

THE BOOK of COLOSSIANS

1) 1:1-2

In coming to Paul's letter to the Colossians, we will try to get an overview of the whole letter from which we will be better placed to see and understand the individual parts. We look first of all, at the forest before we look, in coming weeks, in greater detail at the trees. For our introductory readings, as we should do whenever we approach any biblical book, and as we often do almost without thinking, we will ask the questions who? What? Where? And why? Who was Paul writing to and where were they living? Why has Paul written, and, in general, broad strokes, what has he tried to say? The ancient city of Colossae was one of three adjacent country towns which straddled the River Lycus in the Lycus valley, in the province of Asia (now Western Turkey). Laodicea (10mls west) and Hierapolis (12mls north west) were sister cities. As far as we know, the apostle never visited the Lycus valley (2:1) and yet he was the instrument used under God, from afar, as the herald of the glad evangel. It seems probable that it was during the highly fertile period of evangelism mentioned in Acts 19:10, as Paul laboured daily in preaching in Ephesus (70mls to the west of Colossae), that the majority of churches in the whole of Asia Minor were planted. Paul's converts and fellow workers were sent out from Ephesus with the Gospel far and wide throughout the province. It is highly likely that it was during this prodigious missionary and evangelistic activity that Epaphras travelled to Ephesus from his home in Colossae and under Paul's preaching ministry was brought to faith in Christ. He in turn became an evangelist to his own people (1:6, 7), and was used of God to plant churches throughout the Lycus valley in Laodicea and Hierapolis, as well as in his own home town of Colossae.

2) Map



3) 1:1-2

If Paul did not know the Colossian believers at first hand, why did he write to them? Well, from the establishment of these churches, several years have elapsed, during which time Paul has been arrested, taken to Rome and imprisoned (He was put under house arrest - Acts 28:30-31 and Colossians 4:3. Colossians is one of the four 'prison epistles' - Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon and then Philippians). The new converts at Colossae have become established in their faith (1:4, 5; 2:5) and have grown in their love for each other. Epaphras (the local 'parish minister' in the Lycus valley - did he have a linked charge!) has recently travelled to Rome to meet with Paul and to report on a matter of great concern in the Church back in Colossae, and has himself been arrested for his faith (Philemon 23, 'fellow prisoner'). While Epaphras has reported the praiseworthy growth of the Colossian fellowship and while he has sought to encourage and minister to Paul in his imprisonment, he has also brought disturbing news of a worrying and dangerous 'false teaching' which has arisen in the church at Colossae. And this is the reason for Paul's writing now. This letter is his urgent response. The Colossian epistle is Paul's vigorous reaction to news of a new, strange teaching which is creeping into the church at Colossae. Paul wants to expose the error and so refute and excise it. Paul immediately recognises the danger to the peace and stability of the church and the necessity of warning the fellowship and refuting the error: He recognises that this 'new' teaching and lifestyle cut at the very heart of the Christian Gospel. So he warns (2:4, 8) the apparently unsuspecting fellowship not to be misled by plausible but utterly false philosophies. He warns them to be on their guard lest they are kidnapped from the truth.

4) 1:1-2

Trouble with false teaching is very contemporary and yet as old as the Church herself. Throughout its entire existence the Church of Jesus Christ has been beset by 'hollow and deceptive philosophies'. Paul's letter is a timely reminder that the world is forever insidiously seeking to press the Christian into its own mould. The intellectual and spiritual pressures and fashions of our time seep, subconsciously even, into our minds and hearts and divert us from the truth. This is the very relevance of the Colossian epistle for the Church today. We must be forever alert and on our guard. The 'meditation' and 'healing' of New Age spirituality has already crept into the Church. The big thing for many Church leaders and teachers, these days, is the multifaith philosophy. Flying in the face of Scripture, we are told that 'We are all pilgrims on the same road to God, one way is no better than another'. When it comes to hollow and empty humanistic philosophies, the Teacher of Ecclesiastes is right, 'There is nothing new under the sun.' As today so in Paul's day. It is ever the same with these new spiritualities, they claim to be Christian but, whether they realise it or not, they owe their inspiration to the spirit of this age, to the malevolent evil which is ultimately anti-christ and anti-christian; '...hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ' (2:8).

5) 1:1-2

Now, nowhere in his letter does Paul specify exactly what the error at Colossae is. We can, however, by carefully piecing together and interpreting his counter arguments, catch something of its chief tendencies. What we find is right up to date. The false teachers at Colossae are part of the church and are advocating a new improved theology in the name of Jesus Christ. Alongside this, they advocate a rigorous accompanying lifestyle: they seem to adopt a dual approach; offering a deeper faith with its resultant effect in 'christian' living. Belief and action go together. What we believe ultimately affects how we live. So erring in the realm of Christian/biblical teaching (theology/ doctrine) has a resultant effect in practical everyday living. These false teachers, it seems, claim a better, deeper understanding of spiritual realities and of who Jesus really is, which ultimately denies the centrality and supremacy of Christ. And, at the same time they urge a particular way of worship and an extreme asceticism, 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!' (2:21). As I say, we cannot be dogmatic about the exact nature of the Colossian heresy, since Paul nowhere spells it out, but we deduce this as the substance of the error because of Paul's response to it.

6) 1:1-4:18

Having covered some of the basic introduction and background to the letter, it is important to have a feel for the letter as a whole before we dig into it in detail. The letter was, after all, read from beginning to end in public, during the worship gatherings of the Colossian house churches. It will help if you read it aloud all the way through.

1. 1: 1- 2 Opening greeting**2. 1: 3-11 Paul's Prayer: Thanksgiving and Intercession**

- a. 1: 3- 8 Prayer of Thanksgiving
- b. 1: 9-11A Prayer of Intercession

3. 1:12-2:5 Paul's Gospel and Ministry

- a. 1:12-23 Paul's gospel: Christ the Lord
 - i vv.12-19 Christ - supreme Lord and Saviour
 - ii vv.20-23 Reconciliation - accomplished and applied
- b. 1:24-2:5 Paul's Ministry: preaching and teaching
 - i vv.24-29 Preaching ministry
 - ii. 1- 5 Pastoral ministry

4. 2:6-23 False Teaching and its Antidote

- a. 2:6-8 Paul confronts the situation at Colossae
- b. 2:9-15 Antidote to error: Christ in all His fullness
- c. 2:16-23 Christian freedom - not legalism

5. 3:1-4:6 The Distinctive Character of Christian Life

('be what you are in Christ')

- a. 3:1-4 The Christian and Christ - seek things of God
- b. 3:5-10 The Christian and self - put off
- c. 3:11-17 The Christian and fellow believers - put on
- d. 3:18-21 The Christian at home - be subject
- e. 3:22-4:1 The Christian at work - be subject
- f. 4:2-6 The Christian and the outsider - watch and pray

6: 4:7-18 Final Greetings and Instructions

7) 1:3-12

As we read what Paul writes in response to Epaphras' report, it becomes evident that these false teachers, wittingly or unwittingly, were raising questions as to whether or not Epaphras had given the Colossians the whole truth/the whole gospel: this in turn, inevitably, raised painful doubts within the believers themselves as to whether they were fully/truly Christian. The pedlars of this new spirituality, (often called 'Gnostics' with the same syncretistic approach as 'New Age Spirituality' gathering ideas from here, there and everywhere) it seems, offered a spiritual 'fullness' not previously experienced: 'Mere Christianity' was not enough. There was, they suggested, a fuller experience, a greater liberation than so far enjoyed. So they offered to complete and perfect the simple and elementary faith to which the Colossians had been introduced by Epaphras: Can you sense the desolation, the uncertainty, the painful questioning and the introspection that would have been engendered in Colossae? 'I wonder if I am really a Christian?' 'Perhaps there is something more that I need?' There are today, sadly, groups within the Church of Jesus Christ, who while they might not be advocating 'hollow and deceptive (Gnostic or New Age) philosophies', are nearer to the Colossian heresy than they might realise. By offering Christians new liberty, new power, deliverance and freedom in the Spirit (and that seems to have been exactly what the Colossian believers were offered), the effect, intentional or not, is to cast doubt upon the adequacy of the work of Christ and to imply that there is something more that is necessary; the effect is to raise painful doubts over one's standing in Christ and to belittle that Gospel which has been heard and embraced in the past.

8) 1:3-12

Now, it is against this background that Paul's opening prayer of thanksgiving and intercession should be understood. When seen in this light it just bursts into life: From vv 3-12 Paul, as was his custom when writing, opens his letter with a prayer for the Colossian believers: This opening thanksgiving and intercession is, however, no banal or insincere formality. It is highly significant: He makes every word and phrase count in his efforts to reassure and encourage the Colossian believers. This prayer highlights his pastoral response to danger attacking and infecting the church. For Paul, prayer was the immediate response to news of heresy and false teaching (vv 3 and 9). We shall see as we proceed that Paul does not seek primarily to refute the Colossian heresy by argument. What he does do, and this is surely a fundamental lesson for us as we face a church increasingly infected with empty and deceitful humanistic philosophies, is that he prays and he proclaims the truth of Christ. Paul prays for the believers who are in the midst of danger and attack. He gives thanks to God for them and he bears them up before the throne of grace with specific, pointed intercession.

9) 1:3-8

It appears that Paul has a twofold intention in beginning his letter with this prayer of thanksgiving. He wants to encourage the uncertain believers and he wants to give his seal of approval to the Gospel Epaphras preached to them: Paul gives warm and sincere thanks to God, from a full heart, for their faith and love and hope in Christ, intending to reassure the hard-pressed believers as to their proper standing as Christians and to confirm the authenticity of Epaphras' Gospel. This thanksgiving to God, if it is nothing else, is an impressive piece of pastoral reassurance. This is the depth of a pastor's heart, gently and kindly seeking to reassure those who are tempted to doubt their salvation by the innuendoes of the new and alien teachers who have arrived in Colossae. The evil one loves to make us doubt our salvation: By whatever means he can he will inveigle himself into our consciousness to rake over the past, to heap up guilt and to undermine faith. He comes as an angel of light, as he did in Colossae, in the shape of teachers of a new spirituality, to deceive if he can even the very elect of God, to insinuate some question mark over our salvation so as to sweep us on to the faith-wrecking rocks of doubt. How far we have drifted from the apostolic gospel when, so often within the Church of God in these days, doubt is encouraged as a virtue. Paul will have none of it. Instead, praise and gratitude to God well up in Paul's heart for the marks of genuine Christian experience shown in the lives of the Colossian believers and he puts his thanksgiving in writing for their encouragement, to dispel any doubts. Paul rejoices and he explains, that from the report he has received from Epaphras, he has no doubt that they are truly born again. He has no doubt but that they are really and truly Christian.

10) 1:3-8

Faith, love and hope (v 5) are a favourite trio for Paul. They are the proper evidences of a work of God in the soul of man: For Paul, these three qualities are the spiritual hallmark of the genuine article: No cheap and trashy imitation could possibly bear this authenticating hallmark of the work of God. Faith, love and hope are the outgrowth of the gospel, the fruit of the Spirit of God, the consequence of the work of God in a person's life. Now notice what it is that Paul is doing here. In his thanksgiving he is pointing the Colossian believers to the Gospel and to its fruit in their lives. He is causing them to review the whole course of their spiritual pilgrimage, right from the beginning. And that is surely what we must do whenever we are assailed by doubt like this. Notice that the gospel is called the word of truth (v 5). There is nothing relative, nothing uncertain or doubtful here. The gospel is not a matter of opinion, it is a body of truth, it is truth through and through for everyone, whether they will submit to its claims or not. Paul reminds the Colossians, then, of The Truth and of its effect in their lives. If we try to follow Paul's train of thought for a moment, we see the intimacy of connection between the preaching/proclamation of the gospel and the effect of the gospel on the lives of men and women: (1) Epaphras preaches the gospel of Christ to the Colossians (v 7). (2) They hear and understand God's grace in all its truth (v 6). (3) As the truth of God grips their minds and hearts, as the Spirit of God works in their lives, so they are given new hope (v 5): (4) As the hope of the gospel is presented to them, held out before them, faith in Christ and love for one another are kindled in their hearts (vv 4/5). This is still God's way.

11) 1:3-8

The second point which arises from Paul's prayer of thanksgiving is his ringing commendation and affirmation of Epaphras' Gospel. Paul has no doubt, both that the Colossian experience of Christ is genuine and that this Gospel, which they have heard from the lips of Epaphras, despite what the false teachers imply, is indeed the authentic Apostolic Gospel. Paul places all his apostolic weight behind Epaphras. In v 7, to uphold an authority which has been attacked and to defend a character which has been hurtfully maligned, Paul gives Epaphras his apostolic imprimatur. He identifies himself, his ministry and his Gospel with that of Epaphras: If that were not enough of a commendation, Paul also makes it absolutely clear that there is no difference between the Apostolic Gospel and the message of Epaphras. The Gospel which Epaphras preached to them, Paul affirms, is exactly the same Gospel which is being preached, which is producing fruit and growing all over the world (v 6). This then is the reassuring and encouraging thrust of Paul's prayer of thanksgiving.

12) 1:9-12

Having returned thanks to God for the work of the Gospel among the Colossian believers he moves on (v 9) to intercede before God on their behalf. Thanksgiving and intercession are closely and intimately connected. Mingled with the joy Paul feels over the work of God clearly evident in Colossae is a real fear and a deep concern about the permanence of the flowering of the Gospel. Paul dreads the prospect of an alien teaching distorting or stunting the growth or causing, even, the tender young plants to wither altogether. To change the metaphor, Paul is concerned lest the influence of another spirit lay hold of this fine but vulnerable material and mould it awry. So it is that, since he received Epaphras' report, he has not stopped praying for the church in Colossae, struggling and labouring for them, crying to God on their behalf, bearing them up before the throne of grace with specific, pointed intercession. There is a real point of significance here. Not only is Paul, far away, in the secrecy of his prison house, interceding for the Colossian believers, he now tells them that he is praying for them, he tells them what he is asking God, on their behalf, and he explains why he is asking for it: Once again, it seems Paul's intention is to encourage and to nurture the faith of these believers who are under attack: By writing out a summary of his prayer for them, Paul is seeking to exhort the Colossian believers to stand firm, to endure, to persevere: He is trying to build a bulwark so that this new teaching will not sweep them away.

13) 1:9-12

Now we, in the privacy of our home and in the fellowship of the prayer meeting, spread before the Lord the needs of those who depend upon us, many of whom are far away and many of whom are up against it. In power and grace, God deigns to move and to act: As we pray, He deigns to bring blessing and renew hope and strength, and yet there is a very real and additional sense in which this blessing is multiplied when we tell our brothers and sisters in Christ, by word or letter, or action, that we are praying for them. It is immensely humbling, but you have no idea of the encouragement it brings, when folk tell you that they are praying for you. Yes, we are reticent to push ourselves forward, we do not want to boast about our spiritual prowess in prayer, yet Paul, moved by his deep pastoral concern tells the Colossian believers, not only that he is praying for them, he tells them what he is praying and why: Paul's prayer can almost be paraphrased as an eightfold petition. It is interesting, in a day and age when many within the church frown upon petitionary prayer, Paul is not afraid to ask of God: He asks earnestly for what one of the commentators calls 'theological blessings', and as such, he surely sets us an example and a challenge for our intercessions. When Paul could have prayed for any number of things; safety, prosperity, protection, health, what he does ask is that God bestow the discernment of his will and the power to do it. He prays that they might know God and so live for him, that they might have an intelligent grasp of what the will of God demands in daily living.

