s life, the formative structure of his fellowship was naturally Arab, very patriarchal, but there had been a death and resurrection, a transformation, and the life of Christ had affected the indigenous structure that emerged. There’s a natural, self-organizing nature to the gospel as it works out the image of a new humanity. I believe Paul has given us an important plumb-line with this use of image, one that opens up cultural possibilities when it comes to the structure of the church in new frontier regions.

This distinction of image or culture can be determinative in religious situations where conversion is so easily understood as leaving one socio-religious world and joining or assimilating to another. So many religious communities today are intensifying their boundaries with the symbols of their faith, especially in antithesis to “Christian” (read Western) religious culture. It is a missiological imperative that we rediscover Paul’s picture of the image of Christ as a new humanity being actualized in modern inter-religious settings.

A Compelling Ecumenical Vision

This formation of the image of Christ in our lives is given an ecumenical perspective in v. 11, where Paul says,

... a renewal in which there is no Jew or Greek, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, for Christ is all and in all. (Col 3:11)

As Paul looked across the Roman Empire, or what he considered the *oikoumene* (“inhabited world”) of his day, he wanted to elaborate his christological vision with this short affirmation: *Christ is all, and in all*. In one sentence, Paul summarized both his theological and social anthropology for that first century world, and, specifically, how Christ had overcome the common divisions of mankind: Jew, Greek, and barbarian (racial/ethnic/cultural); circumcision and non-circumcision (religious); slave and freeman (economic, social).

Commentators indicate that this little statement, *Christ is all and in all*, is most likely a way to simply say, “Christ is all that matters.”¹⁰ But notice it has two parts: the first (“Christ is all”) may refer again to Paul’s emphasis throughout this epistle on the “fullness” (*plerouma*) of deity found in Christ (1:19; 2:9), and how this totality in Christ is so crucial when believers begin to succumb to any cultural or religious influence that would diminish Christ; but, secondly, the “and in all” indicates the destiny of all believers to enter this wealth, this completeness, this fullness found in him. This is *the indwelling Christ*, the very Spirit of Christ, crossing every conceivable division or barrier and dwelling in us with his life. This is Paul’s ecumenical vision: as an apostle he wants to cooperate with this incarnate Christ as he fills believers from every social, cultural and religious segment of global societies.

This ecumenical vision of Paul has now been stretched across twenty centuries and includes peoples and societies Paul could not have imagined. There are a lot of studies on the present plurality of world Christianity, but the global ethnology of God's people was conveyed twenty centuries ago in Paul's apostolic vision. The image of Christ, reflected in that new man, would even be actualized in the life of the "Scythian," transforming fellowships of believers in that savage society situated around the Black Sea on the far frontier of the Roman empire. Paul believed that Christ would indwell them just as he had the Jew and the Greek.

Paul's vision of a "new Adam" does not deny difference, but simply that an orientation to the risen Christ allows us to transcend these divisions without necessarily compromising human identities. He's not affirming some kind of cultural homogeneity, nor an ecclesial homogeneity. To affirm oneness is not to affirm sameness. The oneness is a spiritual unity that is grounded in the risen Christ and his being. We know that elsewhere Paul recognized cultural distinctions—for "the Jews demanded signs, and the Greek demands wisdom." These pervasive social, cultural and religious divisions were to be spiritually transcended in Christ who is all and in all.

