

COLOSSIANS



John Edmiston

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The Gospel Bears Fruit Everywhere

Colossians 1:5-6 LITV because of the hope being laid up for you in Heaven, which you heard before in the Word of the truth of the gospel, (6) coming to you, as also in all the world, and it is bearing fruit even also among you, from the day in which you heard and knew the grace of God in truth.

Colossae was a lax, declining city, with many Jews and traders. It tended to worship the angel Michael, who it is said, saved the city from a flood. Overshadowed by wealthy Laodecia it was nonetheless the home of such NT luminaries as Epaphras and Philemon. It seems to have been evangelized by Epaphras and Timothy. Over the next few weeks we will look at key verses from this epistle which gives some of the key teachings about Christian living, the deity of Christ and the cruciality of the cross. Today we will look at the "fruitful gospel".

Paul writes to the doctrinally lax and theologically laid-back Colossians and describes the gospel as "the Word of truth" and tells them that they "knew the grace of God in truth". Paul is saying that gospel is a lot more than a bunch of nice, warm, fuzzy words that make good song lyrics on Sunday morning. Paul is saying the gospel is the truth about the future - about the real hope laid up in Heaven for those who believe.

It is true that we will be raised from the dead, it is true that we will face judgement and it is true that on that Day we will have hope - not despair, if we have believed in Jesus. If it is true it cannot be replaced by an alternative philosophy - for instance one that says we ought to worship angels. When something is true, then it is fixed. It cannot be altered by doctrinal fads. If there is a judgment to come, and that fact is true, then no amount of pooh-poohing the idea of judgment will alter it. Jesus will return even if no-one believes it at the time. Truth is like that - fixed, powerful, unalterable. It's like wishing Math was different when you get the credit card bill. But it isn't - and you have to pay.

Now truth can be relied on and when the Colossians relied on it, it bore fruit. And it started to bear fruit instantly "from the day in which you heard and knew the grace of God in truth;". Many Christians testify to a major change occurring at the moment of conversion. From the first moment of belief the gospel went to work in them. God wastes no time in making His saints. The gospel bears fruit because it is alive. Only a living tree can bear fruit and the gospel is the gospel of Him who said "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life". True Christian faith is quick, alive, full of sap, and bursting with life. Deadness means that something has gone wrong, that some fundamental disconnection from God has occurred.

The gospel is alive and delicious - it bears fruit not cactus leaves! The gospel is winsome with life and joy, it is not a sharp, prickly holiness or a tart, acidic disapproving legalism. The real fruit of the gospel is in changed lives and transformed temperaments. It's moving from the anxious clamor of the self-life to joyous, loving, peaceful, kind, gracious, patient, gentle, meek and humble Christian living.

This fruitfulness comes from hearing and knowing. From hearing the gospel, believing the gospel, and apprehending the gospel in our inner self so that we know deeply that it is true - and its truthfulness can transform us. Hearing and knowing is the "from faith to faith" pathway of the Christian life. Christianity is internal, no ritual or external observance can cause us to "hear and

know". Spiritual life is not transmitted via rituals or given in buildings nor does it flow from statues or dwell in temples. Rather spiritual life flows from Spirit to spirit.

Spiritual life flows to receptive people who are able to hear the gospel with their spiritual eyes and ears and know the truth of the gospel in their hearts.

Christians need to stop, become quiet and listen for spiritual things and then take those spiritual truths deep into their hearts and treasure them and meditate on them. This process of hearing and knowing the truth will cause the gospel to bear fruit in us and may often result in instantaneous spiritual transformations.

Why do I say instantaneous? Firstly, because Paul says "from the day you heard" and secondly, because there is no time with God, eternal things can happen instantly and last forever. The lame man did not slowly get well - he jumped up. People can and do change overnight under the power of the truth of the gospel and as we keep on "hearing and knowing' we may find instantaneous changes happening as truth impacts our lives.

Filled With the Knowledge of His Will

Colossians 1:7-12 ASV even as ye learned of Epaphras our beloved fellow-servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, (8) who also declared unto us your love in the Spirit. (9) For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray and make request for you, that ye may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, (10) to walk worthily of the Lord unto all pleasing, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; (11) strengthened with all power, according to the might of his glory, unto all patience and longsuffering with joy; (12) giving thanks unto the Father, who made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light;

As we saw in the last devotional the Colossians were good at love but poor at truth. Paul was delighted about their "love in the Spirit" (v.8). Yet love without truth can be misguided so Paul prays for the Colossians "that ye may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding...". This would cause them to a) walk worthily b) bear fruit c) increase in knowledge d) become strong e) develop patience, and finally - f) be thankful to God. The knowledge of God's will combined with deep spiritual wisdom and understanding brings a solid soundness to the Christian life that it can have in no other way. Truth enables us to see life correctly, to live and act honorably and to bear fruit in quiet steady ways in our ministry. Truth and wisdom give us a long-term life perspective enabling us to be strong under trials and thankful in all circumstances. With a deep grasp of God and of spiritual wisdom we can be overcomers in all circumstances.

What was Paul praying for when He asked for them to be "filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding"? Was it that they would all know the books of the Bible? That they would all be bible-trivia experts? Or able to parse Hebrew? Or perhaps that they would be able to give the "eschatological implications of a literal interpretation of the book of Revelation" (an essay I once got set at bible college). I don't think so.

Paul was wanting them to know what God wanted (knowledge of His will) and how to go about doing it in wise and spiritual ways that showed that the Colossians deeply understood what it meant to be a Christian (spiritual wisdom and understanding). Bible trivia and esoteric theology have little or nothing to do with living the wise and spiritual Christian life on a day to day basis. By nature they avoid it and locate Christianity in such questions as "who was the shortest man in the bible" (Answer: The guard who slept on his watch) or in arcane questions about "bible codes" that have no daily application. Trivia and esoterica dodge around real life and thus miss out on being "chokma" or true wisdom.

The true results of spiritual wisdom and understanding are evident in a life that "walks worthily of the Lord, bearing fruit in every good work". Such a life radiates God, and displays understanding. Such a life bears fruit in the community and is a blessing to one's friends and neighbors. True spirituality is tangible. It is not quite enough to have a good, bible knowledge and a dozen "big visions" which never happen. You have to show your knowledge in your living, you have to make your visions bear fruit – then you are truly wise and truly spiritual. And we cannot rest on our laurels or our diplomas. The truly spiritual person is a life-long learner "increasing in the knowledge of God".

Verses 11 and 12 have a few surprises. Verse 11 begins with "strengthened with all power, according to the might of his glory, unto..." well what would you expect to come next? What purpose is this mighty power "all power according to the might of His glory" going to be put to?

Unto preaching the gospel? Unto mighty works? Unto conquering the world? The answer is "unto all patience and longsuffering with joy". The person who can be patient and long-suffering and rejoice in all circumstances is demonstrating the mighty power of God. God fills us with power so that we can be PATIENT.

By definition impatient people are spiritually weak and unwise. Most of our weak moments and foolish acts arise when we are impatient. Only the power of Christ in us can make us strong enough to be patient, wise and noble Christians.

Finally, the person filled with knowledge and with spiritual wisdom and understanding is no joyless cynic. They are characterized by living "with joy; giving thanks unto the Father". The wise person is a happy person seeing deep joy in a world ruled by God.

This is a contrast to the wise person in the OT Wisdom literature who is often saddened by the world's ills and puzzled by injustice. In Christ we transcend such despair, we know that there is love at the end. We know that the darkness will be dealt with and that God has "made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light".