14) 1:9-12

There is a double thrust running through Paul's petitions: that of knowledge and that of power. Paul's prayer has both a theological and an ethical emphasis. Again, it is against the background of this new teaching circulating in Colossae, that Paul's petition comes sharply into focus. While he wishes to guard them from offers of 'fullness' and 'knowledge' and spiritual 'power' which are deceitful and illusory, he wants nothing less for them than that they should be 'filled' with all the blessing of God in Christ. It is important to notice that the 'knowledge', the 'spiritual wisdom and understanding' for which Paul prays is not speculative or theoretical (as was the 'knowledge' offered by the false teachers), it is theological and moral, it is knowledge of God's will worked out in a life which is worthy of and pleasing to God. The desire of the apostle for the Colossians and for every believer, is that this knowledge of Christ will so develop and so grip our minds and hearts that our chief concern and delight will be in giving God pleasure by the way we live: Oh the blossom and fruit which will adorn such a life: A believer whose heart is set on knowing and doing God's will and who is brought by that determination to a worthy walk and an intimate communion with Christ, will bear fruit in every good work (v 10), will grow ever deeper in the knowledge of God (v 10) and will (v 11) be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might and so be given great endurance and patience. The fruit of such intimate and devoted communion is a rock-like character, a character steeled and tempered and able to bear every attack of the evil one: This word 'endurance' (v 11), the commentators tell us, signifies that kind of perseverance which enables one to hold the position already taken in battle against enemy attacks from without. This, then, is Paul's intercession: What a prayer! What a reality! The business of living for Christ in the real world demands this kind of praying and this kind of living. As the Colossians, so we, need all of God's almighty power steadily to continue and to persevere despite the suffering, in spite of the opposition and false teaching and despite the disappointments that must at times be our lot. It is only thus (v 12) that we are enabled to joyfully give thanks to the Father in every situation.

15) 1:12-23

Paul slides, immediately and naturally from intercessory prayer into a quite thrilling and marvellous proclamation of the Gospel of God. He summarises the salvation in which the Colossian believers and every believer stands (vv 12-14). He exalts Christ as the supreme and pre-eminent Lord of Creation (vv 16-17). He affirms the supremacy of Christ in His Church, in the new Creation (v 18). He proclaims the mystery of Christ's Incarnation and the universal efficacy of His atoning life and death (vv 19-23). And at the end of v 23, Paul explains that what he has just been doing (vv 12-23) is proclaiming and re-affirming and reminding them of the Gospel of Christ (v 23b). This is not some abstruse theological treatise. It is the Gospel which was preached to the pagan Colossians, to bring them to Christ. This is the Gospel which was taught to them by Epaphras in his efforts to establish them in the faith. Paul's strategy, as he writes to the saints in Colossae, is highly significant, and perhaps something we would do well to emulate as we seek to combat the enemies of the Gospel within the Kirk. Although the apostle seeks to counteract and refute the false teaching which is causing so much confusion at Colossae, as it marginalises Christ as one among many spiritual mediators, he does not do this, in the first instance, by denouncing the heretics nor by systematically destroying their arguments. What Paul does is pray for the believers (vv 3-11) and then proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ (vv 12-23). He sends them a letter telling them that he is praying for them and reminding them of the authentic gospel, which they have already heard from Epaphras, calling them back to the truths to which they are already willingly committed. He commends them to the throne of grace in prayer and he proclaims the unsearchable riches of Christ. He proclaims the majesty and mystery of who Jesus really is and what Jesus has done in his Incarnation and Atonement, reaffirming, in ringing terms, the Lordship and supremacy of Christ and the absolute and only sufficiency of His life, death and resurrection for the salvation of all sinners.

16) 1:12-23

Paul, in his wisdom, knows that it is positive doctrinal instruction, once it has really and truly sunk in, once the implications have been grasped in terms of the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ; it is this kind of positive instruction which will be the Colossians' best protection against any kind of error. It is just as true for us today. This is the practical usefulness of sound doctrine. The fact that many Church leaders discount the need for sound teaching/preaching doctrine and the fact that many in the pews regard 'doctrine' as theoretical and impractical, not to say dull and boring, shows just how much they do not understand. What Paul focuses on immediately after his opening prayer is the 'doctrine of Christ'. This is the very heart and soul of the Christian faith and it is magnificent and thrilling. It should draw praise and wonder and adoration from our hearts and lives and should establish us firm and sure in the face of all attack and error. It is, you see, the intelligent appreciation of the doctrine of Christ (the biblical teaching of who Jesus is and what he has done) which is the Christian's best safeguard against heresy and all the fiery darts of the evil one.

17) 1:12b-14

Rounding off his prayer of intercession by urging an attitude of joyful thanksgiving to God, the Father, Paul glides naturally into an exalted and joyful description of the wonderful salvation, the blessings of the Gospel, which, in Christ, the Father has bestowed, as a present possession, upon every believer. This is why we should give thanks to God, Paul says. This is what God has done for you; this is the reality of the remarkable change which God has effected in Christ and which was realised when the Colossians, when we, were converted. This is the salvation in which you stand: Notice the tense of the three main verbs (all Greek aorist): (v 12) has already qualified/fitted you (once and for all) to share in the inheritance of the saints; (v 13) has already rescued/delivered us from the dominion of darkness; has already brought/transferred us into the kingdom of Christ: This is the reality for the Colossian believers, for every believer, no matter what anyone might say, and the present consequence/the continuing result is (v 14) that '...we have (present tense) redemption, the forgiveness of sins'.

18) 1:12b-14

Everything that Paul affirms in vv 12-14 is true for every Christian. And O how wonderful and marvellous it is. Ponder anew the complementary aspects of salvation which Paul highlights here. (1) Inheritance: We have been fitted and qualified to share, with all believers, the promised land of God's eternal kingdom: Ours is a Kingly heritage, the glory and the majesty of the eternal kingdom of light. Paul calls us (Romans 8:17) 'children of God', 'heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ'. What a rich and distinguishing heritage! (2) Deliverance and liberty: God has rescued us (-ve) from the tyranny of darkness and He has brought us (+ve) into the kingdom of His Son. There are, you see, two realms/kingdoms to which men belong; the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light. For Paul, mankind, in and of itself, is held in the thralldom of Satan's dark power. But God, in Christ, has rescued us. Christ, by his life and supremely, by his death on the Cross, has bruised the head of the Serpent. Christ has struck the fatal blow. He has conquered the evil one and so has delivered us into the Kingdom of light: He has brought us out of bondage into the glorious liberty of the children of God. (3) To say that we have redemption in Christ is to say that we have been liberated, set free. We have been delivered from bondage by the payment of a ransom. Our freedom has been purchased. In the slave markets of old, the redemption price was the price needed to secure the liberty of the slave. Christ has purchased our redemption by laying down his life (Ephesians 1:7-8). (4) The companion blessing of 'forgiveness', speaks to us of pardon and of a clean slate. It speaks to us of the cancellation or lifting of a debt. As with redemption, forgiveness flows from the Cross where Christ not only purchased our redemption but cancelled our debt. He broke the power of sin once and for all and so provided forgiveness and pardon. Hallelujah!

19) 1:15-23

Is it any wonder, after exulting in the full salvation which is ours in Christ, that in the next verses the apostle should break out into a hymn of praise to Christ, exalting the Son in full and joyful adoration?

It would seem that there were those in Colossae who were denying the sufficiency of Christ for all spiritual needs and, in effect, if not by intention, denying the supremacy of Christ. So having highlighted the blessings of salvation which are the believer's present possession, Paul drives home his point by affirming and asserting the breathtaking supremacy of Christ in all things. He seems to be urging the Colossian believers to remember who Jesus is and what he has done for them: Jesus Christ, he says, is both supreme Lord and sufficient Saviour. This is our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Angels and spiritual powers (cf. 2:18) are of no consequence. This Creed/hymn is of the highest importance for our understanding of the Person and Work of Jesus (which are part and parcel of the one Christ - His nature and his salvation; incarnation and atonement go together). From vv 15-19 we have an affirmation of the supremacy of Christ's nature and being and from vv 20-23 we have an affirmation of the universal and cosmic sufficiency of his atoning work.

20) 1:15-19

In these verses Paul exults in the majesty and mystery of the Person of Christ. Jesus Christ, the man who walked the streets of first century Palestine, Paul affirms, is none other than God in human form. In Christ all the fullness of the Godhead lives in bodily form (1:19; 2:9). In Jesus Christ the invisible God has become visible. He who existed before all worlds (v 17) has become man, putting on hands and feet. Jesus is God with the skin on, the express image and likeness of God. In Jesus Christ, the creator of the whole universe, the one by whom and for whom all things were created and the one in whom all things hold together, became a part of his creation: The supreme creator has stepped out of all the undecaying majesty and glory of heaven and become a part of that which he had made (See John 1:18; 14:8-9; Hebrews 1:1-3). It is astounding, mind boggling. So often folk (even and very often Christian folk!) are afraid of some dark and forbidding God, away up there hidden and menacing. Jesus shows us that there is no such God. There is mystery in God but no dark, hidden terror. God, in all his fullness, has shown himself to us, once and for all, in Jesus Christ His Son: Jesus Christ is God's mercy and God's judgment in action. Christ is. God's love and God's wrath carved in the concrete of human life and nature. So, says the apostle, in so many words, 'If you want to know what God is like, don't philosophise or speculate, look at Jesus: If you want to know what God thinks and how God acts, listen to what Jesus says and see what Jesus does. In Christ, and O the wonder and the marvel of it, God, the invisible Creator reveals himself; reveals his very heart and his nature'.

21) 1:15-19

The next thing to notice is Paul's emphasis on the supremacy of Christ over the 'powers and authorities' of the invisible spirit world (v 16). When Paul speaks of thrones, powers, rulers and authorities, he is referring to the invisible principalities and powers, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12). These four classes of angelic powers are reckoned to represent the highest orders of the spirit realm in the Kingdom of darkness, the wicked and hostile forces of Satan: Paul's emphasis, then, is that even the evil host of Satan, the cosmic principalities and powers were created, unfallen, in Christ and are subject to Him, even now, in their malice and rebellion: The very fact that Paul makes such an emphatic statement about the supremacy of Christ over these cosmic powers, seems to imply that he is combating something of the false teaching which is rife in Colossae (cf: 2:8, 15, 18). Paul's emphasis on the supremacy and Lordship of Christ in the realm of the invisible spirit world is surely just as necessary and relevant today when an unhealthy interest in the occult is, once again, so prevalent and widespread. In rejection of and in ignorance of the true Spirit, men dabble dangerously with the invisible powers which they believe can influence and govern the destinies of men. Seeking a form of spirituality they hope for supernatural experience and power: it is in the light of this troublesome deception and error that Paul exults in the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ: While Paul recognised the danger and reality of this invisible world, his uncompromising affirmation is that Christ is Lord of all, even of this invisible world: Christ is supreme: There is nothing this evil host can do to the child of God: There is nothing these powers can do to influence or affect the destinies of those who are in Christ: They have no treasures to offer: They have no terrors to frighten the one who lives under the sovereignty of Christ.

22) 1:15-19

The next thing to notice is Paul's affirmation of the supremacy of Christ in the Church and in resurrection (v 18), i.e. the supremacy of the risen Christ over the new creation. 'The Body' is Paul's graphic and dynamic image for the new humanity/the new creation which is the Church of God: The apostle emphasises the fact of Christ's supreme control over His people/His body and the total dependence of every Member of the body on Christ its head. If we tease the analogy out a little, it is obvious that without vital connection to the head there will be no life in the body. It is only the abiding presence of the risen Christ in our midst, as Lord and head that bestows life and vitality. Without our head we cannot hope to survive: The gruesome picture of decapitation highlights the stark reality of separation from our head! (Paul uses precisely this picture in 2:19): Christ's resurrection is another mark of his supremacy (not something that needs to be explained away!), and for this reason. It was the signal that Satan and all his evil minions had been defeated. It was the trumpet blast of liberation for mankind bound in sin and death: it was the proof and guarantee that Christ's sacrifice for sin was accepted by God: The risen Christ is the first of a brand new redeemed humanity: He is the first man to be raised to life with a new sin-free, death-free humanity and as such He has become the 'Author of Life' for us (Acts 3:15) and the promise and guarantee that we will also rise (1 Corinthians 15:20-23). With Jesus' resurrection, the age to come, the resurrection age has burst forth and as the first to rise from the dead, never more to die, Jesus is the first-fruit who guarantees the future resurrection of all believers. This is why Christ is supreme. He is the risen and exalted Lord, He is the One who was dead but now lives to die no more. He is the supreme head of the Body, the Church. He is the unsurpassed Lord of all Creation both visible and invisible. What a Saviour! What a Lord! We do well to fall at his feet in humble obeisance and offer him the worship and the adoration of our hearts.

23) 1:20-23

Having thus proclaimed the mystery of the Person of Christ, Paul now moves on, in his confession, to explain the mystery of Christ's reconciling work. To speak of reconciliation at all presupposes and implies an already existing state of strife and disharmony, a state of estrangement between mankind and God (v 21). Paul assumes a background of mankind alienated from God and God alienated from mankind (Romans 5:9-10). The picture is of battle lines having been drawn; God on the one side, mankind on the other; hostile to one another, separated, isolated, antagonistic. God and man alienated by sin. This is the 'real' situation for all men and women outside of Christ, despite the facade of open-minded indifference or apathy: The Bible is clear that this has not always been the way of things but the Fall and rebellion of mankind, all those centuries ago, in and through our head and representative, Adam, in the Garden of Eden, disrupted the harmonious relationship. Now instead of friendship, fellowship and communication we have antagonism, hostility and enmity. And the whole created order is somehow, mysteriously involved. When man sins and falls, because of the 'solidarity of the created order' the whole of creation is spoiled and marred and brought crashing down: Reconciliation occurs, then, when God takes the initiative so that those who were enemies are reunited as friends: Reconciliation occurs when peace is declared in a war (v 20). Reconciliation occurs when antagonism and alienation are replaced by co-operation and fellowship. Harmony is restored as fear and distrust are taken away. This is the essential meaning of atonement; at-one-ment. The heart of atonement is reconciliation, God and man at one in and through Jesus Christ.