Cooperating with the Indwelling Christ

We would do well to reflect on the implications of Paul's statement, "Christ in all." We may need to admit that the present vision of global Christianity¹¹ can minimize the significance of Christ's indwelling in receptor populations in frontier settings.¹²

Paul's vision assumes a *unity* in the body of Christ (3:11), and anticipates a certain *continuity* through history until that day when he is revealed (3:4). The English term used today to refer to this historical continuity is the word *apostolicity*—"a faithfulness to origins

expressed in the continuity of mission." Western Christianity has understood its apostolic continuity through an interpretive lens on the New Testament; but herein lies a problem, according to John Flett (whose work I referred to in my introduction). Our understanding of unity through a faithfulness to New Testament origins "sets the parameters of Christian identity." Flett speaks to the way a global church has ignored the present pluriformity of world Christianity in constructing true Christian identity. He suggests that an underlying perspective on apostolicity will always favor historical continuity, and in doing so it places an evaluative measure and structural limits on any new community of faith that wishes to be received as a



member of Christ's body. Flett believes this unrecognized emphasis on apostolic continuity will continue to limit how we understand cross-cultural mission and the appropriation of the gospel in frontier contexts.¹³

Flett has pointed out this hermeneutical bias in the Western church, and I believe many in frontier situations today have felt this *interpretive glare*. It lodges a heavy and precipitous accusation of syncretism. Flett is brilliant in his description of an ecclesiology that prioritizes its historical continuity, that reduces its imagination to a single trajectory in church history, with all its associated institutional methods or forms (read architecture,

ritual, liturgy, teaching, and theology). Paul knew this interpretive lens was happening with Jewish believers as they encountered the Gentile response to Christ, and again, on the part of the sophisticated Greek believers when they related to the barbarians. We face this same phenomenon when we speak of a Western *Christendom*. A received orthodoxy can prevail, an orthodoxy that governs according to its historical *church culture*.¹⁴ It grounds one in a

single historical narrative that follows the contours of a supposed center of Christian power and the controls of form and interpretation managed by such.¹⁵

When apostolicity is defined by naming the range of practices and institutions that belong to an apostolic tradition, it places limits on the way the gospel can be legitimately appropriated in new contexts.

This concern for limits, this illegitimate constriction on Christ's presence and working, is where Flett's observations of world Christianity converge with our concerns for releasing ministry in new frontier mission contexts. There a wonderful convergence happening between these lessons of world Christianity and the challenges of frontier mission.¹⁶ We're rediscovering *how to be grounded differently*, not in one particular church tradition, but in the risen Christ. Flett says it so eloquently and succinctly:

The church finds this identity in the history of Jesus Christ. This is the possibility of historical continuity, for it is the continuity of the resurrected Jesus Christ and his abundance through which every history is redeemed.¹⁷

This is the continuity of an indwelling Christ who enters the particular history of each people and incorporates those histories into the history of Jesus Christ. This a perspective for the final frontiers. It's a christological orientation that grounds every young ecclesial movement beyond itself. They're not to be primarily oriented towards an historic church, but to the supremacy

and fullness of the risen Christ (chapter 1). It is this grounding that will buttress them against the ideological pull of their socio-religious world (chapter 2). This important text in chapter 3:1–11 calls the apostolic worker and the indigenous local fellowship to ask three primary questions:

1. Are we grounded in the risen Christ?
2. Are we being conformed to the image of Christ?
3. Are we cooperating with the indwelling Christ?

These are the questions around which we can cooperate as widely divergent ministries on the frontiers. And I believe these questions can free us to explore together the vital forms Christ is affirming and establishing in difficult socio-religious contexts.

Ekklesia and Socio-Religious Reality

Throughout this study my assumption is that Paul faced a religious predicament in Colossae that shaped his entire epistle. Although somewhat akin to Jesus' situation when encountering a Samaritan population (John 4), or Paul's situation when facing Greek philosophers (Acts 17), Paul's apologetic here is more ecclesiological. He is helping the ekklesia in Colossae deal with their pluralistic religious context, which first of all, required a good Christology (chapter 1–3). But, then, in 3:12–4:1, Paul begins to clarify his priorities for a believing fellowship in this type of religious tension. Paul knows that these Colossians are still in a process where they must figure out their identity in Christ amidst the reality of their socio-religious world. Any sense of ekklesia will emerge out of that process.