The Saints in the Light

Colossians 1:12-14 ASV giving thanks unto the Father, who made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light; (13) who delivered us out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of his love; (14) in whom we have our redemption, the forgiveness of our sins:

Christians have been made to be: in the light, out of the darkness, into the Kingdom and in Christ's redemption. Let's look at each of these four in turn:

Partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light

The light is the place of visibility and purity and goodness, a place without shadows and darkness and pain. 1 John says: And this is the message which we have heard from him and announce unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. (1 John 1:5 ASV). The Good News message is about the nature of God, the message Jesus told the apostles and which John announces is this "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all". In God there is not a trace of the slightest form of darkness not even grumbling, there is no meanness, no hateful vindictiveness, no pettiness, no corruption, unreliability, no folly. There is just pure love, pure justice, pure grace. Now Paul says that our inheritance is "in light". It partakes of the purity and goodness of God and of Heaven. It is utterly unsullied, pure, undefiled, unfading and immortal, kept in heaven for us (1Peter 1:4).

Delivered us out of the power of darkness

The darkness - Satan and his cohorts, does not have power over Christians. We have been delivered from his power. We have been released from prison. Our spirits first, then our souls and finally our bodies will be delivered from the power of the Accuser and the power sin and death. We will be filled with life and immortality and cry "Death where is thy power...". While Satan may steal, kill and destroy and may wreck the health and marriages and finances of Christians, his power is limited and his power is not permanent. Because we are in Christ there will be a day when his power will not touch us at all. There will be a day when the sin in my members will be dealt with and the battle with sin will be over and glory will reign in my mortal body. In another sense we sometimes are in the power of darkness - held by an addiction or enslaved by a sin. In such cases we need to "reckon ourselves dead to sin" and claim the fact that we are delivered from the power of darkness - no occult force, no demon, no bondage, no sin, no fear has any right to have power over us. We have been delivered, we are in the light, and we need to claim that by faith.

Translated us into the kingdom of the Son of his love

Translated means to transfer. We have been transferred from a dictatorial enslaving kingdom of darkness to a kingdom of light and love and belovedness. The ruler of our new Kingdom is "His Son" - Jesus and He rules with love and mercy and grace and healing is in his wings. We are now in a safe place. Furthermore, we are in a Kingdom that has God's love poured out on it from its Sovereign is His beloved Son and God blesses the Kingdom of His beloved Son. We are in a place that radiates health and well-being and security and which casts out all fear. We are in a new Kingdom under a new way of living that is joyous and free and grand and wonderful. We are not half-there, we are not going there, we are already there. We "have been

transferred", or as Hebrews says "you have come to the Heavenly Zion" or as Paul says to the Ephesians "you have been raised with Christ and seated with Him the heavenly realms". We are already in this Kingdom - and what privileges go with it. Matthew 11:11 GNB "I assure you that John the Baptist is greater than anyone who has ever lived. But the one who is least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than John". [For more on this see my article on the Ascension of Jesus Christ <http://www.aibi.ph/articles/ascension.htm>]

In whom we have our redemption, the forgiveness of our sins.

The passage in Exodus about the slaughter of "all the first-born of Egypt" has particular meaning for me, because I am a first-born son. The first-born of Israel were protected by the blood of the Lamb, they were redeemed, they were purchased back from destruction (Exodus 13:1-15). By trusting in Jesus we are protected from the destruction of the judgment of God on all sin. This comes at a high price, the blood of Jesus Christ, the perfect Lamb of God. Again lets notice the past tense here - "we have our redemption". We have got it. We do not earn it in Purgatory, we don't attain it through a thousand good works, we have our redemption and our sins are forgiven when we believe and this washing away of sin, which has occurred, previously, is acknowledged in baptism. Baptism would be meaningless if our sins were not already dealt with. We have our redemption and we have our forgiveness because we are in Christ.

On a final note the combination of all four of the above means we are spiritually safe from Satan's attacks. He cannot attack us with accusation because our sins are forgiven, he cannot rule over us because we are in another Kingdom, his dark power over us is broken and we are delivered from it, and we now dwell in the light where he cannot come and our inheritance is there and cannot be touched by evil. Our redemption is a marvelous work of God, wrought in Christ Jesus, praise His name!

The Image of the Invisible God

Colossians 1:15 ASV who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

What is the relationship between an "image" of a god and that deity? Say an image of Baal and the god Baal himself. Well, first of all, the image was a local representation of the spirit. So you would have Baal-Somewhere and this would be the image of that village or town or region. A bit like "the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe", the Virgin Mary is in Heaven but her idolatrous representation locally is down there in Guadalupe. And the idol or image does the miracles for the local villagers providing the shrine is kept in order and the right sacrifices are made. A little bit of the power of the deity flows through the image. Sometimes the image also lives in a temple and if it's a really important image there are priests that guard access and protect the rites and keep the Temple precincts and sort of "own" the god (and in turn are owned by the god.) Well how does this apply to Christians? Jesus is the image of the invisible God, who has made His nature perfectly visible to humankind and through whom the power of God is manifest on earth. He comes to dwell in His temple - our bodies and His church and we are His priests - all of us. The true image of God is not a statue but Jesus Christ and His followers, the Christians who are being made into His image (Romans 8:29-31).

Here is what Hebrews says about Jesus: "Hebrews 1:3 ASV who being the effulgence of his glory, and the very image of his substance, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had made purification of sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high..." Jesus is the very image, the perfect representation of the substance of God. Jesus could say "Phillip, he who has seen me has seen the Father". But this isn't too obvious so Paul says: "2 Corinthians 4:4 ASV in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should not dawn upon them." Christ is the perfect image of god, but most are blind to this, they have Jesus and God as very, very different. Jesus is nice and meek and mild and a bit inept while God is big and speaks loudly, is easily made angry and throws thunderbolts and yet is deep, wise and mysterious. With this dichotomy Jesus and God are opposites. But they are not opposites - they are exactly like each other because Jesus IS God and as Hebrews says above is "upholding all things by the word of his power". He is the powerful image of the living, yet invisible God and the only image we should worship.

A few days ago I mentioned that the Colossians were noted for being led astray by angel worship. To counter this Paul says Jesus is "the firstborn of all creation". This does not mean that God had a wife and begot Jesus. In fact this makes it impossible - because Jesus is the first-born of all creation and was prior to men or women or angels. Thus there was no woman there, before the Son of God existed. The only thing before all created things such as angels or light or space or air - was God. So as the first-born of all creation Jesus was God. First-born also means the heir, the important Son (in fact in this case the only Son). In authority there is God the Father, then the first-born Son, then all the rest of creation including the angels the Colossians worshipped. The obvious conclusion was "why fool around with the lesser beings when the very apex, the first-born Son, is accessible to you through faith in Jesus Christ". As Halloween approaches, remember that calling up the dead is as is nothing compared to calling upon the One who has risen from the dead.

To summarize: Jesus is exactly like God, upholds the Universe by the word of His power, existed before all the creation, is superior to the angels, has authority as the first-born over all Creation and dwells in us as His temples and uses us as His priests. This means the total and

utter end of earthly idols, temples and the priesthoods that guard them. The image-honoring religious devotion of traditional religions is a powerless farce. Religion is over. Jesus is the true image, the Holy Spirit is the only true form of Spirit that should dwell in us, and we are the only true temple - not any building made with human hands. Buddha, Krishna and Baal have fallen, the only true image is Christ and He has all the power.

In Him Were All Things Created

Colossians 1:16-17 ASV for in him were all things created, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things have been created through him, and unto him; (17) and he is before all things, and in him all things consist.

"Jesus? Ah yes, the nice mild mannered chap with the beard and sandals who blessed small children, healed the sick, and was a good man and a prophet, yes a very interesting religious figure in history". This is the opinion of many and the image of Jesus in the children's bibles and the films and story books. But this is scarcely the Jesus of Colossians, the Cosmic Christ, in whom all creation was made. Jesus is the womb of Creation, for the Universe was formed in Him. Out of His love and personality and thoughts and creativity Creation came. All things, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers, were made in Him and were made through Him and were made for Him as their rightful owner. He is prior to all things, "before all things", and holds together the very fabric of life "in Him all things consist". Jesus Christ the Son of God is superior to all angels, all spirit beings, all kings, all thrones and dominions, and all that says it has some claim to authority. Forget about the beard and sandals and think of the scepter. Consider the One who sits at the right hand of the majesty on high. (Hebrews 1:1-3).