24) 1:20-23

In these verses Paul explains the means and the extent of this reconciliation/at-one-ment. Reconciliation between God and man takes place 'through Christ' (v 20) (through the Incarnate Son of God in whom all the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily), 'in/by Christ's physical body' (v 22), through his 'death' (v 22); 'through his blood shed on the Cross' (v 20). There are a number of things we must say about this to distil the essence of these verses and to savour the marvellous truths they contain. Reconciliation is something God does for us in Christ. The initiative belongs wholly to God. The whole idea of man searching for God is a nonsense. We were alienated, enemies in our minds, rebellious and antagonistic. We needed to be subdued, rescued and pacified. In and of ourselves we are unable and unwilling to make any moves towards God. It is God, the offended party, recognizing the inability and unwillingness of men to be reconciled, who effects a reconciliation for us and on our behalf. The stunning fact that Paul is pointing to here, the sheer and utter grace on the part of God, is that we, human-kind, men and women as a whole, who were alienated and estranged, are reconciled to God, by God's gracious action, apart from anything that we do, apart even from any positive response on our part, while we are still rebellious.

25) 1:20-23

Paul further asserts that reconciliation is a finished work of cosmic and universal scope. In Christ reconciliation has been objectively accomplished once and for all. We cannot add to it nor can we detract from it. What Paul is proclaiming here is the centrality of his Gospel. He is declaring the objective reality of reconciliation having been established and accomplished for the whole created order (v 20), solely by God, in and through Jesus Christ. This is the universal extent and significance of God's reconciliation. Nothing and nobody lies outside the scope of Christ's reconciling work. Christ is the key to an understanding of this objectively accomplished universal reconciliation. Jesus Christ, in who he is and what he does, brings about the peace and reconciliation of the entire cosmos, our peace with God, our reconciliation; this reconciliation occurs in the very person of Jesus, in the fact that Jesus Christ is the God/Man; fully God and fully man, simultaneously; God and man at one. Reconciliation is not something external to Christ, it occurs in the mystery of his very person 'in his physical body' (v 22). God and man are reunited in Jesus Christ and this begins in his birth in the stable at Bethlehem. Throughout his life Jesus accomplishes this reconciliation. God and Man together, united in perfect harmony. For the first time since the Fall, for the first time ever, a human being responds perfectly to the will of God in everything he is and does. Living by faith, trusting in the Father's will, perfectly submissive and obedient in everything. The picture we need to have in our minds is of Christ as Second Adam, going over the ground of human life again. Where the first Adam was defeated, Christ is victorious. Where Adam disobeyed and failed and brought the entire cosmos crashing down, destroying man's relationship with God, causing enmity and alienation and antagonism, Christ, as the second Adam, reverses the Fall. He obeys and is victorious and raises the entire cosmos, reconciling mankind with God and God with man.

26) 1:20-23

God's reconciliation of mankind to Himself not only occurred in Jesus' birth and throughout his life and ministry. It also occurred finally and fully, and most importantly, in and through His death and resurrection; it is in the passion and sacrificial death of Christ, as Christ offers himself, the innocent for the guilty, as sin is finally and fully dealt with, that a new state of reconciliation between God and man is established. As Christ suffers in our stead, as He the sinless One becomes sin for us, so the righteous wrath of God against sin is propitiated and God and man are at one. Christ goes to death, He who had no sin takes the deepest and fullest penalty for sin (see Mark 15:34 and 2 Corinthians 5:21). And it is this which is done for all men that Paul applies personally to his readers, to the Colossians and to us. Paul makes it plain that this historic reconciliation accomplished on our behalf, once and for all, by the death of Christ must be received and appropriated by faith (v 23). Reconciliation is experienced when we enter into peace with God: Personal reconciliation is the result and outworking of cosmic reconciliation. That which is done for us must be made effective in us, by the Spirit. This is why, although all men are reconciled, not all men will necessarily be saved. It is possible, incredibly possible, to refuse and to reject God's declaration of peace: This cosmic reconciliation only touches our lives in full measure when, by the Spirit of God, in living faith we receive it, when we yield and submit to it, when we willingly render our submission and gratefully accept the amnesty which Christ offers. By faith we enter into something which has already been completed by God. We appropriate a finished work of reconciliation and so we enjoy peace with God:

27) 1:24-2:5

Paul moves on from the heart of his Gospel to explain the shape this Gospel gives to his ministry: He now focuses attention on his apostolic ministry. It's almost as if, in this section, the Colossians are invited to examine the shape and content of an authentic, apostolic ministry and to recognise the genuine signs of God at work through His chosen servant. Once again, it would seem that this apologia for authentic, God inspired and God directed ministry, is Paul's response to the false teachers who are disturbing the fellowship at Colossae. It seems likely that these false and deceitful apostles were masquerading as apostles of Christ. They were charismatic leaders, persuasive speakers of great charm who could attract a favourable hearing and cause quite a stir by their personality and presence (2:4). It is, then, by way of contrast to this impressive but false ministry, to show it up for the empty and deceitful thing which it is, that Paul lays before the Colossian believers the pattern and content of an authentic, God inspired and God honouring ministry. It is important for the Colossians; it is important for us to have some standards by which to measure the claims that people make for themselves and by which genuine spiritual leadership and ministry may be known in the church. The timeless and permanent value of this passage before us is that it provides the Church of Jesus Christ, in every generation, with just such a standard. We would perhaps be saved from so much that passes for 'ministry' but which is ultimately empty and vain, if we took seriously Paul's identification here of genuine Gospel ministry. The true Minister of the Gospel today would also, perhaps, be spared much of the criticism that is prone to come his way, if we began to recognise the shape and content and the priorities of such an authentic ministry.

28) 1:24-29

What then is a God-given ministry? What is authentic, apostolic service and how may we recognise it? The main idea which permeates the whole of this section is that of servanthood. Picking up what he has just said in v 23b, Paul seeks to explain exactly what it means to be a servant/minister of the Gospel. The word Paul uses as the touchstone and keynote of Gospel ministry is the word from which we get our English word 'deacon'. It is the word which the AV translates as minister/ministry: To be a minister of the Gospel, Paul says, means to be like Christ (Mark 10:42-45), to have his mind in us. It means to be a 'servant' of the Gospel; a servant of the Church, the body of Christ (v 25). In these verses before us, Paul unveils the stark reality of this servanthood in his own apostolic ministry and challenges us as to how much we have been willing to embrace this servant role. He reveals the joy and the suffering involved. He reveals the privilege of God's calling and empowering and he reveals the awful struggle and burden. Throughout, and hopefully this will become clear as we continue, he emphasises, again and again, that the aim of being a servant of the Gospel, the intention of this suffering and struggle, is the proclamation of Christ, the preaching of the word of God; so that the word of God becomes fully known and the people of God become fully mature.

29) 1:24-29

We must say something about Paul's joy in suffering (v 24): This is an important but difficult verse and it raises a number of questions. What are Paul's sufferings and how can they be an occasion for rejoicing? In what sense can these sufferings be for the Body of Christ? What does Paul mean by the 'afflictions of Christ'? What is lacking in them and how can the servant of the Gospel fill this deficiency? The first thing to say is that the Apostle is not being masochistic: He is not rejoicing because he is enduring pain. He is rejoicing at the effect/the result of the suffering that he has been called upon to endure as a servant of the Gospel. He recognises realistically that servanthood, by its very nature, involves physical suffering but that it has untold benefits for the Body of Christ (see 2 Corinthians 1:3-11; 4:7-12). The normal life for the servant of the Gospel will involve a heavy weight of suffering as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives. As we live the servant life, dedicated to Christ, crucified with Christ, living sacrifices we die to self, we 'bear about in our body the death of our Lord Jesus' so we suffer and by so doing we reflect and communicate the message and comfort of the Cross to those around (whether within or without the body of Christ). It is not until the message of the Cross is embodied in our lives, not until we incarnate the truth of the Gospel, that there will be any real communication of the Gospel message of comfort and grace to our fellow believers or to the unbelieving world.

30) 1:24-29

Paul, however, seems to be saying more than simply that dedicated servants of the Gospel reflect the sufferings of Christ. He appears to be very daring and bold when he claims that in some way his sufferings fill up what is lacking in regard to the afflictions of Christ. What can Paul mean? Well, the apostle has just affirmed that Christ's birth, life and death on the Cross have accomplished and completed, once and for all, a full and sufficient at-one-ment. Nothing can be added or need be added to it. Paul cannot, therefore, mean that his sufferings can add anything to somehow complete the unfinished saving work of Christ. This leads us to interpret the phrase 'the afflictions of Christ' in a way that does not refer primarily to the Cross. Paul's reference here is best understood as referring rather to the end-time afflictions of the Body of Christ. (Acts 9:4, for example, implies that the exalted Christ continues to suffer in the members of His Body (cf Matthew 24 and Mark 13). Paul's teaching here, then, is that by his suffering, he helps to fill up what is lacking in these eschatological sufferings of Christ in His body, the Church and, by implication, that we fill up the measure of this end-time suffering and so bring the end, the advent of Christ and the dawning of future glory, that much closer. Does this not put our suffering into a quite different context? The significance of all and every distress which the servant of the Gospel endures is this big. By so suffering we are led ever deeper into union with Christ; we bring the end (the Parousia) that much closer; we serve the Body of Christ and we reflect and communicate the Gospel message to the watching world. No wonder the apostle, while not denying the inward groaning and distress, can rejoice in his suffering (v 24) and, speaking of the end, can say (Romans 8:18),

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

31) 1:24-29

Paul makes it clear (v 25) that his ministerial office, his role as servant of the Gospel/Church is not something he has sought or chosen for himself. It is a result of the divine commission, given from on high. Surely, in the light of the suffering (v 24), the labour and the struggle (v 29), (the Greek word Paul uses gives us our English word 'agonise!'), it is only the one upon whom God lays his sovereign hand, calls out and empowers for service, who will be equal to the task. Is it this sense of divine commission that keeps the many faithful servants of the Gospel soldiering away in hard and fruitless parishes? Notice the place that preaching and the proclamation of the word of God has in the divine commission. Preaching is the priority. The commission is to present the word of God in all of its fullness. This is still the crying need of the Church today. The proclamation of Christ takes place by instruction and warning (v 28), by admonition and teaching. The word which Paul uses for 'admonish' has to do with setting the mind of someone in proper order; correcting him or putting him right. Sin blinds and clouds our minds and hearts. Sin deceives. It is the preaching of the word of God, the proclamation of Christ which straightens out our false and crooked thinking and undeceives. But O the cost for the preacher (v 29). Paul uses extremely vivid metaphors to explain the exertion involved. He pictures the task of preaching/ministry as a severe labour and toil. The words he uses imply a great weariness and physical tiredness from the immense effort expended in labouring for the congregation. This is front line battle, striving, agonising, labouring under a heavy burden to fulfil God's calling. At the same time (v 29), the apostle is very conscious that he is upheld and energised by the supernatural power of God: As Paul labours, so God works mightily through his weak and toiling servant.

32) 1:24-2:5

Paul not only affirms the authentic pattern and focus of apostolic ministry, he summarises the content of authentic preaching. There is all the difference in the world between 'fine-sounding arguments which deceive' (2:4) and the preaching of the truth. To preach the word of God in all its fullness, Paul asserts, is to preach Christ. 'We proclaim him (Christ)...' (v 28). It is to manifest and make known 'the mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (2:2). 'The mystery of Christ' (1:26-27) is Paul's shorthand for the Gospel and it is now an open secret (cf 1 Corinthians 2:1-16 and Ephesians 3:2-12). In 1:27, Paul identifies a number of features of this 'mystery' as he delights in its glory and greatness.

First, the apostle tells us that this mystery is magnificent in every way. It is an inestimable treasure, characterised by riches and glory. It is the pearl of greatest price which is worth possessing at any cost. This mystery, Paul affirms, encompasses all the riches and the glory of God Himself. In it, in Christ, as he says in 2:3, are 'hidden all the treasures of (God's) wisdom and knowledge'. In this sublime mystery, who is Christ, we have the vast treasury of God. It is, if you like, God's 'Fort Knox'. He has deposited in it the abundance of His grace and glory and, in Christ, he has opened to us the door of his treasure house. Here, He says, it is all yours and He lavishes upon us, poor and poverty stricken as we are, every conceivable blessing and benediction.

33) 1:24-2:5

The second feature of this 'mystery' is that God has graciously chosen to make it known (v 27) 'among the Gentiles', for it related to them/us in a special way. This mystery of Christ, Paul says, reveals how non-Jews (Gentiles), along with Jews (the chosen people of God), are incorporated, on an equal footing, into His redemptive purposes (Ephesians 3:6). This is surely the glorious riches of God lavished upon us Gentiles. That we, the uncircumcised, we who were far off, separated from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, strangers and foreigners to the covenant of promise, without hope and without God in the world; that, in Christ, we should be brought near through His blood and be made fellow citizens with the people of God and members of God's household. The wonder of the mystery is that, in Jesus Christ, salvation has come to us. Salvation has come to the wild and uncultured olive branches as, contrary to nature, we are grafted into the true olive tree. Thirdly, at the end of v 27, Paul identifies the content of this mystery, '...which is Christ in you, the hope of glory'. This is the mystery which is Paul's consuming passion. This is what Paul preached as the unsearchable riches of Christ, the Word of God in all its fullness, 'Christ in you the hope of glory'. The content, focus and centre of this mystery is Christ. This supreme and majestic, cosmic Christ whom Paul has just been exalting in the earlier section of his letter (1:15-23); this Christ who created the universe and who even now upholds it by the word of his power; He who by his death has accomplished cosmic, universal reconciliation; this Christ, mystery of mysteries, indwells the believer. He dwells within us. By His Spirit, the eternal King of heaven, who fills the vast universe, has taken up residence within our hearts: We have His resurrection life and power coursing through our veins. What a mystery! What a treasure!

34) 1:24-2:5

You will notice that Paul's labour and struggle in preaching the 'mystery of Christ' was to one specific end (v 28) '... so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ': It would seem that Paul has the Parousia in mind here. His intention is to present everyone perfect in Christ at that last day. And yet, even now, as we groan and struggle, longing for the final redemption of our bodies, Paul will not allow for anything less than full maturity for every believer. He will not allow us to remain as mere worldly infants in Christ. He expects us to be mature, grown-up Christians, with hearts wholly turned to God, as holy as it is possible for fallen man to be. While that perfection will only be finally and fully realised at the last trumpet, Paul is convinced that preaching the mystery of Christ contributes to the sanctifying and maturing process, as the word of God does/is allowed to do its deep work within us (Ephesians 6:26-27).

35) 2:1-5

Paul now explains that the purpose and intention of the struggle and unremitting labour in which he is engaged is the perfection and sanctification of the believers in the Lycus valley, whom he has never met (v 1). In vv 2-4 Paul specifies his purpose and intention. The maturing, sanctifying process involves, Paul says, strengthening, encouraging of heart. It involves being knit-together in love within the fellowship. It involves knowing and understanding the mystery of Christ. It involves digging ever more deeply into that rich treasure-house of God's wisdom and knowledge which is Christ. You will notice that in this process of upbuilding, love and truth, heart and mind go hand in hand (v 2): For Paul there is no false tearing apart of heart and mind. To know God is to love Him: It is as we grapple with the mystery, and it demands all that our minds can give; it is as we plumb the depth of the mystery of God that our hearts will be encouraged and strengthened and our love for one another will overflow. It is as our minds are gripped by the mystery, expanded and reformed, that our hearts will be thrilled and set on fire with love for Him and for one another. As we explore His treasure house (and this is surely our duty as believers), as we dig ever more deeply into the wisdom and knowledge of God stored up in Christ, as we set our minds on these things, as we unearth glorious sparkling jewels from the mine of His word, forever plumbing new and unseen depths, forever discovering unexpected and marvellous riches, so we shall be gripped and mastered, and love for God and for one another will flow from our hearts and our lives. False teaching (v 4), persuasive, plausible heresy might attack to deceive and kidnap, but we will be held and supported, garrisoned in our hearts and our minds by the mystery of God which is Christ in us the hope of glory.