Again, let me emphasize, that I believe modern religious conditions require that we find places in scripture like Colossians that can help emerging movements foster an appropriate ekklesia. Time does not permit us to

P*aul's sensibility here is to focus intentionally and entirely on a redeemed associational life that is a very clear embodiment of the risen Christ.*

examine these conditions any further, whether it be the social impact of globalization, the crisis and opportunity of modern diaspora, or the deep fear of displacement that results from the unfortunate legacy of Western civilization (read Christendom). This global kaleidoscope of change leads to religious struggle and reaction that then affects the interpretive exercise of any young and emerging ekklesia. Each of you may be able to confirm this from your own contexts.

The Redemptive Transformation of Relations

In 3:12 and following, Paul translates his Christology into ecclesiology—and it's an ecclesiology that is vital, essential and appropriate for Christward movements that remain in their own socio-religious worlds. He begins with their identity as “chosen of God, holy and beloved.” (v. 12) These are deep and rich Old Testament terms that identify this Colossian fellowship with God's covenantal community throughout history.¹⁸ Again, they have a clear compass on their past legacy, and the spiritual resources available to them in that spiritual lineage.

But, then, Paul prioritizes the ecclesial experience for situations that have heightened inter-religious encounters; that is, to “put on” Christ—to be clothed in Christ. He first describes *the redemptive transformation of relations*¹⁹ that should take place among these chosen ones: a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace, singing, and teaching. These should characterize relationships in this redeemed association (vv. 12–17). This is the risen Christ, the image of the new man, that should be embodied among Colossian believers.

What's interesting is that these verses don't seem to reference or prioritize a congregational form. Ralph Martin suggests in his commentary on v. 17, where Paul says, “Do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,” that the believer is “placing the *totality* of his life under Christ's Lordship.”

The reference should not be confined simply to acts of worship performed in a church service but embraces the whole of life. However, there is a sense in which every phase of life is an act of worship and all our activities, even the most mundane and routine, can be offered up as part of the “living sacrifice” we are called upon to make (Rom. 12:1).²⁰

I should note that in v. 15 Paul does make reference to the “body,” yet this is a reference to a broader Oneness, and quite a minimal statement when compared to the sister letter to the Ephesians. There the “body of Christ” is given a fuller description of gifts and organic reality (Eph. 4); but, here in these verses of chapter three, Paul does not take the opportunity to expand on this organic metaphor. Neither does he recommend an institutional structure of leadership as he does in his pastoral epistles to Timothy and Titus. While I may be faulted for arguing from silence, Paul's sensibility here is to focus intentionally and entirely on a redeemed associational life that is a very clear embodiment of the risen Christ. It does not require an articulation in all its institutional form. We can assume that some formal structure is already in place; but, I would make the case that Paul believes this redemptive transformation of relations actually takes place first and foremost in grassroots ekklesia. He is calling them to actualize the new man, the image of Christ, in their relations, and in doing so to express a corporate Christology,

the embodied Christ, in the socio-religious reality of Colossae.

“Hermeneutical Space” and Ekklesia

We do have a certain tendency as Christians in the West when it comes to understanding the term “body.” We don’t think of this as a broader reality of redeemed and transformed relationships. Instead, it immediately suggests a formal incorporation into a bounded religious membership with an historic Christian legacy—we might call it a “congregation.” And this ecclesial structure emerged in the socio-religious context of the Roman world. But, again, let’s look at the text: the incorporation, the baptism that Paul is emphasizing in this epistle, is an incorporation above, into the risen Christ.²¹ His body, the embodiment of Christ, is here primarily expressed in the redemptive transformation of relationships. It’s a fellowship centered on Christ, expressing his resurrected life, and not primarily a reference to some kind of bounded organizational life. There is certainly a sense of collective identity (note 4:12–16), but its primary expression is a life of redeemed relationships.