This Cosmic Christ portrayed in Colossians fascinated the Jesuit theologian Teilhard de Chardin. He saw Christ as intimately involved in all the processes of Creation and matter being "divinized" by Christ. Though Teilhard's theology was unusual it contained a core truth - Creation and Christ are closely related. Creation was made for Jesus Christ and finds its ultimate purpose in Him. Whether it is a river or a mountain or a volcano or a frog or a donkey or a man or a woman, we are all made for Him and our purpose in life is bound up with Him. We are even held together by Him, and we fly apart and person apart from Christ, the further from Christ we go, the more fractured and alienated we become. Russian writers such as Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn have made this fragmentation apart from Christ a theme of novels such as Crime and Punishment and the essay World Split Apart which can be found at <http://www.aibi.ph/history>. Harmony with Creation is only possible if we are in harmony with Christ and moving away from our sin that wounds the world and has brought it into bondage. (Romans 8:19-21)

Creation and Christ are so closely related that we cannot reject the Creation and love Jesus. The creation was made for Him, not for us and we when we reject it we reject that which He sustains and owns. Saints like Saint Francis of Assisi have grasped this deeply and seen that Christ expresses Himself in the birds and the trees and the goodness of the created order. The creation may be in bondage but one day it will be freed, and when it is freed we will realize what a glorious prisoner it was. Neither can we disregard Creation and yet find spiritual truth. For Creation gives us many clues to the Nature of God and the heavens declare Him (Psalm 19). Many people are surprised that so many scientists are Christians and that the Science faculty at any university is often where you will find the most born-again Christians. But if you love the beauty and order and simplicity and elegance of Creation and search for its truths you soon find yourself face to face with the mind and personality of God. The sheer elegance of Group Theory in explaining chemistry was a powerful influence on my own conversion in 1978. I am deeply moved by fractal geometry and by the laws of physics and chemistry. These things spoke to me of God, shouted it to me, even while I was a most skeptical atheist.

The intimate relationship between Christ and Creation has at times been overstated and degenerated into pantheism (God=Creation) and pane-theism (God dwells in all Creation). Certainly Jesus does not dwell in every rock and the worship of Creation is not the worship of Christ, it is in fact forbidden. But sometimes we have fled so far from these errors that we have ended up losing our sense of beauty and balance and joy. For Creation was designed to fill you with joy! (Isa 65:18 But be ye glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy.) We cannot throw out Creation and still have a whole and real and good faith in God. Our faith needs to look in three directions, down into the Scriptures, up to God and out the window into the world He created. It is then that we find balance and peace. Mysticism without the Scriptures can become heresy and the Scriptures without prayer can be dry and deadly and either without looking out the window can become off-balance and even cruel. Those who hate nature or despise their own bodies tend to maltreat other people as well. That rose bush outside the window was made in Christ, was made through Christ and for Christ and He even holds it together - and he rejoices in its beauty. So rejoice in what Jesus Christ has made and praise His name, not just the man with the beard and sandals but Him who holds all things together and for whom the stars were made!

From Enemies to Saints

Colossians 1:21-23 ASV And you, being in time past alienated and enemies in your mind in your evil works, (22) yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and without blemish and unproveable before him: (23) if so be that ye continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel which ye heard, which was preached in all creation under heaven; whereof I Paul was made a minister.

These three verses we see our past "alienated and enemies", our time at the cross "reconciled in the body of his flesh", our future "holy and without blemish and unproveable", and our part in the process" if so be that ye continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast".

Firstly, we were away from God ("alienated"), in utter opposition to God in our deepest thoughts ("enemies in your mind") and in our practice ("in your evil works"). This does not mean that we were monsters, or unsociable, but it does mean that we lived as if what God wanted did not matter, and when it did matter, we opposed it. An enemy is simply someone who puts their interests far, far ahead of your interests. Someone will run you over if you get in their way. And when God gets in the way of an unbeliever - they crucify Him! The cross (and the fate of the prophets) is the very clearest expression of how people react when God becomes inconvenient.

And where God's will and their will come into opposition there is no thought of giving in to God's will. If someone fully intended to cheat on an exam and I said "Don't do that it will offend God." It would have no impact. But should I invoke their own interest and say "Don't do that or you will be expelled." Then, and then alone they will listen. God's interests just don't matter, (they are alienated) their interests are all important (they are enemies).

Then, when we repent and believe and trust in the gospel, we are reconciled. We stop fighting with God, and He turns away His wrath from us. There is peace. We have moved from being enemies to being sons, we are taken into the divine family. But that is not all there is. We are made holy. We are expected to learn the good and high ways of the sons of God. We cannot run around being criminals in Paradise. Our filthy and wicked ways, our grasping lusts and degrading practices are not fitting for being the sons of light. We must get rid of them and we must clean up our act. So God gently takes us in hand to teach us His ways and make us holy and without blemish and unproveable before Him. He makes us able to behave rightly in Heaven and lovingly upon Earth.

Now it is immediately obvious that this work of becoming holy takes some time and involves a dogged persistence on our part. We have to fight all our unholy impulses and put them to death. If we do not out them to death they will grow and take us over again and sweep us away from the faith and our last fate would be worse than our first. We would be enemies all over again, living for our own interests and with no way back (see Hebrews 6).

We have to stick at the work of holiness, and this means sticking to Christ and the gospel. As we stay fixed on God, with our mind set on the things of the Spirit, God transforms us from glory to glory and fills us with life and peace (2 Corinthians 3:17,18, Romans 8:5,6). In fact if we walk in the Spirit there is no way we can fulfill the lusts of the flesh (Galatians 5:16-18) or be condemned (Romans 8:1,2) or do the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21) but rather we will become full of love, joy, peace and patience and all virtue (Galatians 5:22,23). The way forward

is simple - stay fixed on God, abide in the vine, keep the connection, be unmoved in the faith, be steadfast in Christ. God will do the changing - but you must do the sticking.

Spiritual Authority

Colossians 1:23-25 BBE If you keep yourselves safely based in the faith, not moved from the hope of the good news which came to you, and which was given to every living being under heaven; of which I, Paul, was made a servant. (24) Now I have joy in my pain because of you, and in my flesh I undergo whatever is still needed to make the sorrows of Christ complete, for the salvation of his body, the church; (25) Of which I became a servant by the purpose of God which was given to me for you, to give effect to the word of God,

Paul says he was "made a servant" of the gospel and that he "became a servant" of the church. That this service was by the "purpose of God" and was "given to me" not for his own self-expression but "for you". Furthermore, Paul says that his sufferings and imprisonment were "for the salvation of His body, the church". Paul was pouring himself out for the gospel and the church, right until death. Paul had apostolic authority - but it was an authority born out of suffering and service.

As Menno Simons, the founding father of the Mennonites said: "Spiritual authority is never to make the rebel conform; its only purpose is to enable the obedient person to live a holy life. Therefore it rests on obedience and submission freely given. Furthermore, spiritual authority has only spiritual means at its disposal; its only weapons are prayer, scripture, counsel and the power of a holy life."

Paul's spiritual authority was grounded, first of all, in his call. He knew that God had appointed him to the job and that this calling was serious, high and holy. In 1 Corinthians Paul even says: "1Cor. 9:16 For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of; for necessity is laid upon me; for woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel." There was no glory - it was a duty and a calling. It was an absolute necessity, and if he shirked it – there would be "woe".