36) 2:4-8

It is not until we come to v 4 and come across the first overt mention of the false teachers, that we know Paul is warning the church in Colossae against some real danger. Having affirmed the truth of Christ, having laid down the standard of apostolic ministry and having explained the content and purpose of that preaching ministry as the preaching of the mystery of Christ for the sanctification of believers, Paul now expressly grapples with the 'hollow and deceptive philosophy' of the false teachers to correct and to refute it. As a complement to his positive teaching of the truth, Paul now sounds the alarm. It's almost as if everything that Paul has said in his letter so far has been laying the foundation, has been preparatory to an explicit exposure and refutation of the false teaching. Vv 6-7, then, are a turning point in the letter as for the first time Paul overtly warns the Christian community in Colossae. He urges them to continue in the teaching they have already received from Epaphras (which he has been reinforcing) and to remain immovable in their faith (v 6). He urges them not to be taken in by the very plausible teaching of the heretics and so be shifted from the foundation of Christ and the apostles, into the quicksand of error (v 7). He warns them to be on their guard against the empty and vain deceptions of the heretics (v 8). Throughout these verses Paul gives these warnings and admonitions in language intended to make the Colossians sit up and take notice. There is real danger here and Paul uses language which is urgent and commanding: He uses imperatives, urgent exhortations, to summon the believers to action. He summons the Colossians to put their faith into practice; v 6 'So, then, just as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live in him...'; v 8 'See to it (Beware/look out) that no one takes you captive...'

37) 2:6-8

We look, then, at what Paul urges by way of admonitory warning: In 2:6, Paul holds two truths before us, insisting that they be held firmly in balance: The apostle affirms that receiving Christ is not the end but the beginning of Christian life. From initial introductions we are to go on to know him ever more closely and ever more deeply. There is no place in the Christian life for complacency! At the same time, and this is perhaps the thrust of Paul's thought in the face of the new and erroneous teaching, he affirms that all growth and progress in the Christian life must be entirely consistent with its beginning. The foundations and the building are all of one piece. So, in the face of all that would oppose and attack, Paul summons the Colossians and he summons us to live out the Christian life in a way which is consistent with its foundation on the Apostles and Prophets, with Christ as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20): Dick Lucas makes this insightful comment:

"The new learning must be consistent with the old: The Christian who grows in knowledge can claim further enlightenment only insofar as he remains loyal to the saving gospel truths that first he was taught, and which led him to Christ.

"This has something uncomfortably trenchant to say to Christian leaders: Did not many owe their first knowledge of Christ to evangelical truth? Yet how many now say that they have 'grown out' of such simplicities. But to grow beyond the saving truths as we were faithfully taught them is not to grow up in a way that can please God or profit the church. Such fancied superiority in knowledge calls for honest self-examination to see if true loyalty to Christ remains."

38) 2:6-8

Paul goes on in v 7 to explain what it means to 'continue to live in him' and he does so using a number of word pictures, metaphors of firm solidity and growth. Paul pictures the life of the believer as a tree rooted deeply and firmly in good soil, having been planted in Christ, with roots that go firm and deep to draw from Him all that is necessary for growth and development. The life of the believer is pictured as a building, built on a solid and secure foundation, built on the rock Christ Jesus, standing firm and tall when the floods come and beat against the house. These striking metaphors of a believer's consolidation in the apostle's teaching and faith are reinforced further as Paul speaks of growth in knowledge and understanding which overflows with thanksgiving. For Paul the foundations are all important, and that at every stage of Christian experience. Indeed growth and fruitfulness only come as we are rooted and established ever more deeply in the Apostle's teaching. At first glance it might appear strange to combine images of the Christian being established in the faith on a solid foundation, with thanksgiving. But, when you think about it, thanksgiving is the natural result of such rooting and grounding in Christ. It is as we are established more and more in the faith, as we understand more and more of what God has done for us in Christ, that our hearts overflow in thanksgiving. As we glimpse the depth of His redeeming love, so we marvel at His mercy. As we plumb the mystery of Christ, so we see our weakness and our sin over against His grace and we become ever more dependent on Him. Joyful thanksgiving and praise, then, is the language of dependence, of rootedness. It is the language of the weakest Christian in Christ, and it is only as our hearts and our minds become fixed upon Christ and upon what he has done for us, that our glad and grateful hearts will overflow in thanksgiving and praise.

39) 2:6-8

Paul's second imperative comes in v 8 and it is an exhortation to a negative, as the apostle warns against the devilish philosophy of the heretics. Paul sounds the alarm very forcibly. Not only is the believer to 'live in Christ' he is to 'be on his guard' because it is all too easy to lose spiritual freedom and be kidnapped from the truth into the slavery of error. Paul does not mince his words: False teaching and false teachers can so captivate the believer that they become shackled again with the chains of bondage and slavery. The force of Paul's words here speak of the slave trader carrying off, kidnapping his victim, body and soul. These spiritual confidence tricksters may say that they come to bring spiritual fullness and new Christian liberty but, beware, says Paul, they are wolves in sheep's clothing. Now we must be clear about what Paul is and is not speaking about here. He is not claiming that all philosophy is empty and deceitful: He is not speaking about philosophy in general. He is giving his verdict about this one particular false philosophy which seduces believers from the simplicity of their faith in Christ. It is this much acclaimed teaching which the heretics are peddling (as philosophy) which is empty and deceitful. Paul exposes it as a hollow sham, as empty of true content, as seductive and misleading: It is opposed to the word of truth. It is not even Christian because it is not rooted and grounded in Christ, nor is it built upon Him.

40) 2:6-8

Paul explains (v 8b), by referring to its source and origin, why this false philosophy is empty and deceptive. He exposes it for the human and devilish thing it really is (v 8b): This is surely true of false teaching of whatever sort when it comes to infect the Church of God and to kidnap believers. Whether those who advocate it realise it or not, false teaching is ultimately the vain machinations of men motivated and directed, behind the scenes, by Satan himself. He is after all the father of lies. These false teachers, it seems, claimed to preach an authentic Gospel tradition. They claimed to speak the word of God and to reveal His will but they were preaching another Gospel which was no Gospel at all. It all sounds so contemporary! Paul, however, rejects any suggestion of divine origin to their message. This is a mere human fabrication and it is antagonistic to the authentic apostolic tradition centred on Jesus Christ as Lord. More than that, the real truth of the matter is that their message, even if they are unaware of it, rather than being according to Christ, is according to 'the basic principles of this world' (DIV), 'the elemental spirits of the universe' (RSV). There has been much debate about exactly what it is Paul is referring to when he speaks of these 'elemental spirits of the universe' but it would seem that he has in mind the principalities and powers of the dark demonic world of spirits, the spiritual powers and authorities of this dark world, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms who oppose God. Paul is alerting the Colossians, and every Christian, to the fact, and it is very sobering, that such false teaching ultimately emanates from the devil and his demonic host, as he tries to recapture those who have been liberated from his dread tyranny. This is the truth of any heresy and this is the importance of being rooted and grounded in Christ. This is the importance of being built up and established in the apostolic faith as we were taught. The enemy of souls is prowling around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour and he comes very often as an angel of light to deceive, if he can, the very elect of God.

41) 2:9-15

Continuing his polemical thrust against this false teaching, Paul now explains why the philosophy of the false teachers is not 'according to Christ' and why the believer should live 'in Christ'. What we have in these verses is Paul's 'antidote to error', his antidote to the poison of a false, humanistic, devil-inspired philosophy. Against a philosophy which claimed to offer new spiritual freedom and new spiritual fullness, Paul declares the truth and reality of fullness already possessed by the believer, in Christ, and only in Christ. Against a philosophy which was seductive and misleading, a tool in the hands of the principalities and powers in their war against Christ and those who are his, Paul directs the Colossians, and us, to Christ, and to his work of redemption. Taking up (vv 9-10) what he has already said in his Christ hymn in chapter 1 (1:19), Paul urges the Colossian believers to 'think what Spirit dwells within them'. 'Ponder anew the wonder of what Christ has done for you. Gaze afresh at the treasure which is already yours in Christ. How can you possibly need anything more or better? Christ is all in all'. Once we understand our position of privilege in Christ it is inconceivable that we will want to look anywhere else for spiritual satisfaction; it is inconceivable that we will be kidnapped by hollow and deceptive philosophy. So in vv 9-15, Paul gives the church at Colossae and the Church universal, an immensely valuable, and a marvellously concentrated summary of what it means to be 'in Christ'. Notice just how much Paul focuses on the centrality of Christ, The Foundation. The commentators liken Paul's repetition of 'in Him' and 'with Him' to a scarlet thread running through this whole section. This is one of Paul's most compact and comprehensive passages detailing the breadth and scope of Christ's saving work. The rich depths of it are just staggering. Paul's exposition of redemption is marvellous and wonderful and we will need to spend some time drinking in the grandeur and the glory of it.

42) 2:9-15

In these verses Paul affirms the magnitude of the work of redemption. He affirms the facts, the truths of redemption which have been accomplished objectively, once and for all, in the Incarnation and Atonement of Christ. He affirms that the fullness of Christ, everything that He has accomplished objectively for us at the Cross, everything Christ has won, has become ours, subjectively, in the reality of personal experience, as we are united with Christ by faith. This redemption, in Christ, is pictured as a circumcision, as a radical putting off of the body of flesh/the old man in Christ's death (v 11). It is pictured as the death and resurrection of baptism (v 12). It is pictured as the forgiveness of sins and the cancellation of a great debt (v 14). It is pictured as a great victory over Satan and his demonic host (v 15) and, the apostle reminds us, all of this happened, in Christ, while we were yet sinners (v 13); 'This', says Paul, 'is the true apostolic tradition. This is the true philosophy. Become rooted and grounded in this: Plumb its depth. Savour its sweetness and its grandeur and as you do your heart and life will overflow with thanksgiving and praise to God and to His Christ and nothing and no one will be able to take you captive, neither the false and empty philosophies of men nor the elemental spirits of this world. For this Christ is head over every power and authority. He has disarmed them, triumphing over them and making a public spectacle of them in His Cross.'

43) 2:11-15

It must be emphasised that the various 'pictures' of redemption which Paul highlights here are different aspects of the same reality, different and complementary facets of the same jewel. It's almost as if Paul is viewing Christ and His redemption through a camera and by so doing he shows us these different camera angles so that we will get the full, thrilling picture.

In his first 'picture' of redemption, Paul uses circumcision as the gruesome metaphor for the crucifixion of the body of flesh/the old man in the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross (2:11). Paul is speaking in objective categories: He refers to this destruction of the body of flesh as having occurred, once and for all, in Christ. What Paul is saying then is that in the death of Christ on the Cross at Calvary the 'body of flesh' was stripped away once and for all. In Christ's death the old man/old fallen Adam/sinful humanity was cut off and destroyed once and for all time and for all people. Now Paul is saying something very profound here about the person and work of Christ. The background to this atoning circumcision is the Incarnation. When Christ was incarnate of the virgin Mary, by the Holy Spirit, He assumed a body of flesh: 'Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made Man' became The Man Christ Jesus, having our flesh and our nature. He came to redeem fallen mankind and he stooped to the lowest to lift us up. The Incarnate Word of God took to himself human flesh and nature in all of its fallen sinfulness and he sanctified it. As the new Adam, he took up what the old Adam had spoiled and corrupted, he took up this old sinful humanity of ours and throughout his life he subdued and mastered it, living as the sinless one, perfectly obedient to the Father. Ultimately, he took this 'body of flesh' to death and it was crucified and in the circumcision of his death, finally and fully, the old man/the body of sin was stripped/cut off.

44) 2:11-15

In his second 'picture' of redemption, the apostle uses Baptism as a metaphor for the burial and resurrection of Christ (v 12). Once again, and it is worth emphasising, Paul is pointing to the objective work of Christ as he speaks of burial and resurrection. He is not speaking primarily about our baptism or our faith. Paul is rather speaking of Christ's faith on our behalf, stressing the objective nature of what God has accomplished in Christ for us. Paul is not speaking about baptism as such. He is using the picture of baptism as an analogy of what occurred in the death and resurrection of Christ. Just as in baptism there is a burying of a person in the water, as they die to the old life of sin, so in Christ the body of flesh was destroyed once and for all at his death. Christ was buried. The old man was crucified and buried with him, done to death, destroyed. And, just as in baptism a person rises from the water to newness of life, so in Christ there was a resurrection and He was raised a new redeemed, glorified, sin free, death-free man, the first fruits of a brand new humanity. Paul, then, is speaking once again, not of baptism nor of our faith but of Calvary and the empty tomb. It was at Calvary, in the sacrificial death of Christ on the Cross, as He died in our place, that we were circumcised and our body of flesh was stripped away. It was in the garden tomb, sealed by the stone, that our old man was buried in baptism and raised to the newness of glorified humanity on the third day by the power of God. This is why, in v 13, Paul can say, emphasising the objective nature of what Christ has done for us, that all of this happened in Christ while we were still sinners. It took place while mankind was alienated from God. This is the wonder of God's grace and mercy in the face of the awful hopelessness of man's predicament.

45) 2:11-15

As the third 'picture' or camera angle of redemption, Paul focuses on the reality of forgiveness and pardon, in Christ. He uses the striking metaphor of a massive debt having been cancelled (v 13b-14). Once again Paul emphasises the objective fact that this forgiveness and pardon took place, once and for all, in Christ at the Cross. The apostle illustrates the forgiveness of sins which Christ has provided for us in his sacrificial death by using the legal picture of debt being redeemed and cancelled. In the first instance this is a solemn picture of a bankrupt debtor unable to clear his debts. It is perhaps only when we think of sin as a debt owed to God that something of the seriousness of our predicament becomes clear. Mankind is unable to square its own accounts with God. We cannot pay the debt we owe. It is when we think we can and when we try to pay the outstanding debt that our very incapacity and poverty become all too apparent. We cannot pay the debt of our sin. The 'bond' stands against us. The IOU of our sin hangs over our head with its inescapable legal demands and there is nothing that we can do except hang our head in shame: The death of Jesus Christ, however, and this is where Paul's solemn picture becomes utterly joyful and thrilling, forgives our sin and cancels the debt. Redemption means that Christ has wiped the slate clean. He has paid the debt for all. He has set aside our IOU, stamping 'paid in full' across the page: Nailed to the Cross our sin has been blotted out, once and for all (2 Corinthians 5:21): Taking our body of flesh to the Cross and death, He became a curse for us and so redeemed us from the curse of the Law (Galatians 3:13). He took this body of sin/flesh to himself in order to blot it out on the cross. Nailed to the Cross he became the cancellation of our 'bond' so that we might go free. This is the wonder of the redeeming love of God; because Christ was nailed to the Cross our debt has been completely forgiven.