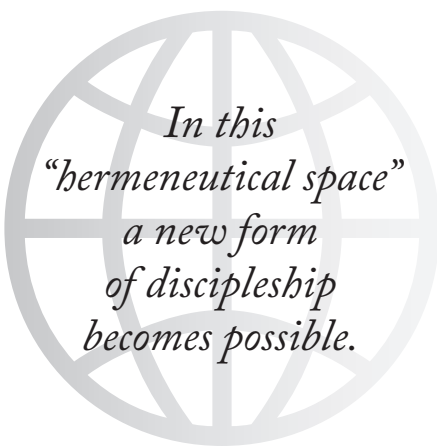
Again, contextually we need to appreciate Paul’s inter-religious sensibility here. I believe he’s offering a way to realize “church” that transcends socio-religious tension. The religious conflict in Colossae was what Paul was focused on missiologically, and that mission purpose shaped the essential aspects of ekklesia. Rather than focusing on the body in its more corporate and formal structure, he chose to emphasize Christ as the “head” of the church and supreme over all authority and power:

He is also head of the body, the church. (1:18)

The head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God. (2:19)

Ekklesia and the Hindu Context

This kind of ecclesial experience of “associational life centered on the supremacy of Christ” was addressed a couple of weeks ago at the ISFM meetings by Paul Pennington, who has had recent interaction with Dyanand Bharati, an indigenous leader among Jesus-centered families in Hindu India. Some may know this wonderful brother as the author of *Living Water and Indian Bowl*. Paul interviewed Bharati on the matter of ekklesia and fellowship, since his kind of loose non-institutional association can be understood as a “churchless” Christianity.²² Building off of Bharati’s original work on this leavening of Christ in India,²³ this paper dispels the notion that Bharati is promoting



a more private and individualized life among believers in Jesus. A fellowship of redemptive association is encouraged and expected. Yes, there can be an emphasis on more individualized devotion (*bhakti*) among followers of Yesu, but Bharati reinforces the priority of the redemptive transformation of relations which we see Paul encouraging in Colossae.

Bharati is quite explicit in resisting a congregational experience which he calls “meeting-based spirituality.” What he sees happening in congregational life in the more traditional churches of India is not the ecclesial life he wants to press for in their association.

I, too, recognize the initial need of some kind of structure or form to link with

each other. But when structure becomes the center of focus and not people, then all kinds of problems come one by one. What we started in spirit will end up in flesh. This is inevitable in any man-made structure, as structure needs rule and regulations for smooth functioning.²⁴

Bharati and others are working out ekklesia in what Bill Dyrness has called a “hermeneutical space.” These spaces are where believers attend

...to the emergent interaction between the qualities of the gospel and the (religious) communities’ inherited dispositions, allows a new, generative space to come into view... In this new hermeneutical space a new form of Christian (I would prefer “Christward”) discipleship becomes possible, and along the way new insight into both the work of Christ and the value of Hindu and Sikh practices emerges.²⁵

Like Paul they are placing a premium on personal devotion that leads to a total transformation of life and relationships. But they need some space to determine just what its structure will be.

Ekklesia and Korea

Pennington makes the interesting comment that “the West’s propensity for structure, organization and external conformity is itself partially a product of its culture.” The long history of the congregational form as a necessary bounded expression of voluntary Christian association is so embedded in our civic American culture that we are unable to treat it objectively. Mark Noll, the distinguished evangelical historian, has hypothesized that a certain set of conditions in 19th century America led to a certain type of church structure—a voluntary organizational “template”—and where those same conditions are present in today’s non-Western (majority world) contexts, the structure of the church mimics that American template.²⁶ Noll spends a whole chapter addressing the similarity of conditions in which American and Korean church movements developed.²⁷

John Kim, in a masterful effort to re-examine the original incarnational dynamics of the Korean movement to Christ, unconsciously confirms Noll's thesis when he says