On the BBC this evening there was an interview with an Israeli major who was a "refusnik" - that is he was refusing to serve in West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon or in the occupied territories. The BBC interviewer was quite insistent that this was a violation of army discipline. She was right. When you serve in the army, whether military or spiritual, you are a person under orders, a person with a "charge" that you must keep. You have many privileges but you also have no choice and at times you must go into places where you know you will suffer. Paul knew this, and believed this and served the gospel.

Serving as a missionary or a minister is not about "expressing your gifts", or some wonderful form of self actualization that leads to green pastures and great comfort and existential bliss. It's about serving the gospel and serving the church, at great cost, even to imprisonment and death. Jesus told Peter that at the end Peter would be imprisoned and executed. "John 21:18 BBE Truly I say to you, When you were young, you made yourself ready and went wherever you had a desire to go: but when you are old, you will put out your hands and another will make you ready, and you will be taken where you have no desire to go." Faithful ministry quite often takes us to places where we "have no desire to go". It's about serving God, even if we end up martyred, or poor, or in a small church or without much in the way of recognition.

Paul's authority came because he truly was "a servant of all" (Mark 10:44 And whoever has a desire to be first among you, let him be servant of all.) Paul did not refuse the hard yards, or sniff at suffering, or only go where he was admired, or only preach the gospel when it would be well received and suitably rewarded. Paul defined his entire life as a servant of the gospel and

of the church. If we wish to be true servants of God, and have real spiritual authority, we must do the same.

Christ in You the Hope of Glory

Colossians 1:26-29 ASV even the mystery which hath been hid for ages and generations: but now hath it been manifested to his saints, (27) to whom God was pleased to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory: (28) whom we proclaim, admonishing every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ; (29) whereunto I labor also, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily.

There is something glorious and perfect in every Christian believer - Christ in you the hope of glory. The body is not glorious, it will grow old and perish. The mind is not glorious, its knowledge is finite and often in error. The unredeemed soul is not glorious as it lusts and grows angry and has numerous wayward affections, and the various possessions we have and offices we hold do not constitute true glory as they are passing away with this world.

Where then is our glory? Where is that something we can hold onto, something about ourselves that we can say "This is me, this is good and this will last!" Something about us that is admirable - and permanently so. The only part of us that we can point to and say "There is glory!" is our redeemed spirit - Christ in us, the hope of glory.

Eventually of course our redemption will be total, our bodies will be glorious (1 Corinthians 15), our minds will know all things (1 Corinthians 13) and we will be immortal and imperishable with true eternal possessions and heavenly offices and responsibilities. But that is not yet. And how can we know that it will be different? That indeed glory will be ours? Because we have a foretaste and a deposit in the Holy Spirit and a new nature in Christ.

This new nature is glorious but in need of maturity and perfection. This is just like the nature of Jesus who when born in the manger was perfect and innocent and sinless and glorious but still needed to grow in stature and wisdom (Luke 2:40). Christ in us needs to grow and he particularly needs to grow in wisdom which is why Paul says that his task is "admonishing every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ."

Thus our ultimate concern should not be earthly titles and glory, or beauty or riches and honor and status - but the lasting glory we will have if we are mature in Christ and wise in the things of God. Daniel, though a highly respected person knew this and wrote: Daniel 12:2-3 ASV And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. (3) And they that are wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars forever and ever.

If we have Christ in us, and if we become mature in Him we shall gain the glory that is of God and shine like the stars forever and ever. [But if we neglect this, and despise it, and trample the things of the Kingdom, neglecting our salvation and our calling, then the NT is full of dire warnings of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. Matthew 8:12, 13:42] Christ in you is the secret of the Christian life, of eternal life and of heavenly glory.

The Treasures of Wisdom and Knowledge

Colossians 2:1-3 ASV For I would have you know how greatly I strive for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh; (2) that their hearts may be comforted, they being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, that they may know the mystery of God, *even* Christ, (3) in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden.

Since Christ is involved in Creation and it was made through Him and for Him and He holds all things together then He is also the wisdom in Creation. The “Supreme Reason”, the “Cosmic Mind”, the “Universal Consciousness” of the New Age movement is the none other than Jesus the Christ from Nazareth. You do not need the New Age add-ons – you just need Jesus.

In Jesus are ALL the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. All the knowledge about the stars – for it is His Word that holds them together, all knowledge about the future – for all things are for Him, and all knowledge of Chemistry and Mathematics – for all things are by Him and in Him all things consist (As we saw in chapter one of Colossians).

It's not as if Jesus is the source of moral and spiritual knowledge and Einstein is the source of scientific knowledge and Marx is the source of political knowledge and Keynes is the source of economic knowledge. Not at all! All the knowledge that can be treasured, every bit of that which is worthwhile is found in Christ first. Then it is given to those who seek it and to those whom He chooses to reveal it.

It is not that you can search the gospels for clues on electric circuits. That is a very crude way of looking at it. There are no secret physics equations hidden in the Bible or chemistry formulas in Revelation. Rather truth opens up to the seeking mind and the inquisitive spirit that is connected to Jesus Christ.

“Christ in you the hope of glory” is also our hope of wisdom. The Holy Spirit can open your mind to scientific and other truths and reveal His Universe to you. Isaac Newton openly acknowledged this process, as have many other great scientists.

The revelation about Creation through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit should be a vital part of the Christian life and of our discipleship. We should constantly go to God for wisdom and expect Him to teach us many things, if not all things (1 Corinthians 2:9-16; 1 John 2:20,27).

This is not to say that we can wander out into the desert and come back with a Ph.D. in astrophysics. God teaches us through people, schools, universities, churches and through books and through our own reflections. But at the deepest level it is in our spirit we truly learn - through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Wisdom is spiritual and all true wisdom comes from Christ.

As You Have Received – So Walk

Colossians 2:4-7 ASV This I say, that no one may delude you with persuasiveness of speech. (5) For though I am absent in the flesh, yet am I with you in the spirit, joying and beholding your order, and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ. (6) As therefore ye received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, (7) rooted and builded up in him, and established in your faith, even as ye were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Here is the sheer simplicity of the Christian faith "as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him". There are no add-ons, no weird rituals that make one a super-Christian. The Christian life is not a tangled philosophy but a simple faith. It is "from faith to faith" as Paul says elsewhere. (Romans 1:17)

The way we started the Christian life, that is in simple faith, is the way we are to proceed. It's good enough for the whole journey. It is not as if you have to first find Christ and then learn from a philosopher or theologian. Jesus is quite sufficient. It is not as if we start with Christ and graduate to Spong. It is Christ all the way.

There are many persuasive speakers who will tell you that Christ is not quite enough, or is misconstrued, and that their system brings enlightenment in some way. This rhetoric was such a threat to the Colossian church that Paul expressly writes to warn the early Christians away from it: "This I say, that no one may delude you with persuasiveness of speech."

Instead Paul was pleased with their steadfast and orderly faith and asks that they may stand strong, not swept here and there by theological fads but established, following what they were first taught... "joying and beholding your order, and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ. (6) As therefore ye received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, (7) rooted and builded up in him, and established in your faith, even as ye were taught, abounding in thanksgiving."

Paul believes in a received faith, a gospel that is from God, eternal, (Romans 16:25, 26; 1 Peter 1:25; Rev 14:6) fixed for all time, and not swept this way and that by trends and fashions. Yet Paul was also a pragmatist adapting to culture and using whatever means possible to save the lost. There is a very real tension here. We cannot change the truth in order to please people, so they may "accept Christ". Because if we change the gospel it is not the real Christ that they accept but some other Christ, accommodated to the fashion of the day.

On the other hand we can change the way we dress or the architecture of the church, such things are generally peripheral to the gospel message. The beliefs must be constant, the methods can vary. Neither can we compromise on morality and justice. We cannot wink at corruption or excuse promiscuity in the body of Christ. The fact that all are sinners does not mean we should be anything less than holy.