46) 2:11-15

The final 'picture' for Paul, as he expounds the objective character of redemption 'in Christ', is the victory and liberation from the powers of darkness, which Christ has won for mankind by his death and resurrection (v 15, cf 1:13-14). Paul now develops what he has said previously by specifically relating to the work of Christ on the Cross, this deliverance from the dark powers and authorities. Christ's death, Paul affirms, has, once and for all, utterly stripped the spiritual forces of evil of all their power. The principalities and powers, who have until then held mankind in their dread thrall, have been radically cut off, stripped of their authority. Christ's death has dealt them a fatal blow. The Cross has exposed, for everyone with eyes to see, the utter helplessness of the Satanic powers and authorities. The picture Paul uses here is that of a victory parade. The imagery comes from the triumphant processions of the Roman Emperors as, in jubilant celebration of victory, they paraded their beaten and bedraggled captives through the streets of Rome. So, says Paul, in the Cross, in Christ, God has paraded these powerless principalities and powers to make plain to all the magnitude of the victory which Christ has won for mankind and to affirm that their rule is over. It must be added, however, that these dark powers are not depicted as surrendering gladly, but as submitting against their wills to a power they cannot resist. They have been forcibly pacified and subdued, and they are not finally destroyed (cf. Romans 8:37-39 and 1 Corinthians 15:24-28). In a day and age when so many try to 'demythologise' this teaching of Paul's on the reality of spiritual powers of wickedness, it is perhaps worth saying that spiritual warfare is real, even when we fight on the winning side. This is no fictional myth: The 'superior enlightenment' of the modern world, and the ignorance of our adversary, even within the Church, which blandly dismisses the reality of evil spirits, indicates sadly, just how far we have slipped from apostolic Christianity. For Paul, spiritual warfare is real: For Paul, however, the final truth is that in Christ, Satan and his dark host have been stripped and exposed as ultimately powerless.

47) 2:11-15

There is one final, but important, point to make. Paul has been affirming the objective facts of a multidimensional redemption, the fundamental of the faith, the grand indicatives of salvation. The wonder and glory of the love and mercy of God is that while mankind was helplessly lost in sin, ignorant of God and wilfully rebellious, while we were wretched and culpable, Christ died for us, crucifying the body of flesh, for us. While we were dead in sin, lifeless, without hope, without God, uncircumcised in heart, while the devil and the flesh, with its desires and lusts, held us in its thrall, even then, especially then, in Christ's resurrection, God raised us to newness of life and set us gloriously free. Objectively, in Christ's death and resurrection, mankind was made alive by God. The old man was stripped off and the new man was raised in the power, the glory and the liberty of the new creation.

The implication of all of this, however, is that what Christ has won for us in the Cross is to be a personal reality in our lives. We are to experience Christ's redemption, subjectively, in our lives. We are called to live in Christ: The very facts of redemption, the crucifixion of our old man, the risen life of the new creation, the cancellation of our debt, forgiveness and spiritual victory, these facts of redemption are to be appropriated by faith. They are to be entered into and reckoned as ours so that, by the Spirit, they become operative in our lives. Christ calls us to venture all that we are upon what He has accomplished for us. He calls us to rest in the marvellous truths of his redemption, to know the power of his death and He calls us to make it ours in the reality of everyday living.

48) 2:16-23

You will notice that v 16 begins with the word 'Therefore'. Whenever Paul says 'therefore' we must ask what it is there for? This apparently insignificant word (in Greek it is a small three letter word) is a pointer of great significance to what Paul is saying. 'Therefore' connects what follows very closely with what has gone before, as Paul draws out the implications of what he has just said, the implications of what Christ has done for us in His glorious redemption: 'Therefore', says Paul, 'in view of these tremendous facts, on the basis of what Christ has done for you in the Cross, on the basis of what Christ has done in you by faith, by incorporation into His death, knowing that you have been crucified with Christ and raised to new life in him, knowing that you have been forgiven, pardoned and given victory over the principalities and powers, 'do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink...' This is the significance of the 'Therefore'. Paul is building on the sure foundation of Christ's great redemption and he is saying 'Let the liberty and power of Christ equip and empower you so to live for him. Let the death and resurrection of Christ be your death to sin and your resurrection to new life'.

49) 2:16-23

In these verses Paul exposes and refutes a wrong way of living which purports to be authentic Christian living. He exposes and refutes the false piety, which is the outworking of the empty and deceitful philosophy of the 'heretics'. By so doing, Paul is specifically applying the implications of this objective redemption 'in Christ' to the particular matters of concern which arise from the false philosophy and false practices advocated by the heretics. You will notice that these are negative injunctions, they are exhortations 'not to' (it is not until ch. 3 that Paul comes to the positive exhortations). Salvation says 'no' to certain ways of living and thinking before it ever says 'yes' and in the particular situation of Colossae, Paul targets his guns on the false teachers, on the practices they advocate and on the false notions of piety which underlie these practices.

50) 2:16-23

It would appear that the false teachers have been openly contemptuous of the Colossian believers, implying that they lack the essentials of true spirituality and live in a way which is less than Christian. The heretics focus on external food and holy days (v 16). They teach what appears to be a rigid asceticism where certain foods and drinks are prohibited and forbidden and where certain religious obligations are mandatory (cf 1 Timothy 4:1-5). Now we all know that Paul would have been the last person to deny the need for self-discipline in the Christian life. Even a cursory reading through his letters will make it clear that in every servant of God, appetites will continually need disciplining and self-control will need to be exercised if time is to be made for prayer and worship, if the body of flesh is to know its master and if we are to win the ultimate prize. Paul can never be heralded as the champion of 'antinomianism'/lawlessness. Paul would never dispense with 'Sabbath' worship any more than he would dispense with the commandment concerning adultery. We also know that Paul respected the scruples of other believers in matters of abstaining from food and drink, even when he did not share the same convictions (Romans 14:1-18; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13). For Paul, the law of love, concern for the 'weaker brother', imposes a voluntary limitation on our Christian liberty so that the liberty which we enjoy in theory is not such in practice. 'For Paul, Christian liberty, which we all enjoy in Christ, in full and abundant measure, means that the 'strong' will go out of their way to avoid offending the tender consciences of the 'weak' or 'scrupulous'. But! ...more in the next note.

51) 2:16-23

At Colossae, however, the scrupulous are threatening to impose their scruples, their rigid ascetic principles, on the rest of the congregation and Christian liberty needs to be reasserted in the light of such false attempts to undermine it. Part of the problem at Colossae was that the false teachers made their prohibitions and ascetic lifestyle essential to salvation. They said, in so many words, 'Except you abstain from eating this and drinking that, unless you worship like this on that particular day...you cannot be saved.' In the light of this, Paul urges the Colossians '...do not let...' (vv 16-19); see also Galatians 5:1). Paul recognised, you see, the issues which are at stake. He recognised that the imposition of such scruples (not the holding of the scruples but their imposition) cut at the very heart of the Gospel. It was an imposition of the shadow for the reality of Christ. It implied that Christ's redemption was not enough and that something extra must be added.

52) 2:16-23

In vv 20-23 Paul comes to the heart of the matter (and in so doing he refers back to the multidimensional redemption accomplished once and for all in Christ). 'Don't you realise', Paul says, 'that you died with Christ on the Cross and that that death crucified your body of flesh, and liberated you from the tyranny of the 'elemental spirits of the universe'. How come you are now turning back to these weak and miserable principalities and powers? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? (Galatians 4:3, 8-11). You are dead to all of that, so be dead!' Notice what Paul says in these verses about the origin of such legalistic rules and regulations. Such precepts are the devil-inspired religion of the world. These taboos about what you can and cannot eat or drink, are merely passing human inventions (v 22) 'according to the regulations and doctrines of men' yet they are inspired by the father of lies himself. This is the hidden and sinister significance of the imposition of these rules. They emanate (v 20) from the basic principles of this world/the dark elemental spirits of the universe, as Satan's dark host seeks to kidnap and re-enslave those who have been liberated. This, Paul says, is the dangerous reality of such legalistic scruples. Satan is happy to provide a 'religion' that can seem to satisfy people while it actually keeps them from God. His whole aim is to turn our eyes away from the eternal and the imperishable and to focus our attention on the temporal and the material. Matters of what we eat and what we drink are of no consequence as far as godliness is concerned, particularly when a test case is made of their abstinence or enjoyment (over-indulgence leading to gluttony and drunkenness is another matter altogether). Let us not get side-tracked on to the peripheral and the unimportant. We have died with Christ to the basic principles of this world.

53) 2:16-23

Notice what Paul says about the nature and the effect of these legalistic rules and regulations (v 23). He cuts away the facade and with strong direct language he exposes the sham and the hypocrisy. Ultimately, Paul says, such rules do exactly the opposite of that which seems to be their intention. They appear to be spiritual and wise: They give an impressive show of piety and asceticism with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body but, behind it all, they actually pander to the flesh. This is the stark and surprising reality of such legalistic rules and regulations. They (v 23) '...lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence'. It is possible to translate what Paul says in the last line of chapter 2 like this, 'which things actually lead to the gratification of the flesh'. Moffatt's translation has this (v 23).

"These rules are determined by human precepts and tenets; they get the name of 'wisdom' for their self-imposed devotions, their fasting, and their rigorous discipline of the body, but they are of no value, they simply pamper the flesh!"

Constantly focusing on such 'do's and don'ts' does not deny the flesh. It does not deny the old self/the old Adam, it feeds and encourages it and that is sensuality. This kind of imposed legalistic puritanism which Paul is exposing here looks like true piety. It looks like a true death to self but it is in fact a self-gratifying substitute which men cling to and which they parade for all to see, exactly because they are unwilling to die the death to self and sin

54) 2:16-23

Now, it is exactly this fleshly self, in all of its rebellion and vainglory, in its refusal to die, which we see laid bare in the false teachers themselves, as Paul exposes them for the sham that they are in vv 18-19. In this warning to the Colossians, Paul gives a devastating critique of the character and piety of the false teachers. In general, Paul seems to be refuting a very modern tendency. He seems to be dismissing, as the aberration of a fleshly mind, these claims to superior spirituality validated by visions and higher, mystical religious experience: Whether they know it or not, Paul says, such men are really spiritual confidence tricksters, delighting in a false asceticism which echoes Christian language and apes true humility. They claim their spiritual authority, not from Scripture but from 'visions' they have seen. They claim to advocate a death to self, a self mortification by which the initiate is enraptured so as to participate in the heavenly worship of God performed by the angels, but all they are in fact doing is pandering to their unspiritual mind (literally - 'the mind of his flesh'). They have allowed their fleshly minds to 'puff them up', to build up their own ego with illusions of grandeur and superior spirituality. They boast of their acquaintance with the 'divine fullness'. They boast of their 'full and superior knowledge', but says Paul, all they are full of is their own pride, their own conceit. Their mind is set on the flesh, not on the Spirit. They have lost connection with Christ, The Head (v 19). If only they knew it, such men are in the gravest of perils. They have nothing to offer other Christians. (Paul compares the fleshly man and the spiritual man, in Romans 8:5-9). So, Paul writes to the Colossians and to us, have none of it! Have none of this false, fleshly piety that is ultimately enmity with God. If you are a Christian at all, you have died with Christ. The body of flesh has been crucified, live as if it were so. Don't be taken captive by rules and regulations. Don't be side-tracked by taboos about eating or drinking, by particular forms of worship or by visions. If the Spirit of God lives in you, you are controlled by the Spirit not by the flesh (Romans 8:9-10). Live in the Spirit!

55) 3:1-10

Having thus exposed and refuted the false asceticism, this fleshly/carnal/unchristian piety, and having urged the believers not to be bound by such a pseudo Christianity, the Apostle moves on, at the beginning of ch. 3, to advocate true Christian living. He advocates an authentic Christ-centred piety and he strongly and positively urges mortification of the flesh. From the beginning of ch. 3 Paul lays out the practical outworking, in the believer, of union with Christ. He describes 'normal Christian life' lived in godliness and holiness. The outworking of redemption, in the life of the believer, Paul says, is not to be like that of the heretics, where it looks to all intents and purposes as if the flesh has been crucified, when in fact it is alive and well and being encouraged: The outworking of redemption in the life of the believer is to be like this. The old man is to be put to death and the new man is to be put on. There is to be a real death to self and sin and a real resurrection to newness of life. If you wanted a pithy title for all that Paul says about living the Christian life or walking in Christ, it must be 'Put off and Put on'. To be a Christian at all is to put off the old man and to put on the new. This is what it means to be engrafted into Christ, united with Him in his death and resurrection.

56) 3:1-10

In these verses, Paul continually refers back to the indicatives of redemption as he urges this putting off and putting on. He continually points back to what Christ has done once and for all at the Cross and from there he points forward to what that should mean for daily living. This section of the letter is just littered with 'therefores' and imperatives (Therefore; vv 1 and 5; imperatives at vv 1, 2, 5, 8 and 9), as Paul refers back to the objective redemption in Christ and then applies what Christ has done to our lives. The Apostle echoes what he has affirmed as fundamental of Christ's redeeming death and resurrection (2:9-15) and says, if you are a Christian, this must be true, not only for you but in you: This objective/subjective; indicative/ imperative pattern is fundamental to any understanding of Colossians (indeed it is fundamental to a proper understanding of any of Paul's letters). Before we look in detail at what Paul urges, let me highlight the indicatives and the imperatives.

v1 Since...you have been raised with Christ - indicative

v1 Seek the things which are above - imperative

v2 Set your minds on things above - imperative

v3 For you died - indicative

v5 Put to death therefore - imperative

v8 Rid yourselves of all such things - imperative

v9 Do not lie to each other - imperative

The apostle always anchors his commands for godly and holy living in the facts of what Christ has made us.

57) 3:1-10

The apostle's insistent exhortation is very impressive and deeply challenging. 'This is your position in Christ. Now be what God has made you: You have been raised with Christ - live as if it were true. You have been crucified with Christ, you died with Christ - so be dead, put to death all that is of the earth. In Christ, the old man/the old Adam was put off, stripped off in the circumcision of His death; in Christ's resurrection the new man was put on - so put off the old man and put on the new. If we are believers at all, this is what it means to be such. We are no longer the man or woman we once were. We have been identified with Christ in His death and resurrection - so we must be identified with His death and resurrection as a constant attitude and mindset. We are to reckon it as a living/as a dying reality so that the power of His death and resurrection will be at work within us.' Let me insist, however, that it is only because we have been remade and recreated in Christ, it is only because, in Christ, the man we once were has been put off and the new man has been put on, that we are equipped and empowered and enabled to live as new men and women: it is not something of ourselves. By ourselves, we are weak and frail and sinful but 'in Christ' we are that no longer. This is the grace and power of the Gospel which prevents the divine imperatives from becoming counsels of despair for us. This is the grace and power and enabling which prevents these commands for holy living becoming heavy weights which, in the light of our weakness and frailty and sin, hang round our necks and drag us down to despair. Our weakness and frailty and sin have been crucified with Christ: It belongs to the man we once were. In Christ we are not weak nor frail nor sinful, we are, rather, mighty to the pulling down of strongholds. In Christ, and only 'in Christ' we are true and good and holy and are empowered so to be. So, says Paul, leaving no place for complacency, because you are that, be that. Walk in Christ. Live in Christ. Be true to your new nature, not to your old one.