...dependency on the West has become very common in almost all forms of Korean Christianity including theology, doctrinal faith confessions, worship forms, Christian lifestyles, and even gospel songs and hymns. Many Korean Christians are now merely recipients and consumers of those Western forms of Christianity in a passive way.²⁸

But now, Kim recognizes that this Korean church is confronting newer conditions in the 21st century. Simultaneously, he and a cohort of Korean scholars are taking a look at their history in an effort to find a fresh and original way to re-contextualize their church for what currently appears to be a more hardened population. Kim, like Bharati, wants to open up what Dyrness calls a hermeneutical space, to allow a "new generative space" where a "new form of Christian discipleship becomes possible" in reaching the remaining secular-Buddhist population. Kim discovers, like Noll, a broader range of ecclesial dynamics in the late nineteenth century genesis of the Korean church. Those hidden components are missed in the more conventional explanations that emphasize John Nevius' Three-Self Method. But unlike Noll, Kim finds a structural distinctive in that early movement among Buddhists that he believes could reinvigorate mission today. In what appears more like Bharati's leavening movement in India, Kim observes "oikos movements," i.e., home-based Jesus movements led by Korean laity, who had that cultural-insider quality. Noll's American template seems to apply more to the Korean churches of the post-war period in the 20th century, but Kim's analysis of the earliest period of Korean church history brings us back to the origins of a movement, and this emphasis on oikos resonates with what we see here in Colossians. In Col. 4:15, Paul says, "Greet Nympha and the

Paul's ecclesiological apologetic for an inter-religious context contains a sensibility that focuses on oikos as the strategic institution.

church (ekklesia) that is in her house (oikon)." The oikos appears to be the default institution where grassroots Jesus movements experience the redemptive transformation of relations.

Oikos at the Grassroots of Movements

In 3:18–4:1, Paul focuses on this primary social institution: oikos (Grk., household, family, home). Rather than the congregation, Paul gives more immediate priority to God's action in the family. The redemptive transformation in ecclesial life should both affirm and re-contextualize family relations, and a new *redemptive reciprocity* is to be witnessed between husband and wife, between parents and children, and between slave and master. Obligations were not just for children, wives and slaves, but for masters, husbands and parents as well. But that's the subject of a different article. Suffice it to say, Paul's christological and ecclesiological apologetic for an inter-religious context like Colossae contains a sensibility that focuses on oikos as the strategic institution. And it appears to be at the frontline of God's kingdom across religious frontiers today.

I will add just one point of emphasis from Asia. Simon Chan, a systematic theologian from Singapore, in his new book *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up*,²⁹ notes how the household codes in Pauline epistles resonate with Confucian principles of family relations. He suggests that family/home/oikos should be the key organizing principle in Asian theology, and that it should guide witness and mission to the remaining unreached of Asia. He sees oikos as the primal reality that should frame a grassroots theology that would even include a new Asian appreciation of the Trinity, and a new appreciation for how the honoring of

ancestors can relate to our historic creedal understanding of "the communion of saints." Chan is calling all theologians to a radical accountability, and appealing for a new "hermeneutical space" in the emergence of ekklesia in Asia.

I offer you this missiological reading of Colossians in the hope that it will initiate a broader "group hermeneutic" between Majority World and Western world ministers of the gospel. I believe our ability to biblically interpret together is fundamental to our cooperation in reaching into sensitive socio-religious contexts. And here, in Colossians, it is Christ—his resurrection, his image and his indwelling—who is our theological and missiological compass among frontier peoples. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ I refer here to Oliver O'Donovan's insightful reflections in his first chapter of *Common Objects of Love* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), which were the publication of his 2001 Stab Lectures.

² John Flett, *Apostolicity: The Ecumenical Question in World Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

³ Ian Johnson, *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2017).

⁴ The idea of "place-world" is borrowed from Willie James Jennings in his book, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, where he uses the terminology to describe the consequences of displacement, or a person's loss of rootedness in a particular land, (New Haven: Yale University, 2010), 24–59.