The gospel is simple and uncluttered, a gospel from faith to faith, a gospel we can lay hold of at conversion and follow for the rest of our days, needing neither more nor less than Christ. We do not need philosophers or trends. We do not need some extra add-ons. Faith

in Christ is all we needed to get saved, and all we need to be sanctified and to know and enjoy God forever.

The Rudiments of the World

Colossians 2:8-12 ASV Take heed lest there shall be any one that maketh spoil of you through his philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ: (9) for in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, (10) and in him ye are made full, who is the head of all principality and power: (11) in whom ye were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ; (12) having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

As a child did you ever played the Winnie the Pooh game where you must step in the pavement squares and not on the lines, because if you step on the lines a bear will come out and eat you? Did you ever get superstitious about the number 13 or walking under ladders? Then you have felt the power of a "taboo" and the "rudiments of the world", the basic superstitions and legalism that, in more serious forms, governs conduct for much of the world's people.

This phrase "the rudiments of the world" is the Greek word "stoichion" and in its plural form "stoichea". This is literally "the measured out things" the basic building blocks, such as the alphabet and the numerals and very basic measurements. The very basic orderly geometry of things. the "stepping on the squares". It is variously translated elements as in chemical elements, first principles, and basic principles, and is closely related to the idea of walking in an orderly fashion or "taking steps". Thus they are the basic first steps of wisdom and the spiritual life, the very most elementary principles - from which we graduate when we have faith in Christ.

Galatians says: (Galatians 4:3-10 NKJV) Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world... {9} But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? {10} You observe days and months and seasons and years. And later in Colossians Paul writes: (Colossians 2:15, 20-22NIV) Therefore, do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.

....Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations; {21} "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," {22} which all concern things which perish with the using; according to the commandments and doctrines of men?

The stoichea are the old religious principles - shrines, feasts, taboos and festivals. They include priests, temples, diets, rituals and the trappings of religiosity from which Christ has freed us. (For more on this see my free ebook Temples and Tithes <http://www.aibi.ph/tt/>) These religious taboos were associated with various principalities and powers. For instance it was forbidden to play the pan-pipes at noon as that was the god Pan's rest time and he could not be disturbed than and would curse anyone who played his pipes at that hour. Animistic religions are still full of these superstitions and taboos that bring down curses from one or more gods for the violation. However, because Christ has ascended through the heavenlies and taken captivity captive we are now freed from all such bondage.

Christ has undoubtedly been raised and is far beyond the rule of all principalities and powers and out from under the Law and all religious regulations. But what about us? Let's look at verse 12: "having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith

in the working of God, who raised him from the dead." We are raised with Christ! We are, spiritually speaking, a son of God and "up there with Jesus!" Paul says this very clearly in Ephesians 2:6: "and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus". You and I are seated with Christ in heaven - far above all legalism taboos, Sabbaths and religious requirements.

We have graduated from being slaves to sons, we no longer have the spirit of fear, guarding ourselves carefully lest we break some taboo, but rather we are sons and cry out "Abba Father". We don't have to have a kosher kitchen to keep meat and dairy products separate, we can eat pork, we don't need to be circumcised, and we don't have to observe a long calendar of religious feasts so God will be happy with us. Just believing in Jesus is enough to make God happy with us! We don't have to walk around afraid that, in some spiritual sense, we have "trodden outside the squares" and that the bears will come and eat us! God has not made us to dwell in religious dread - but in peace!

The Fullness of the Godhead

Colossians 2:9 KJV For in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.

Jesus is God and is fully God, despite being in human form. God is not limited to being a certain size. He can be fully present in a single point, or fill the Universe. This means He can be fully present in a human body. Thus Jesus is the fullness of the Godhead in a human body.

The human body is so designed that it is meant to be God-indwelt. When God breathed into Adam and he became a living soul, it was God's self-impartment of the divine nature, the image of God. We were always meant to be God-breathed creatures. The New Testament calls us temples of the Holy Spirit. Your human body is designed primarily to be a dwelling place for God. This is what makes sexual immorality so wrong, we cannot take the temple of God and defile it. The body was not made for sexual pleasure as its chief purpose and highest aim - we are not sex objects but sacred sites - temples of the Holy Spirit. (see 1 Corinthians 6)

The human body of Jesus contained the fullness of the deity from the moment of conception. In an extraordinary moment, John the Baptist in the womb, recognized Jesus in the womb and leaped for joy! (Luke 1:44) The presence of God gave Him extraordinary wisdom as a child and caused Jesus to be without sin in any respect. Jesus was a holy God dwelling in a perfect man.

Jesus was the perfection of our ability to be indwelt by God. He was the whole Godhead, dwelling in a perfect temple, in an uninterrupted and complete abiding. John the Baptist recognized this. The Old Testament prophets had an "on again, off again" relationship with the Holy Spirit. The word of the Lord came to them, then went, and then came again another day, and they could put a time and date to these moments when God fully inspired them. This was not so with Jesus. John recognized Jesus as the one on whom the Holy Spirit came - and remained. (John 1:32, 33) Jesus was the ideal home of God. The Spirit never had to leave, the Spirit remained, because Jesus was perfectly holy.

Jesus was God in a perfect temple, in a sin-free human body, and full of grace and truth. Jesus could honestly say: John 14:9 ASV Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and dost thou not know me, Philip? He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father; how sayest thou, Show us the Father?

The human body cannot just be God-indwelt, it can also be indwelt by demons and in the last days an Anti-Christ will arise who will be Satan in human form, the Devil incarnate. Thus our bodies are battle-grounds. The Devil wants to dwell in them and God wants to dwell in them. In Christ, God had perfect control of a human body. In Christ, God dwelt fully and revealed Himself most clearly.

This presents us with a choice. Do we surrender the members of our body to the indwelling Christ, or the control of the lusts of the flesh and the seduction of demons? Do we make ourselves, our hand, our feet, our voice, instruments of righteousness - or do we become instruments of iniquity? Do you see yourself as a sacred site, a temple, a holy being, a God-breathed humanity? Because you should! God has died to cleanse you, redeem you and indwell you. You are not just common clay. If you are a Christian, then you are a mini-Christ and a God-indwelt human being.

Eternity 94 - The Work of the Cross

Colossians 2:11-15 ASV in whom ye were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ; (12) having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. (13) And you, being dead through your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, you, I say, did he make alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses; (14) having blotted out the bond written in ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us: and he hath taken it out that way, nailing it to the cross; (15) having despoiled the principalities and the powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it.

(Colossians 2:11-15 NIV) In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, {12} having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. {13} When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, {14} having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. {15} And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

The cross is not just a symbol of a sacrifice, or a piece of jewelry but a place where spiritual work was done and a place where transformations are accomplished. The work of the cross is radical, total and eternal.

In Colossians 2:11-15 the cross does seven things:

1. Deals with our old sinful nature:

ASV "ye were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ;"

NIV "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ,"

2. Accomplishes a spiritual death to that part of us that loved evil:

"having been buried with him in baptism". (both ASV & NIV)

3. And giving us a new nature that is high and holy and alive:

ASV "wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead."

NIV "and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead."

4. And moves us from spiritual death to spiritual life - which is a life with Christ:

ASV "And you, being dead through your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, you, I say, did he make alive together with him,"

NIV "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ."

5. And grants us forgiveness of sin, all our sins, forever nailed to the cross and dealt with:

ASV "having forgiven us all our trespasses; (14) having blotted out the bond written in ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us: and he hath taken it out that way, nailing it to the cross"

NIV He forgave us all our sins, {14} having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.

6. Removing all ground of accusation against us and this robbing Satan of any power to accuse us or triumph over us. With our sins forgiven Satan has no ammunition to use:

ASV "having despoiled the principalities and the powers",

NIV" having disarmed the powers and authorities,"

7. The cross thus triumphs over evil and the demonic world, the spiritual realm and all taboos and curses:

ASV "he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it."