58) 3:1-4

When Christ died we died (v 3). When Christ was raised we were raised (v 1). Christ is now seated in the glory on the right hand of the Father and in Him, incredibly, we too are seated in the glory (vv 1, 3). Christ is our life. The reality of our new life is in the heavenly realms, our life is hid, safely and securely, with Christ in God (Ephesians 2:4-6). Therefore, since this is the reality, since we are seated in the heavenly realms, Paul summons us to seek heavenly things, the things of the new world and of God: He summons us to set our minds, to give our mind and will and heart fully and completely to the things of God. This is to be an active seeking and setting of the mind and affections and will. It is our responsibility as new men and new women, empowered by the Spirit of God, to direct and orientate our lives for the things of God, to set our minds on what the Spirit desires and not on what the flesh desires. This is why saturating our minds and hearts in the Scriptures is of such importance. It is as we dig into the Word of God and meditate upon its truths that we learn the mind of God and His mind is formed in us. The wisdom of the book of Proverbs is as true today as it was then 'As a man thinketh in his heart so is he' (Proverbs 23:7). Where our mind is set, the way we think, is intimately related to the way we live - whether that be as a Christian in the Spirit and by faith or, as an unbeliever, in the flesh, in sin and in spiritual death (Romans 8:5-6).

59) 3:1-4

Let me say two things by way of rider to what was said yesterday. First of all, Paul is not repudiating living as a human being on earth. To have a fleshly/carnal mindset is quite different from living in a human fleshly body. Our bodies, fallen though they be, are part of God's good creation and are to be mastered, not despised. What Paul is rejecting, rather, is the mind set on the flesh. He rejects the orientation, the direction of our lives towards the old fleshly order of existence to which we, as Christians, no longer belong. We are to be heavenly minded, not earthly minded. The second thing to say is that there is a 'not yet' to all that Paul is speaking of. The apostle has spoken of our death and resurrection and ascension 'in Christ' as having already been accomplished once and for all, and that is true, marvellously and liberatingly true. And yet, at the same time, paradoxically, it is 'not yet' true. There is still a future consummation to be looked to and lived for (v 4). We are redeemed, gloriously redeemed, but it is only at the Parousia, when Christ returns in glory that we will know full and final redemption. In the interim, empowered by the Spirit of the risen and exalted Christ, we battle to seek and to set our minds on things above. We battle to put to death the mind of the flesh and to purify ourselves as He is pure. Yet we battle with the joy and assurance that our heavenly life will be fully manifest in all of its glory when Christ who embodies it, appears. Then, we who share His life now, will share His glory. That which is secretly present in us now will, on that glad day, be revealed in all of its splendour and light.

60) 3:5-10

But what does it mean in practice, in the nitty-gritty of everyday life, to set our minds and hearts on things above? Well, from v 5, Paul moves on to give this mindset and life orientation, concrete expression and application. He earths his exhortations to being heavenly minded, in the earthly battle with the flesh, which every Christian pursues. Comparing and contrasting what they once were, in their sin, with what they now are 'in Christ', using three main imperatives, Paul urges the Colossians, and every believer: 'Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature...' (v 5); 'Put off (rid yourself of) all such things...(v 8) and 'Put on (clothe yourself)...' (v12). Peter O'Brien, in the Word Commentary on Colossians, has this very insightful comment:

"Being heavenly minded does not mean living in the clouds! The believer who obeys the apostolic injunction to aim at the things above will be involved in an ongoing spiritual warfare here below as he or she puts to death sinful propensities and pursuits, and allows the new nature to find outward expression in a godly life."

There can be no thought for the Christian that he is too heavenly minded to be any earthly good. For Paul, being heavenly minded is of immense earthly good. In fact the more heavenly minded we are the more earthly good we will be. To set one's mind on things above is to live a godly and holy life here on earth, in the midst of all that would corrupt and tempt. To seek heavenly things is to 'Put off the old man and put on the new man' here and now.

61) 3:5-10

You will notice, in the believer's experience, that before there is ever a putting on of the new man, there must be a putting off, a putting to death of the old, and this is what Paul concentrates on first of all. (Paul only turns to 'putting on the new man' at vv 10/12). He concentrates first of all on the putting off, the putting to death of the flesh. Putting off the old man involves putting off the mindset and the behaviour of the old man. It involves a once for all, decisive death to the flesh and an ongoing renewal in knowledge, day by day and moment by moment: The flesh expresses itself actively by means of these vices of immoral indulgence and lying, filthy language, which Paul lists (v5, 8; cf Mark 7:14-23): Following his Lord, Paul is quite explicit and unambiguous about the extent of evil in the human heart. This, the apostle says, is how we used to live, as slaves to sin, under the condemnation and wrath of God: We offered our bodies to sin as instruments of wickedness: We obeyed its evil desires, as out of our hearts poured forth all manner of filth. This is man without God, the old man in all of its sin and corruption. But now, in Christ, this old man/this old fleshly Adam has been crucified, so, Paul cries, put it to death, put off the old man with all of its detestable practices, discard these repulsive habits, take off these filthy, worn out rags and put on the robe of righteousness, clothe yourself with Christ (Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:11-13; 13:14). This is what it means to live in Christ. It is to actively reckon as ours that which Christ has accomplished for us on the Cross. This is what it means to be true to our new nature, the new nature Christ won for us at the Cross. A death must be died.

62) 3:10-4:6

It is the positive exhortation, the balancing imperative, 'Put on...' (v 12) that Paul develops now, as he urges the child of God to demonstrate the family likeness. From v 10, Paul gives a positive and practical exposition of what it means to be Christ's, to live as a Christian, in the various spheres of everyday life. In vv 11-17 he concentrates on living out the new life of Christ in the local church (among believers). In vv 10-21 it is the home and the family as the sphere of Christian living. In vv 22-4:1 it is the work place and in vv 4:2-6, Paul concentrates on the Christian and the outsider/unbeliever. For Paul there is no notion that the new life of Christ is to be lived out in the rarefied and enraptured atmosphere of the cloister. There is nothing 'other-worldly' here. Paul, as always, is utterly realistic. The believer must live out the life of Christ, the life of the age to come, in the cauldron of the here and now. Thus the apostle's emphasis in this part of his letter, on the necessity for Christ's virtue and peace to rule in our hearts and make us gracious in all personal, domestic and business relationships. This is the practicality of the Gospel! This is the measure of our sanctification or lack of it!

63) 8:11-17

We look first, then, at what the Apostle has to say about relationships between believers in the Church. Paul comes to his positive injunctions via v 11 which forms an introductory transition. At first glance it is not immediately clear why Paul makes this all embracing affirmation (v 11). He seems to be making a statement about the abolition of racial, religious, cultural and social barriers, but what has that got to do with the putting off of the old man and the putting on of the new? The significance of this grand statement is illumined by the account of the Fall recorded in the book of Genesis (ch 3). Paul seems to have in mind the picture of the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, where sin first entered the human sphere and brought all these vices (vv 5, 8) in its train. This was where mankind was separated and alienated from God and, most significantly for v 11, from itself. Sin ruined Adam and Eve, spoiling the human race, bringing death, decay, isolation and separation in its train, raising racial, religious, cultural and social barriers. After eating the fruit, Adam and Eve covered themselves. They hid from God and from one another. They blamed each other, passing the buck. Sin separated from God and it separated them from each other! The fruit of this isolation and separation is epitomised in the division of the human race at the tower of Babel (Genesis 11), when man's arrogance and sin brings national and linguistic division. Christ, Paul implies, has come as the new Adam, to break down the barriers of separation, to reconcile mankind to God and to reconcile men to each other. Christ is the second Man, the Proper Man, who has appeared to renew the Creator's image in mankind (v 10), to reverse the Fall, to deal with sin and to reconcile and heal the whole of creation. Now, says Paul, in that recreation which Christ accomplished for us, in that new humanity, not only is the old Adam crucified and put to death, not only is the old humanity raised to newness of life, where there is no sin and no death, within this new humanity the barriers that divide people from one another, the isolation, the separation and antagonism of the Fall are abolished (v 11).

64) 3:11-17

'Now', Paul says, (building on the previous Note) 'because Christ has been reconciled, because the reality, in Christ, in the new humanity, is mankind reconciled within itself, that is how it must be within your fellowship. Nothing must be allowed to separate believer from believer' (vv 12 -17). It is important to realise that everything Paul urges upon the Colossian believers, and upon every believer, depends upon the very nature of the Church, the Body of Christ, as the new creation, God's renewed society, the new humanity, which he has just described in v 11: Notice the exalted titles given to the believers/the Church; 'Elect of God', 'holy', 'beloved' (v 12). This is what God has graciously made us in Christ. He has chosen us. He has sanctified us: He has poured out His love upon us. These were the titles used of the Children of Israel, as God's chosen possessions. These are descriptions given of Jesus Himself. Jesus is The Elect One and in Him all men are elect (Ephesians 1:4-14). Jesus is The Holy One (Matthew 1:24) and in Him all are made holy. Jesus is The beloved (Matthew 3:17) and in Him all are dearly loved. Each one of the virtues, with which Paul urges the believers to clothe themselves (v 12), epitomises the very nature and character of God, the very nature and character of Jesus Christ: God in Christ is all compassion. In His gracious attitude and action towards sinners He is the abundance of kindness. He is lowly and gentle; gentle and humble in heart, and O how patient and long-suffering He is towards us the sinful children of men. Paul's exhortation then is that we must put on Christ: He writes exactly that to the Church at Rome (13:12-14). 'So', says Paul, and it is an imperative, an insistent command, 'This is what God, in Christ, has made you, be like that'. Our response to the merciful kindness and compassion of God must be to show kindness and compassion to others.

65) 3:12-17

These five graces (v 12), which Paul urges are to characterise our lives, are not natural. They are not produced, worked up by our own innate ability. They are, rather, the fruit of being in Christ, the fruit of the Spirit, and they show us how we should/how we must behave towards one another, in the fellowship of the Church (although it is clearly not limited to the fellowship of believers). Lives of compassion, kindness, lowliness, gentleness and long-suffering are the outworking of the family characteristics of the new creation, the new humanity, which Christ has brought to be. This is where the old man has been put off and the new man has been put on. Now, you might imagine that this new humanity/society which Christ has recreated by his death and resurrection would be idyllic/a heavenly existence without difficulties and squabbles within the fellowship. Paul, however, is not so naive. In what he urges (v 13-14), we see, once again, something of his realism and we see the paradoxical nature of Christian experience in this life. The life of the age to come has to be lived out in this fallen and sinful age. As noted previously, the tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet' is never fully resolved in this life (Romans 8:23). So, even within the body of Christ, perhaps I should say, particularly within the body of Christ, there will be real or imagined slights and grievances. Paul does not pretend otherwise. How very practical and realistic Paul is! It is exactly because there will be those within the fellowship who will, either wittingly or unwittingly, cause us hurt or injury, or who we will grieve (remembering that we as often as any other can be the source of strife!); it is exactly because of this that we see the need for mutual and reciprocal long-suffering patience, which endures wrong and puts up with the exasperating conduct of others rather than flying into a rage or sullenly desiring vengeance.

66) 3:12-17

You will notice that the exhortations to mutual forbearance in Christian love and to mutual forgiveness are once again rooted and grounded in what God has done for us in Christ (v 13). God has forgiven you, Paul says, so you must bear with and forgive one another. We are debtors to God, bankrupt debtors, who have been freely forgiven in the Cross; how can we therefore hold grudges against one another? We must rather conform to the death and resurrection of Christ and put off anger, rage, malice, slander (v 8) and put on forbearance and forgiveness: Jesus' parable of the two debtors (Matthew 18:21-35) comes to mind in this regard. The servant is forgiven his immense debt by the King but then he goes and pursues the paltry debt he is owed by his fellow-servant.

Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant', he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers until he should pay back the last penny. 'This (said Jesus) is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart'.

The second thing to notice is that forbearance and forgiveness go together. It is all very well bearing with one another but, even as one grits one's teeth in the face of some grievance, refusing to become angry, it is so easy to allow a sullen resentment against that person to build up and fester beneath the surface, which is perhaps worse than an outright raging. It is to ensure that such a sullen concealed anger does not get a foothold in the heart that forgiveness must accompany forbearance: Do you see that all of this is the outworking of the love of Christ (v 14) within the individual and within the fellowship? It is love which binds all these graces and virtues together, producing the fullness of holy and godly living. It is love, Christian *agapae* love which binds all believers together and leads them on to perfection in the corporate life of the fellowship, as God's new redeemed humanity.

67) 3:12-17

Paul develops his theme, with another imperative, in v 15, urging the peace and the unity of the body and its mutual upbuilding. Paul, here, is not so much urging inner peace of soul/an inner sense of peace, although that is clearly a part of what he is referring to, he is urging, rather harmony within the body of Christ. We are exhorted/ commanded to allow the peace of Christ to hold sway in our lives as we relate to one another. The Church is the realm of the new man where peace is to preside. As members of one body, as members of the new humanity, love and peace are to characterise our dealings with one another. Once again, Paul is saying, be what you are. It is Christ's peace. He has won it for us. As the Lord of Peace, He embodied it and He gives it to us, indeed He is that peace. So, says Paul, as those who have been reconciled to God, as those who have peace with Him through Christ, we should manifest that peace among ourselves. Christ has reconciled us to the Father, making peace through His blood shed on the Cross (1:20). If we have truly been reconciled to the Father, then we will be men and women who are reconciled to each other within the body of Christ. There can and must be no barriers to separate. It is inconceivable that those who share the immeasurable benefits of Christ's great peace-making work of the Cross should live with any kind of hatred or contempt for each other in their hearts. When Christ rules in the heart, his peace will rule in the fellowship. There will be a unity and an ease about the body. When there is discontent and dissension within a fellowship, when there is a marked lack of the peace of Christ, it says something about the rule of Christ in the hearts of the members and is a sad measure of spiritual disease: Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts!

68) 3:12-17

In v16 Paul makes a parallel exhortation which gives important insight into the spiritual health of a fellowship: 'Let the Word of Christ dwell among you richly/ abundantly, teaching, admonishing and singing.' The Word of Christ, the message of the Gospel, must be central if there is to be spiritual health. When that is the case, there will be a rich indwelling as the fellowship meets together to sit under the word as it is preached and expounded. Men and women will bow to the authority of the Word of Christ and there will be a mutual and reciprocal teaching and admonition as the Word does its deep and enriching work in our lives. Where the Word of Christ has this kind of centrality and importance there will be living fellowship and living worship. Paul's conception of the Church is of a body where every part plays its mutual and necessary part so that the body might be built up and go on to perfection/maturity. Let me quickly add that this Christ-centred and Word-centred ministry of the whole people of God does not invalidate the parallel emphasis which Paul makes of specific teaching gifts being distributed to individual members of the body to prepare God's people for works of service (cf Colossians 1:28; Ephesians 4:7, 11-16).