⁵ This idea of disembedding is taken from Anthony Giddens in *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 17–20. He uses this term in his treatment of modernization and "the lifting-out of social relations from local contexts." I am suggesting that the trust of expert systems which can disembed us socially from our local ties is analogous to the way our trust in

Jesus Christ can spiritually disembed us from local ties. Conversion should be recognized as a spiritual disembedding, a lifting out of either an individual or group from one's immediate relations by an identification with Christ and his body.

⁶ The idea of "situational logic" is treated extensively by Margaret Archer, *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), and offers an insightful analysis of the structural and social implications of inter-religious contexts which display the same level of contradiction we see here in Colossians.

⁷ William Dyrness, in *Insider Jesus: Theological Reflections on New Christian Movements* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), introduces the term "hermeneutical space" as essentially the latitude necessary for a process of discernment in inter-religious encounter.

⁸ C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary (Cambridge University Press, 1958), 114.

⁹ Moule, 119.

¹⁰ Moule, 121.

¹¹ Flett cites Lamin Sanneh who makes the distinction between "global Christianity" and "world Christianity," the former being a concern "for the faithful replication of Christian forms and patterns developed in Europe." *Apostolicity*, 140.

¹² Scott Sunquist gives his perspective on the indwelling Spirit of God as the person of the Trinity who initially works on the religious frontier. *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 259–268.

¹³ Flett, *Apostolicity*, 15–16.

¹⁴ Flett treats extensively this prevalent idea that "the church is a culture" in his chapter 3, "Culture as the Nature of Apostolic Continuity," in *Apostolicity*, 103–137.

¹⁵ Flett, 320.

¹⁶ I want to commend the works of two Africans, Lamin Sanneh and Kwame Bediako, and two African mission historians, Harold Turner and Andrew Walls, whose insights into Christward movements in Africa are so compelling for us who are on new frontiers today. They re-examine older frontiers from the past two centuries and advocate voices which were initially devalued and ignored. They eloquently call us to hear and respect the indwelling Christ who was speaking to these African populations. Their observations from an emerging world Christianity can buttress our ventures into difficult and uncharted religious territory.

¹⁷ Flett, *Apostolicity*, 328.

¹⁸ Moule, *Colossians and Philemon*, 122, and Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 109–110.

¹⁹ I have lifted this phrase from Alistair McFadyen's excellent work, *A Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 113–150.

²⁰ Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, 117.

²¹ Moule suggests a "daring leap" in Paul's conception of "body" in writing Colossians: "What is important is the daring conception of the Body of Christ as his limbs. Whatever may have been the pre-Christian uses of the term 'body' and 'limbs' as metaphors for a collective whole with integrated parts, here is something new and different: Christians are not 'the body of Christians,' nor merely limbs of one another (though they are that), but the body and limbs of Christ." *Colossians and Philemon*, 6.

²² Paul Pennington, "Mandali and Satsang: Dyanand Bharati on Expressions of Ekklesia, Fellowship and Community," an unpublished paper presented at ISFM 2017, September 16, 2017, Dallas, TX, USA.

²³ Dyanand Bharati, *Living Water and Indian Bowl* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2004).

²⁴ Pennington, "Mandali and Satsang," 5.

²⁵ Dyrness, *Insider Jesus*, 90.

²⁶ For a review of Mark Noll's perspective see chapter seven of his book, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 109–125. He suggests conditions of individual self-fashioning; comfortable employment of commerce; voluntary associations; personal appropriation of sacred writings; a more plastic, utilitarian attitude to identity; a readiness to mingle ethnic groups; innovation over tradition.

²⁷ Noll, Chapter 9, "What Korean Believers Can Learn from American Evangelical History," *American Experience*, 151–168.

²⁸ John Kim, "A Reflection on Insider Movements in Korean Church History," *IJFM* 33:4, (Winter 2016): 171.

²⁹ Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 76–81, 188–197.

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