NIV "he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."

The cross in Colossians is about a transition between old nature and new nature, death and life, guilt and forgiveness, and between subservience to spirits and complete victory over them and their taboos. In the Old Testament, and in the pagan religions, God was scary and unapproachable except by a spiritual elite. But such mediation is not necessary if our sins are completely dealt with. The fact that the powers and principalities no longer "have any ammunition" and that we have "died to" them and their world, means that all the old religious regulations that kept the Gentiles in fear and trembling are now powerless. The old religious systems for dealing with a dangerous deity are now void of meaning. All the rules about new moons, festivals, Sabbaths, diets, oblations, sacrifices, vows and all the curses and spells and invocations and temples and shrines and priests and charms and holy days and offerings and robes and taboos and fears are just swept aside. We have died on the cross and they are powerless over us. (see verses 16-23 of Colossians 2) We have been raised with Christ to a realm where they simply cannot apply. Paul is saying that the old religious realm is finished. Faith in the cross has made dealing with God a safe thing to do.

Holding Fast To Christ, Not To Angels

(Colossians 2:16-23 NKJV) So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or Sabbaths, {17} which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. {18} Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, {19} and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God. {20} Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations; {21} "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," {22} which all concern things which perish with the using; according to the commandments and doctrines of men? {23} These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

In these verses a false spirituality and a true spirituality are contrasted. The false spirituality is a "shadow of things to come" and worships angels and is full of rules about "new moons and Sabbaths" and regulations about what can be tasted, touched and handled. The true spirituality is the substance, and holds to Christ the Head, and grows with a growth that is from God and is grounded in the previous discussion of the cross.

Angels had a prominent place in pre-Christian religion. The OT Law was ordained by angels (Acts 7:53, Galatians 3:19, Hebrews 2:2) and they had a prominent role in its administration. On the other hand the Gentiles had religions administered by demons - that is by fallen angels. (1 Corinthians 10:20,21). As this is a rather unusual topic I have included the references in full below.

The Jewish Law was appointed through angels and administered by it:

(Acts 7:53 NKJV) "Who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it."

(Galatians 3:19 NKJV) What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator.

(Hebrews 2:2 NKJV) For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward,

Angels were even involved in punishing those who disobeyed the Law:

(Exodus 23:20-21 NKJV) "Behold, I send an Angel before you to keep you in the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. {21} "Beware of Him and obey His voice; do not provoke Him, for He will not pardon your transgressions; for My name is in Him.

Gentile religions sacrificed to fallen angels - that is to demons:

(1 Corinthians 10:20-21 NKJV) Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. {21} You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons.

The book of Hebrews opens with the contrast between the system based in Christ the Son of God (Christianity) and the system based on the administration of angels (Judaism). Hebrews chapter one shows that Christ is superior to angels in every way. Hebrews chapter 2 shows that angels administered the Law of Moses and thus since Christ was higher than the angels so

Christianity is a much better way than Judaism. Colossians 2 is a briefer form of the same argument. The spirituality based in the administration of good angels (the Law) or bad angels (the Gentile religions) is inferior to that based on the true Head which is Christ and from which all true spiritual life flows.

The administration by angels follows a certain structure - high priests, temples, sacrifices, new moons, Sabbaths, taboos, dietary restrictions. So there would be a temple for Yahweh and a temple for Zeus, a high priest of Yahweh, and a high priest of Zeus etc. The forms were basically the same whether Jew or Gentile. But in Christ all these old forms are done away with because the angelic layer of mediation is done away with and we have risen beyond that administration (of angels, principalities and powers) to sit with Christ. (see Ephesians 2-4)

This radical difference in spiritual authority and the transition between the Old Testament and the New is commented on by Jesus when He talks about John the Baptist. (Matthew 11:11-13 NKJV) "Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. {12} "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. {13} "For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.

The astounding spiritual fact is that the least born-again Christian is "greater than" John the Baptist and all the OT saints! Why? Because we are born of God and seated in heavenly realms with Christ. This great status is not deserved but is a promotion by grace that will display God's goodness to sinners. (Ephesians 2:5-8 NKJV) even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), {6} and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, {7} that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. {8} For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God,

Thus Christians who go back to the old religious structures of priests, temples etc are acting as if they were still under angelic administration and thus deny what God has done for them in Christ. In Galatians Paul says that this going back to old religious requirements such as festivals and circumcision can even imperil our salvation (Gal 4:9-11, 5:1-11) To go back to all those rules and regulations is to let go of our spiritual Head - Christ and to let an angelic and priestly structure be our head instead. This has occurred to a great extent in traditional Roman Catholicism which is greatly compromised. These old religious structures may seem wise (verse 23) but are of no use in restraining the flesh. Only born-again, Christ-centered, Spirit-filled Christian faith is effective in bringing self-control and spiritual freedom.

Why then do Christians cave in to observe festivals and Sabbaths and religious taboos? Because someone "judges them" and criticizes them, demanding they observe this holy day or this dietary rule and on face value that person seems authoritative, traditional and wise. Thus Paul exhorts us: "So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or Sabbaths, {17} which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ." We are not to cave in to those who demand submission to their rules and regulations. We are to cling to Christ alone - who is the true substance of our faith.

Things Above

Colossians 3:1-4 ASV If then ye were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated on the right hand of God. (2) Set your mind on the things that are above, not on the things that are upon the earth. (3) For ye died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. (4) When Christ, *who is* our life, shall be manifested, then shall ye also with him be manifested in glory.

Born-again Christians are ascended saints. We have been "raised with Christ", we are where He is, we are seated in the heavenly realms with Him. We have died to this world. We are corpses to materialism, fame, sensuality and earthly glory. We are dead to what others seek here on earth and we have another life. Our life is Christ.

If you are denied a promotion - don't worry, your life is not in that promotion, it is in Christ. If your wedding is postponed or cancelled, remember your life is not in that person, your life is in Christ. If your house is burgled and your bank account cleaned out - do not worry your life is not in money and possessions it is in Christ. That may sound severe but is what Paul means.

I am trying to deal with Philippine Customs and bring a donated second-hand duplicator into the country for my ministry. Fully half of my entire ministry budget is being demanded as bribes and "charges". I have tried four different brokers to no avail. The actual customs duties are only a few dollars - the rest are service fees and "paperwork" charges. Is my life in a duplicator or in my ministry budget? No. It's in Christ. It's humiliating and painful and makes me angry, but it's "just stuff".

I feel like I am being eaten by those who neither fear God or man. Part of me wants to lash out. The better part of me says "this is small stuff, this belongs to the earth, in a thousand years time that duplicator won't matter but who you became in response to it will".

I have to set my mind on things above. I have to get beyond the frustrations of this life and set my mind on Christ. My life is not even in my ministry. It is in Jesus. How can I use this situation to grow in Him? How can I use this to grow in maturity? How can I use this to display Christ?

When Jesus returns and we are manifested with Him in glory, in the full Romans 8 liberty of the sons of God, then I will realize my life was not in an office or a duplicator or my ministry success or my ministry budget or in a computer - but in Him. I will realize that my "real life", the substance of my existence, the expression of my true nature, is Christ.

Am I an ascended person or an earthly person? How do you react in a Christ-like way to extortion, bribery and corruption? I have to go back to who I really am in Jesus - an ascended saint, a son of God, a dweller in Zion. That should dictate the rest. I need to set my mind on God and His deliverance not on the earth and the situation.

In short I need to live out of the ascension - not out of the contention. I need to remind myself that my life is in Christ, that I am in Christ and that my actions and reactions must flow from there as well. Whatever your life, whatever your frustrations, the centre is to be the heavenly throne, our mind is to be set above, and our life is to be Christ alone. And if we choose to live the life of an ascended saint, of a true Christian, then when Christ appears we will be glorified with Him.