69) 3:12-17

It is interesting to notice that the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (v 16, the actual distinction is uncertain, lost in the mists of history - but not psalms, psalms and nothing but psalms!) is, alongside teaching and admonishing, one of the ways in which the word of Christ is to dwell among us richly. And this should perhaps say something to us about the content, the subject matter of hymns (whether they are modern or traditional). What the apostle is concerned to see is that these songs are consistent with the word of Christ, that they are 'scriptural', that they focus on the fundamentals of the faith and are a thankful and heartfelt expression of gratitude to God for His redeeming love. While there are other legitimate forms of hymn, it is not coincidental that the majority of solid biblical, theological hymns flowed from times of evangelical revival within the Church of God, as there was a renewal of the Word of Christ, centering upon the greatness and the mercy and the salvation of God Almighty. Genuine Christian praise which allows the word of Christ to dwell in us richly will not be primarily man-centred but God/Christ-centred. They will not be the vehicle for the expression of our spiritual aspirations and experiences, so much as a celebration of God's mighty redemptive acts in Christ.

70) 3:18-4:1

Having dealt with our attitudes and actions within the fellowship of believers, the apostle moves on to address domestic and business relationships. This is no abstract and airy fairy Christianity. Paul is concerned that the Lordship of Christ is displayed in the concrete of family and workplace relations. Ultimately there is no area of life which stands outside of God's influence and control. There is no final distinction between the sacred and secular. It is in the home (vv 10-21), in the relationships between husband and wife and between parents and children that the life of Christ and the virtue of Christ is to be manifest. It is at work (vv 22-4:1), in the relationships between slave and master (we will say employer and employee) that the reality of our sanctity is put to the test: This is where the Christian life matters. It is in the crucible of the home and the workplace that our faith is tested by fire to see what it is made of. The person who is fully involved in the work of the Lord, immersed in the life of the Church but who is a bear with a sore head at home and who is unreliable and half-hearted at work, is a double-minded man. His home and his work place tell the true story! How does your life at home or at work measure up?

71) 3:18-4:1

Notice that throughout this whole section there is a repeated and very significant reference to 'the Lord', often accompanied by an imperative

- v 18 submit..as is fitting in the Lord
- v 20 obey..for this is pleasing in the Lord
- v 22 obey..with sincerity...and reverence for the Lord
- v 23 work..as working for the Lord
- v 24 you will receive an inheritance from the Lord
- v 24 for it is the Lord Christ you are serving
- 4:1 provide...you have a master/Lord in heaven

This is the rationale of all that Paul commands. As Christians we are new men and new women, in Christ, in the Lord. We have been made over anew, we are indwelt by the Spirit of Christ, and so Paul urges us to be that new man and new woman in the concrete reality of home and work. Let the Christ who is within you shine out. Let Him live out His life in and through you. It is important to realise that as Christians we are citizens of two worlds. Paul was writing to believers who were 'in Christ' but who were also in Colossae. We are 'in Christ' and we are in Edinburgh and yet it is Paul's burning conviction that it is our heavenly citizenship which is paramount. His ethical imperatives are often set within the context of future rewards and punishments (eg vv 24-25). And so we must ever hold the realities of the eternal world before our eyes. This is what it means to set our minds and hearts on things above. But it is this heavenly citizenship that should and must motivate and direct our living here on earth. It is only when we have our hearts and our minds set on Christ and the things of God that we will be equipped and empowered to live for our Lord in the groanings of this age. Only thus will the whole of our life, the whole of our thought and conduct be submitted to His Lordship.

72) 3:18-21

In vv 18-19 Paul bears witness to the divine order laid down for the relationship of mutual care and support between husband and wife. In a day and age when women's issues and women's rights are front page news, both inside and outside the Church, Paul's injunction for the wife to subject herself to her husband is not well received. On the topics of women and marriage Paul is often approached warily, if not dismissed out of hand as bourgeois and middle class. In direct opposition to the apostolic imperative, disparaging and rejecting it as a pandering to the social norms of that day, women are urged rather to assert and to express themselves, to throw off the shackles of male domination. We should not be surprised at this. This is how the flesh has always reacted to the divine Lordship. The flesh, the old man, is always self assertive. Sinful human nature has never liked the biblical 'subordination-ethic'. This is why the flesh must be put to death and why the new man must be put on. This is why we must clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, lowliness, gentleness and long-suffering patience. A wife submitting herself to her husband is showing forth the grace of her new self (in all lowliness, gentleness and long-suffering patience). In urging submissiveness on the wife's part, this is no craven surrender by Paul to the popular but misguided attitudes of the day. It is exactly the opposite. The new life of Christ challenges the accepted moral and social attitudes. The new man turns the values of the world on their head. This injunction is revolutionary, it flies in the face of our fleshly self assertion and that is why it is so despised and rejected in our modern world. By urging subjection to the husband, Paul is calling for sacrificial submission to Christ as Lord. It must be admitted that the wife will not always find this sacrificial giving of herself to her husband congenial but the putting to death of the self is never congenial. This is what it means to be crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:20). This is what it means for the wife to call Jesus Christ, Lord.

73) 3:18-21

There are two further points to make in regard to a wife's submission to her husband, to clarify what Paul is and is not affirming:

(1) The first thing to say is that subjection is not a synonym for servile and menial bondage. We will come to Paul's balancing injunction to the husband, but it is clear that Paul would recognise the way the flesh can assert itself in the husband, as much as in the wife. Men, in their sinful rejection of God's sovereign Lordship have abused their God-given headship to oppress and to subjugate women. Paul is not defending that. There is no place in the biblical teaching for harsh domination and subjugation of the woman by the man.

(2) The second thing to say is that Paul is not suggesting that the woman is naturally or spiritually inferior to the man. Men and women are equal before God in dignity. Paul does assert, however, and very importantly, no matter the popular, modern assertion of sexual equality; Paul does assert that husband and wife are different in function and according to the Bible, a woman's true function is fulfilled in submission to man. The biblical teaching is that God has so providentially ordered human affairs that a measure of authority must needs be recognised and exercised if human society is to hold together. There is a divinely instituted hierarchy in the order of creation and in this order the wife follows that of her husband (1 Corinthians 11:3, 7-9; Ephesians 5:23-24). The Christian wife, Paul says, should recognise and accept her subordinate place in this hierarchy, as is fitting/proper/duty within the new fellowship of those who own Christ as Lord. It is only thus that she will find fulfilment and joy in the sovereign purposes of God.

74) 3:18-21

Paul has an equally revolutionary word for the husband (v 19 and Ephesians 5:25-33). There are, you see, mutual responsibilities. Indeed, the wife's submission is hardly possible without his love and vice versa. It is when we think of the love of Christ that we realise just what Paul is commanding of the husband. In giving himself for the Church, Christ displayed gracious initiative. He loved the unlovely and He loved on despite the indifference and lack of response. He displayed tender, steadfast love, sacrificial, self-giving *agapae* love that took him to death (Romans 5:8). The husband is to love his wife like that. It is his duty in the Lord. This love which Paul is urging is clearly not simply a matter of affectionate feeling or sexual attraction. It is a commitment of the husband's will, involving his tender, unceasing care and loving service for his wife's entire well-being. Once again, it is only in heeding this apostolic injunction that the Christian husband fulfils his divine destiny, Only thus is he clothed with the love and the grace of Christ; clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. No place here for harsh and overbearing husbands. Rather, every area of married life is characterised by self-giving love, by forbearance and by forgiveness. This is the beauty and harmony which adorns the home where Christ is Lord. As Mr Philip writes in his Notes, commenting on these verses:

"A woman is at her most womanly, and therefore most attractive, when she most approximates to this biblical standard, just as a man is most manly when showing forth the gentleness and the grace of Christ":

75) 3:18-21

I wonder if, once again, we are perhaps intended to see Adam and Eve behind the scenes here? What Paul is describing is surely a restoration of the pre-Fall harmony between husband and wife. It seems to me that throughout this section, as Paul addresses the home and the workplace, his injunctions relate to Christ's reversal of the Fall. Where sin destroyed the love and the harmony of the home and the dignity and grace of work, this has been renewed and restored in Christ. So Paul can urge us to live as part of that renewed creation. For the husband and wife in Christ, the Creator's original order has been restored. The original order has been twisted and marred by the devil, by the rule of sin, and by the flesh, with all of its self-centredness, and had ended in the tyranny of eros and the slavery of sex. When we look at what Paul writes in v 5 about sexual immorality, impurity, evil desires and covetousness, we are surely brought face to face with the sad breakdown in morals and in marriage that we see as we look around our world today. It is God's original order, once so twisted, which can now, because of Christ, and only because of Christ, be lived in the harmony of love and submission.

76) 3:18-21

The same is true in relation between parents and children (vv 20-21). In the divine order there is a place for unqualified obedience on the child's part (obey in everything) and there is a place for firm compassion and gentle guidance on the part of the parent (Ephesians 6:4). Once again these attitudes are not a matter of feelings. The child's obedience is the outworking of his submission to Christ, 'for this is pleasing in the Lord'. Parents are enjoined not to irritate or provoke their children to prevent them losing heart and becoming timid. How different is the picture today. When the divine order is ignored and sin and self are given free reign, not only is there a breakdown in the relationship between husband and wife, there is a corresponding breakdown in the family, between parent and child. The child revolts against authority: It is the work of sin and the flesh to assert self, to refuse discipline and throw off restraint and authority. This is why parental discipline is of such importance. It restrains the self-seeking of the flesh. In our modern world, sadly but often, in the name of kindness and progress, or just for a quiet life, many parents abrogate their divine responsibility and allow their children to express themselves and do their own thing. We should not be surprised then, when the child does exactly that, expresses self. The old man in all of its fallen selfishness is given its head and the fruit is all too apparent. In many ways, however, the child's refusal of authority is simply a reflection of man's refusal of God's authority. Adults have thrown off and ignored the divine order, giving the children an invidious example to follow. What is true in that general sense is manifest in all of its awful sinfulness in the abuse of children themselves, whether physically, mentally or sexually. This is what happens when the divine order is ignored and the yoke of God's authority and discipline is thrown off. Against the darkness of this backdrop the apostolic injunctions shine in all of their divine beauty, highlighting the order and the harmony of God's way. This is how it can be, how it must be, in the family of the new, redeeming humanity.

77) 3:22-4:1

From v 22 Paul addresses slaves and masters and in so doing he sheds great light on the Christian's attitude to work. The apostolic injunction to employee and employer places work in its proper, God ordained, place and, once again, we must recognise the transformation and the restoration that Christ, in the new redeemed humanity, has brought to working. God's intention, in the beginning, was that work be a grace and a blessing for mankind. Work was meant to bestow dignity and purpose and worth. It was meant to be the arena in which mankind grew and matured in the service of the living God. This was how it was before the Fall. Work was not part of the curse of the Fall. In the beginning, before sin entered, Adam and Eve were given the responsibility of working and tending the Garden (Genesis 2:15). This was to be their dignified place in the service of the Creator but sin entered and all was spoiled. The curse of the Fall twisted work into sweat and toil, full of frustration and drudgery. But Christ, as the second Adam, has reversed the Fall and so Paul can urge the Christian to see work as God originally intended it: Once again Paul is affirming the harmony and order of the new, redeemed Creation. Christ, by his atoning life, death, and resurrection has, for the Christian, transformed the drudgery and toil and frustration of daily work into God's arena of service and sanctification.

78) 3:22-4:1

Paul's remarkable and astounding insight is that in our daily work, as Christians, we are not serving man at all, we are serving God! (vv 23-24). Paul's words are certainly disconcerting and challenging but 0 the release, the encouragement and the joy that they should bring to our hearts as we work for the Master. In the old sinful order of things we serve men, often with superficial and dishonest ulterior motives. We do as little as we can to get by (raising questions of honesty and integrity). We are half-hearted and self-seeking, looking for the easy way out and for the quick buck. But now, says Paul, we are that man no longer, we have put off the old man and put on the new and in this new order we serve the Lord Christ with whole-hearted endeavour. He is the one we are working for and he is the one who will reward us (v 24). It is God who will judge the quality and worth of our work not our earthly employer. And at the judgment bar of God there is no favouritism; there is no partiality or bias with God, He is not taken in by appearances, although our earthly master may very well be (v 25). This surely lifts our daily work on to a new plain. Work was ordained by God before the Fall to bestow dignity and worth, to be the arena for the building of character and for the growth and development of Adam and Eve. In Christ this is how we must view our work today. We must recognise it as the crucible where God disciplines and sanctifies us, where He remakes and refashions us after His sovereign will.

79) 3:22-4:1

The startling thing, however, and the focus of Marxist scorn, is that in urging slaves and masters to live holy and godly lives, Paul seems to condone the practice of slavery. Similarly in his letter to Philemon, which was sent along with this letter to Colossae, the apostle sends the runaway slave, Onesimus, back to his master. Paul never says 'slavery is an abomination'. There is no hint of condemnation for the slave masters and there is no cry for the slaves to rise up in rebellion. In a day and age when the cause of liberation for the oppressed rightly appeals to our consciences, many Christians, as Dick Lucas puts it

...have expressed feelings ranging from uncertainty through embarrassment to downright disappointment that the apostle appears so content with the status quo, and so apparently unwilling to call for some measure of social change.

It is a bold man, however, who will suggest that the apostle Paul was blind to and unaware of the moral implications for slavery of the Gospel he preached. In this whole section of his letter to the Colossians, Paul is precisely concerned with the social and moral implications of the Gospel for the individual believer. The fact of the matter is that it was as the Gospel was preached and as its message and power laid hold of men's lives that the evil of slavery was finally broken and it became morally impossible. It seems to me, therefore, that Paul's reticence to militate for social action, in the midst of his imperatives for Christian living, reveals a very significant corrective to attitudes which are prevalent within the Church today. The priority of the Gospel and the indirect influence of the Church on society is revealed, acting as salt and light and leaven. More tomorrow...

80) 3:22-4:1

The Church as a whole, and our Church and Nation Committee in particular, would do well to reassess many of its priorities in the light of the principle which Paul underlines in these verses. Paul reflects, it seems to me, a principle which should guide the Church's participation in the affairs of state, the affairs of this world. The apostle espouse, what has been called 'the principle of indirect influence'. Mr Philip makes a comment of real insight in this regard when he writes,

The principle of indirect influence is what Paul seems to be implying here, and what he means is: 'the greatest contribution the Church can make to the burning "this worldly" issues of any day or generation is simply to be the Church'. If the Church were what it ought to be, filled with the Spirit of God, and maintaining its vital witness in the world, its indirect influence would be far greater and far more decisive than it is.

It is a matter of priorities you see. Our Church can militate for social change to its heart's content, appealing to this government and that politician but when it fails to display a similar urgent concern for first order spiritual issues, when it fails to be the Church, when it is destitute of power and authority because of its neglect of such spiritual issues, what right has it, what right have we, to be heard in the Counsels of the nation?