The Old Must Go

Colossians 3:5-10 ASV Put to death therefore your members which are upon the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry; (6) for which things' sake cometh the wrath of God upon the sons of disobedience: (7) wherein ye also once walked, when ye lived in these things; (8) but now do ye also put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, railing, shameful speaking out of your mouth: (9) lie not one to another; seeing that ye have put off the old man with his doings, (10) and have put on the new man, that is being renewed unto knowledge after the image of him that created him:

Some preach that we can pray a prayer of commitment to Christ then sin all we like because we are forgiven. That is not the Scriptural position. When we believe we are made new, we are given a new self, a new creation that is righteous. This new self is a "new man" and lives a new life. It has new standards and they are holy. Thus conversion involves a radical break with the life of sin and an eager entering into a life of holiness.

The "New Man" lives a new life, doing new things, thinking new thoughts, speaking new words and behaving in new ways consistent with Heaven where he dwells and Christ who he serves, and the Lord in whose image he is made.

As "ascended saints" we are citizens of Heaven, and are seated in heavenly realms with Christ, our life is hidden in Christ with God, and we will one day will judge angels (1 Cor 6:2, 3). Hebrews even says that Jesus is "not ashamed to call us brethren" (Hebrews 2:10-13). We are a high and holy and sanctified people so we must put away those things which are earthly, carnal, obscene, and degrading.

Internet pornography must be renounced, along with fornication, passion and evil desire. Greed and covetousness and sweaty scheming is setting up an idol in your heart. So put it to death. Swearing and abusing must not come out of our mouths.

Nastiness, malice, hatefulness, spite and petty jealousy and gossip must be seen for what they are - utterly un-Christlike and unfitting for the born-again Christian.

We have put off the old man. He was crucified when we found Christ, we died to sin (Romans 6) and we now live to God. Therefore let us not lie to one another but tell the truth in honest relationships full of integrity and trust.

Sin is not a light thing. God gets angry at it. It brings His punishment, His wrath, "for which things' sake cometh the wrath of God upon the sons of disobedience". But if we are in Christ and following Christ our lives will be characterized by obedience and holiness and we will walk in the light. We will act like a son of God, not a son of disobedience.

We have put on the new man and he is in the "image of Him who created him" that is in the image of God. Our new self is a direct creation of God, and is in the image of Jesus Christ. When Jesus returns and is revealed we will find out that we are "like Him" (1 John 3:1-3, Col 3:1-4). Day by day we are "being renewed" by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Tit 3:5 not by works *done* in righteousness, which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit,

2Co 4:16 Wherefore we faint not; but though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day.

The old must go. The renewing of our life into holiness and truth and grace is the true eternal direction of our existence. We are not here to indulge the senses or be enslaved to passions but to become like Christ. Therefore put to death the old and focus fully on the new, the holy and the good.

Life in the Kingdom of God

(Colossians 3:15-17 NIV) Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. {16} Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. {17} And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

The Kingdom of God is a lifestyle of "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17) and that is what Paul is describing here in Colossians.

Firstly, Paul calls us to being at peace with one another: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.". This is the corporate peace of Christians in loving unity. (This verse is often taken out of context to refer to about personal peace in guidance issues). We are to create a community in unity that experiences God's Shalom peace and wholeness. Division and squabbling is not appropriate since we are "one body" and our fundamental calling is "to peace".

Three times Paul calls the Colossians to a life of gratitude and thankfulness - in verses 15, 16 and 17. Gratitude is one of the keystones of Christianity and one Catholic author has written a book called "Gratitude The Heart Of Prayer". Our right relationship to the creator Christ of Colossians chapter one means we must be grateful for all He has made.

Frustration and obstruction can eat away at our spiritual lives - so we need to learn to be thankful in the midst of life's irritations. Where I live in Palanan in Manila, Philippines, we have been having frequent blackouts. In the middle of doing something the computer screen goes blank, the light goes out, the fan stops and a silence descends - today it went from 9:30am to 5pm - effectively wasting an entire day. How do you be thankful for an irregular power supply? I took the opportunity to journal, to have a mini-retreat and to start on marking some papers. I turned it into thankfulness for a "nice quiet day".

The heart is the center of the Christian life and where all the big battles are fought. And our hearts are to be full of four things - God's Word, wisdom, song and gratitude. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."

God's word, the word of Christ, is to dwell in us richly - producing fruit and Christian character. In order for this to happen we need to be taught, and we need to be wisely admonished by mentors and disciplers. We need the personal one-to-one exhortation that touches us at our core and helps us see our blind spots and what we need to work on.

This teaching and admonishing is an every member function. It's a "one another" command. It's not just the pastor's job, it's everyone's job. The husband can teach and admonish his wife and the father can teach and admonish his children and the wife can wisely instruct the husband and the bible study leader the group and friends can encourage and exhort each other in the faith.

Music is a big part of the Christian life - but let's not just leave it to the experts on stage! Paul would have even "groaners" like me sing for joy to the Lord! (Once, when I was young and singing in the shower the tune was so bad that my father rushed out of his bedroom thinking I was dying!) Despite our different talents, Paul assumes we all will be making music! "as you

sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God." The Christian life is supposed to be a happy life of singing and joy and worship in the Holy Spirit.

Even our work life and the washing up and mowing the lawn is to be soaked with praise! "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." The whole of our words and deeds are to be done from gratitude to God in Christ.

This is the Kingdom lifestyle - abounding in love, rejoicing in all things, filled with the word of Christ and singing songs! A life lived in a community in harmony dwelling in God's Shalom peace. That might be a long way from your experience or mine but if we let the Holy spirit fill us and guide us, if we launch out on it anyway, we can start to bring it to pass, in us, in our homes, in our bible study groups, our church and eventually in our city or town.

Relationships in the Kingdom of God

(Colossians 3:18-4:1 NKJV) Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. {19} Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them. {20} Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord. {21} Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. {22} Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. {23} And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, {24} knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. {25} But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality. Masters, give your bondservants what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

The Kingdom of God is a place of respectful, loving and fair relationships. These relationships have a certain order that is intrinsic to them. When this order works well there is joy and peace. When this order goes wrong we sense it very deeply and call it either "disrespectful" or "abusive". Disrespectful relationships include rebellious and contentious wives, disobedient children and lazy, pilfering servants. Abusive relationships include harsh unloving husbands, domineering fathers and exploitative bosses. They are all covered in the above verses.

Behind all these relationships lies God. The Lord is impartial, the Master of the masters and the rewarder of the slaves. God is the one that demands that wives submit to their husbands and that children obey their parents and masters treat their slaves fairly. These sort of relationships are often not covered by civil laws, and civil laws can even undermine them - granting too much power to employers or funding the disobedience of rebellious children. Regardless of what laws may or may not be in place God has an order for human relationships and expects us to obey it.

Submission and obedience are rather politically incorrect terms these days. In the Greek submission means to "dwell under" and is more about being a good team player than a robot. Wives are to be good team players with their husbands, not pulling this way and that, being argumentative or always demanding their own way. Husbands in their turn are to forgive their wives, love their wives and be understanding and tender in their regard for them.

The workplace requires a similar team spirit and an eagerness to do the job well, not slackly, and not "as little as possible". So Paul writes: "Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God." Throughout the OT and especially in Proverbs diligence and wisdom is praised along with hard work. There is a Christian work ethic and it involves a sincere desire to excel. But the desire to please the boss must not be just for flattery or promotion but out of self-respect and fear of God.