81) 3:22-4:1

The apostle Paul's great concern then was for the spiritual reality of the Gospel. His paramount concern was that the power of God unto salvation be so effective, so radically effective in the life of the believer that it is worked out ethically and socially, having a positive but indirect influence on the powers that be, cleansing and transforming society from the inside, as the Gospel spreads and the wind of the Spirit fans the flames. The glory of the Gospel is that it transforms and liberates the believer in the midst of social structures which are oppressive and even degrading. Paul's conviction is that in the family, where things may not always be ideal, in the workplace, with its corruption and double-dealing, as a slave, whether or not our circumstances are propitious, whether or not they change for the better, it is gloriously possible and urgently needful for the believer to live victoriously unto the Lord Christ.

82) 4:2-6

This spiritual and gospel priority which is apparent in Paul (noted over the last few readings) is made clear in the final set of injunctions he urges on the Colossian Christians (vv 26). The apostle turns, in these brief verses, to address the believer's responsibility for those outside the kingdom and in marked contrast to those who seek to precipitate social revolution as the means of salvation and as the means of influence on the non-Christian world, Paul urges steadfast intercession and personal witness. His overwhelming concern is that the truth of the gospel might be made known to the lost. The Christian's responsibility for the unbeliever, Paul asserts, is to intercede steadfastly for the preaching of the gospel, to live wisely and to speak graciously for the Saviour as opportunity presents itself. Dick Lucas conveys the balance and thrust of this section, very helpfully, when he makes the following division. In a most memorable way, he entitles the two sections,

1. vv 2-4 Speaking to God about people (Prayer)
2. vv 5-6 Speaking to people about God (Mission)

83) 4:2-6

Notice first of all the attitude that Paul urges for the believer's prayers (v 2); 'continue steadfastly/devote yourselves... (this is a command, an imperative) ...being watchful and thankful'. Paul regularly, in nearly every one of his letters, exhorts the believer to pray: 'be faithful in prayer' (Romans 12:12); ...pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests...be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints (Ephesians 6:18); pray continually (1 Thessalonians 5:17); I urge then... that requests, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for everyone (1 Timothy 2:1). For Paul, intercessory, petitionary prayer was the outworking of the life of Christ in the believer. Yet, the fact that he has to urge persistence in the practice of prayer implies, along with all else in the spiritual life, that it must be approached with resolve and determination. The Christian does not pray because he feels like it. If we waited until we felt like praying we would rarely pray, perhaps only in a crisis. Prayer is our privilege and it is our duty and we must persevere. We must, like the friend at midnight (Luke 11) who kept on knocking, set our minds and our wills and refuse to give up. We must, like the persistent widow (Luke 18) who demanded justice of the judge, be resolved never to grow weary. The idea of watching in prayer is that the sleep and the ease of darkness have been renounced and the mind engaged attentively and actively. How practical Paul is when it is so easy to grow sleepy in prayer. There is no place here for humdrum, lethargic praying. For Paul, prayer is not some quiet reverie. The REB translates the Pauline injunction here as, 'Persevere in prayer with minds alert and with thankful hearts'. The apostle's exhortation is always a timely reminder! This is to be the attitude of our intercession, 'Beware of growing sleepy!'.

84) 4:2-6

Notice further, the content and the objective which Paul urges for intercession (vv 3-4). He appeals to the Colossians, to believers in every age, to pray for the preaching ministry of the apostles. He urges intercession specifically directed to the going forth of the Word of Life. This he says is the crying need of the hour, not social revolution. Pray that God in His mercy will open a door for the preaching of the mystery of Christ. Pray that the servant of God may proclaim it clearly and faithfully. It is interesting and highly significant that Paul does not ask them to pray for his release. Here he is in Rome under house arrest and yet the prayer he requests is not for personal benefit but for the preaching of the Gospel, that opportunity may arise to proclaim the gospel so that the outsider might hear its glorious message. The fact of the matter is that the prison doors might well have opened if he had stopped preaching but it is exactly because he is an ambassador for Christ, looking for doors to open for the gospel, that he is chained. In view of what I have said previously, the significant thing is that even when the social structures are oppressive (what could be more oppressive than Roman arrest?), the gospel is never chained. It is gloriously possible, no matter the circumstances, for the Word of God to run freely and be honoured (2 Thessalonians 3:1). In fact, Luke the evangelist in his history of the early Church (Acts 28:0-1) makes it clear that an open door was set before Paul in Rome (Acts 28:30, 31; cf Philippians 1:12-18). Notice also the intimate connection the apostle assumes between effective preaching and the prayers of the saints. Effective preaching, effective evangelism depends on persevering prayer. For you see it is only God, by His Spirit and through His Word, who can open doors which are barred and bolted in the hearts and lives of men and women. It is surely only as we imbibe the apostolic awareness of the effectiveness and importance of prevailing prayer that we will get down to it seriously. It is only as the Church rediscovers the Pauline conviction (v 4) that preaching, energised by prayer, is part of the process of divine revelation that she will ever get her priorities right and so be enabled to be faithful to her God-given mission and responsibility.

85) 4:2-6

Paul immediately balances prayer and preaching with Christian living and personal witness. He asserts that the believer's responsibility is not only to speak to God about people but also to speak to people about God. The spiritual wisdom in these two brief verses has great practical value and when rightly understood will go a long way to remedy much harm that has been done in the past, and much guilt that has been heaped upon Christians, in the name of evangelical witness. Paul's imperative cuts across much that has been taught on the subject of personal evangelism and is marked, in all of its urgency, by a gentle sanity and realism (vv 5-6). What Paul is advocating for the believer is what he has already, by implication, advocated for the Church as a whole, namely indirect influence. The believer is to look for many opportunities of what has been called 'responsive evangelisms'. Much harm can be done by sincere believing people who feel compelled to preach and testify to those with whom they mix in the local community and at work. They plunge in bravely but more often than not they succeed only in alienating their neighbours and workmates and isolating themselves: Dick Lucas has rightly said that,

...direct assault on entrenched apathy ...is seldom successful and can never be carried out by normally sensitive people without great cost to nerve and confidence.

86) 4:2-6

Paul's direction and advice to the Christians in Colossae is not along the lines of possessing better techniques with which to approach people. He turns such a notion on its head and places our Christian responsibility in a much more promising light. Our privilege, our duty as Christians, is to answer everyone (v 6). This is, if you like, 'responsive evangelism'. We are to respond with the right words, full of grace, to the questions we are asked regarding our beliefs and behaviour. Rather than initiating conversations on leading topics, rather than making and forcing openings, we are to be primed and ready to accept them when they come along. The apostle Peter writes in exactly the same vein (1 Peter 8:15-16). What a strain this should remove from all who are conscientious for the Lord. There is no pressure to be always on the lookout for prospective converts. On the contrary, Paul urges us to live wisely and well, to live and talk normally and winsomely, so that our life, our families, our wholehearted service to our employer and our treatment of our employees, all tell for Christ and have a cleansing and preservative influence on the outsider and on society as a whole. This is what it means to be the salt of the earth. You would surely expect those who are the salt of the earth to have some savour about their life and conversation and to exercise a seasoned, wholesome influence wherever they are (v 6). Only thus, by being ready and prepared to respond, by making the most of every opportunity that presents itself to us, by our habitual conversation always being full of wisdom and grace (both content and manner of our conversation are important - how we speak is equally, if not more important than what we say, particularly when our answers provoke an argument); only thus do we commend the gospel to the outsider.

87) 4:7-18

The apostle, as he does in each of his letters, rounds off this epistle with an epilogue in which he conveys warm greetings from himself and his co-workers and gives some final instructions. Having completed the substance of what he wanted to say, Paul now sends messages and greetings from those associated with his 'prison' ministry in Rome to the congregation of the house church in Colossae. And although it might, at first, appear that this final section of the letter is simply a list of touching personal good wishes, there is much that we can learn from what is written about pastoral care within the Body of Christ and about the kind of man the apostle Paul was. Throughout this epilogue there are all sorts of indications of a warm and deeply concerned pastor's heart. It can be all too easily forgotten, as we study the detail of what Paul has written, as we are caught up in the glory of his theology and as we are challenged by the practical implications of that theology; it can be all too easily forgotten that everything the apostle writes is motivated and directed by an intense pastoral concern for the welfare of the Colossian believers, despite the fact that he has never met them personally (2:1).

88) 4:7-10

It was, you will remember, in response to Epaphras' news (1:7-8) of dangerous teaching troubling the newly established churches in the Lycus Valley, that Paul, full of concern, drafted this letter. The letter is now sent by the hands of Tychicus and Onesimus, Paul's fellow-workers, to the church in Colossae (vv 7-9). Tychicus, it seems, was Paul's special envoy, at this time, to the churches of Asia Minor which had been established during Paul's earlier ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:10). Paul himself was under arrest in Rome and unable to travel, so, full of loving concern for the work of the gospel and for the welfare of the believers, he sent Tychicus to Asia, to minister in his place and Tychicus (Acts 20:4; 2 Timothy 4:12; Titus 3:12) carried letters from Paul to the various churches. Tychicus was certainly the bearer of Paul's Ephesian letter (6:21-22), this letter to the Colossians (4:7-8) and more than likely, Paul's lost letter to the Laodiceans (4:16).

89) 4:7-18

It is particularly wonderful and significant (v 9) that Paul should describe Onesimus, the one who was a runaway slave, a thief and a fugitive (Philemon), as 'our faithful and beloved brother', just as he had described Tychicus. How completely, as far as Paul is concerned, Onesimus' past is forgiven and forgotten. Onesimus, despite the past, is now a child of God, a member of the family of God, and he is representing Paul to the Colossians. In all likelihood, this would have been Onesimus showing his face for the first time after his flight. I wonder if there might have been those in the fellowship who would have been suspicious and uncertain of Onesimus' profession of faith? (cf Paul's own reception by the church after his conversion, Acts 9:21). There are today, sadly, even within the Church of Jesus Christ, those who will never let a man's past be lived down: They tend to hold it against him and keep him at a distance. For Paul, for God, and surely this must be the case for us, when a true work of grace is wrought in a man's heart, there is complete reinstatement (Luke 15:20). This is the humanity and the love of the new creation and when grace has its perfect way in our lives and hearts we will surely become more truly human, more godly, more able and willing to forgive and to forget. As Mr Philip says so pointedly,

The fact is that God is far more forgiving than we humans are. When He forgives, He also forgets. The Church sometimes cannot forget, and does not allow itself to forget the sin a man commits, thus denying him the possibility of ever becoming 'a faithful and beloved brother' and truly 'belonging' again to the fellowship. How very cruel and merciless!

90) 4:7-18

Paul uses similar warm and affectionate descriptions for the others who send their greetings (vv 10-12). This repetition of 'fellow servant/prisoner/workers' emphasises the bond of mutual support and mutual ministry that Paul was so conscious of as he laboured for the Master. They worked shoulder to shoulder for the Kingdom of God. How can anyone decry Paul's ministry as that of an autocratic one-man band? What a fallacy and reversal of the truth! Paul is not only conscious of the fact that each of his fellow-workers are faithful ministers and fellow servants, he is equally conscious of his own weakness. He is conscious of his need of receiving love and support from his fellow-workers (v 11). Again we see the humanity of the apostle and his real honesty in admitting his need. There is no stiff upper lip here! Every Christian, and Paul was no exception, needs comfort and encouragement. In fact it is generally the case that those who are called to serve the Lord at the front line, with all of the pressures, burdens and discouragement of the heat of the battle, will have even greater need of comfort and encouragement, than usual. This is how vulnerable the great apostle to the Gentiles was. Despite his position in Christ and the way he had been used mightily in the work of the Lord; despite his having learned the secret of contentment, in everything, even in prison (Philippins 4:11-13); despite his having proved the sufficiency of Christ in the midst of all the arduous and testing battles of his ministry (Romans 8:37); even in that position of strength in Christ, there is a genuine recognition of weakness and need, a recognition of the costly price to be paid for gospel service which is effectual and fruitful. His final appeal to the Colossians, written in his own handwriting (v 18) is a poignant reminder of the cost and the burden and of the apostle's need. Content and victorious he was but his imprisonment still brought grief and distress to his heart and he needed the prayers of the fellowship, he depended on these very prayers. Surely this is the reality for every servant of the Lord, victorious yet groaning, and if we would be faithful to our stewardship in the gospel we must remember their bonds, of whatever form they take.

91) 4:7-18

Epaphras (v 12), Paul's beloved fellow-servant (1:7-8) and fellow-prisoner (Philemon 2:3), exemplifies precisely this faithful stewardship of intercession for those who are up against it. How challenging is Paul's commendation of his brother in Christ (v 12-13). Epaphras, so far away in prison in Rome, wrestled in prayer for his children in the Lord. He laboured fervently (the Greek word that Paul uses to describe Epaphras praying is the word which gives us 'agonise' in English), he agonised in prayer for the Colossians, crying to God that they might stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured (cf Paul's agonising labour for the Colossians 1:29). This is how it must be for us, conscious of our own great weakness and inadequacy, depending desperately on the prayers of the saints and, at the same time, devoting ourselves to steadfast prayer, watching and praying and bearing up our co-workers to the throne of grace in prayer, so that when the day of evil comes, both we and they may be able to stand our ground and having done everything to remain standing, firm, mature and fully assured.

92) 4:7-18

We must finally say something about the reference Paul makes to his letter to the Laodiceans (v 16). The instruction Paul gives is quite straightforward. He expects this letter to be read out publicly to the congregation (showing that it ranked equally with the Old Testament). The apostle then expects the Colossians to pass this letter (or a copy of it) on, so that it may be read to the congregation in Laodicea. He expects that letters will be exchanged and that his letter to the church in Laodicea will then be read to the church at Colossae. This is how Paul's letters were first collected together and began to circulate as part of the New Testament canon. The problem, however, is that there is no epistle to the Laodiceans included in the canon of Holy Scripture! Much ink has been spilt endeavouring to explain this. Some have identified the epistle to the Ephesians as Paul's letter to Laodicea and that may well be the case. Clearly Ephesians and Colossians are 'twin' epistles which complement one another, and both were carried by Tychicus. Much less likely is the identification of Paul's letter to Philemon as the letter to the Laodiceans. Philemon is a personal letter to a church member in Colossae whereas the implication is that the letter to the Laodiceans is a church letter similar to Colossians. It seems most likely that Paul's letter to the Laodiceans has not survived (there was a great earthquake in the Lycus valley in 60-61 AD). We know, for example, that Paul wrote at least one, probably two, other letters to the Church in Corinth, over and above the letters which have been preserved. Paul refers to previous 'lost' letters in 1 Corinthians 5:9 and 2 Corinthians 2:3. As far as the letter to Laodicea is concerned, we must simply acknowledge our ignorance. We just do not know for sure what happened to it, whether it was lost or whether it is our letter to the Ephesians. What we can affirm without a shadow of a doubt is that the formation of the biblical canon was superintended and directed by the Spirit of God. Every book and every letter which is preserved for the Church is preserved by His sovereign will. It may be, therefore, that God, in His providence, did not see fit to preserve the letter to the Laodiceans, just as He did not see fit to preserve Paul's first ever letter to Corinth. Graciously, God did see fit to preserve Paul's letter to the Colossians.