The same fear of God should place limits on our obedience at work. Even if your boss wants you to take bribes or fiddle the books, you must not do so. Paul takes pains to emphasize that we serve not men, but God. He says that: We are to work "fearing God" (v.22), to the Lord (v.23), for we serve the Lord Christ (v.24) and we also have a Master in heaven (v.25)

The above intrinsic order in Christian relationships sets the Christian community into a proper and appropriate harmony. Paul uses the term: "as is fitting in the Lord" (v.18). The word fitting ("aneko") means to be appropriate and proper. God delights when the Christian community functions properly in respectful love. The obedience of children to parents is "well pleasing to the Lord". (v.20) and obedient servants do not go unnoticed by God. In fact their

obedience to earthly masters has heavenly results - it will lead them to receive the reward of the inheritance (v.24).

Finally, Christian relationships are to be hearty and full. "And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men." (v.23). Yesterday we saw that we are to do all things thankfully giving glory to God (Colossians 3:17). Today we see we are to do them heartily and energetically as positive people living full, thankful and joyful lives. The Kingdom order is never bland or insipid. Tepid, lukewarm living is repulsive to God: (Revelation 3:16 NKJV) "So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth." The apathetic, Lazy-Boy, Coke and chips world of the spectator Christian is not a New Testament lifestyle. We need to live fully, heartily, thankfully and positively with enthusiastic energy in our work and in all our Kingdom relationships.

Praying For a Door for the Word

(Colossians 4:2-6 NKJV) Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving; {3} meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains, {4} that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak. {5} Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time. {6} Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.

Watch and pray! "Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving". We are not to be sleepy unguarded Christians but alert watchmen, seeing the world around us and bringing the forces of heaven to bear through prayer. We are like artillery spotters scanning the horizon and then precisely directing the spiritual fire to the appropriate spot long before the forces of wickedness can pose a real threat to the church.

In our prayerful vigilance we are not to lose our spiritual poise or surrender to vague apprehensions, fears and paranoid. Wild rumors and anxious imaginings do not help the cause of spiritual warfare but rather makes it seem foolish and bizarre. So Paul adds the phrase "with thankfulness". We are to be a thankful and positive people, strong warriors, grateful guards of the Kingdom of God. Our vigilance is to be a cheerful alertness. We are to remain positive in the strife.

The Colossians were not only to pray for themselves but for Paul and for the progress of the gospel: "meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains, {4} that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak." Though Paul was in prison he had not given up hope of ministry and was requesting prayer that he be able to witness in jail.

Paul was not asking for the prison door to be opened (though he did ask for prayers for his release in other places). Rather he was asking for a "door for the word", an opportunity for the gospel. In the midst of a dark dungeon Paul wanted to manifest the mystery of Christ, to declare in apostolic power the presence of the Kingdom of God!

Paul's desire to minister, even in prison is an illustration of a greater principle - using time well for God. Paul calls it "redeeming the time" turning evil times, persecution and prison into opportunities for the gospel. He tells the Colossians to think carefully about their relationships with non-Christians and to consider how they can be best used to share Christ. "Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time."

Redeeming the time is not just about having "good time management" it's about having "godly time management". It's about making every encounter and every minute, a "divine encounter" and a redeemed minute. To cleverly plan the time for adultery or to time a bank-robbery to the milli-second, is not redeeming the time. It simply being efficiently wicked. We need to look at our calendars with the two great commandments in mind and ask "How can I best use my time to love God" and "How can I best use my time to love my neighbor". (Maybe less TV and more visiting people?)

Paul's first clue in time management is speech management! It's making every word count. According to John Maxwell the average worker spends 70% of their day communicating. If each word is spoken with grace and seasoned with salt - what a difference it would make! When we

meet non-Christians what is our speech like: Angry? Turbulent? Gossiping? Trivial? Profane? Let's make it full of grace and truth, gracious enough to be winning and salty enough to make an impact.

Lastly, we are to put our brains into gear before opening our mouths. We are to think about the person and their needs. Instead of formulas and sales pitches we are to "answer each one" as individuals, knowing their spiritual needs and the proper response. The evangelist Charles Finney said there were different kinds of non-Christians - hardened, curious, awakened and convicted I think were the categories. The hardened needed a sharp awakening to the reality of God - often in the form of suffering. The curious needed more information and to come to see that the gospel applied to them personally. The awakened were aware that the gospel applied to them but were dithering about commitment and needed exhortation to "do business with God". The convicted were those who were under the deep work of the Holy Spirit and simply needed the plan of salvation presented clearly to them and they would accept. People are at different places spiritually and need you to talk to them at their point of need.

Let's ask God to open the door for us to proclaim the gospel - even if our circumstances are adverse - and also that God may have grant us the wisdom and the discipline to take advantage of every opportunity that comes our way.

Fellow-Travelers

Colossians 4:7-11 NKJV) Tychicus, a beloved brother, faithful minister, and fellow servant in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me. {8} I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that he may know your circumstances and comfort your hearts, {9} with Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will make known to you all things which are happening here. {10} Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him), {11} and Jesus who is called Justus. These are my only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are of the circumcision; they have proved to be a comfort to me.

The greetings at the end of Paul's epistles give us fascinating glimpses into the community life of the early church. The early church generally did not have church building but consisted of city-wide networks of converted synagogues, house-churches and prayer cells. The persecuted saints met in catacombs and tunnels in Rome and beside river-banks in Philippi. These city-wide networks of Christian cell groups were in turn networked by travelling teachers of the Word such as Paul, Apollos, Titus, Timothy, Epaphras etc.

The messengers would bring news about how Paul's trial was going, the latest epistle, and set things straight in the local church ensuring that the same practices were observed throughout. If you have ever played the mental game of figuring out "how many handshakes" you are away from someone famous you will realize how interconnected we are and how well networks work. For instance I am "three handshakes" away from the U.S. President, having shaken the hand of my local member of Parliament in Australia, who has shaken the hand of the Australian Prime Minister John Howard who has in turn shaken the hand of President George.W. Bush. I am sure that all of us can claim something similar.

In the early church no-one was more than three handshakes from Jesus! Jesus had direct contact with the twelve and Paul (and many others), these then directly trained senior leaders, who set in place the city elders, who then governed the church. Say you were a Christian in far-away Crete. The Lord Jesus appointed Paul who then appointed Titus, who then set elders in every city in Crete, who then took care of the Christians there.

In addition to this direct chain of command many of the Christians would be visited from time to time by an apostle. For instance the church in Ephesus was visited by both Paul, and John. And Jerusalem, Antioch and Rome were visited by nearly everyone! This means that any major deviation in faith or practice was quickly spotted and corrected by a direct disciple of Jesus or someone that the apostles appointed. Major incidents would travel directly back to the apostles who would correct them in the next epistle or on a personal visit (see 2 John, 3 John and Philemon).

Tychicus and Onesimus come with news from Rome. Onesimus is probably the runaway slave of Philemon on his journey back to his master, Tychicus was probably his protector in the delicate negotiations. Tychicus was an "Asian" convert and was with Paul for many years and travelled it seems to Tarsus, Crete, Ephesus and Colossae as well as Laodicea. His last mention is when he takes over the church in Ephesus, freeing up Timothy to be with Paul in Rome (2 Timothy 4:9, 21).

Another companion was the risk-taking, eventual martyr Aristarchus. Here is the entry on him in the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

Aristarchus

ar-is-tar'-kus (Aristarchos, "best ruler"): He was one of those faithful companions of the apostle Paul who shared with him his labors and sufferings. He is suddenly mentioned along with Gaius as having been seized by the excited Ephesians during the riot stirred up by the silversmiths (Act_19:29). They are designated "men of Macedonia, Paul's companions in travel." We learn later that he was a native of Thessalonica (Act_20:4; Act_27:2). They were probably seized to extract from them information about their leader Paul, but when they could tell nothing, and since they were Greeks, nothing further was done to them.

When Aristarchus attached himself to Paul we do not know, but he seems ever after the Ephesian uproar to have remained in Paul's company. He was one of those who accompanied Paul from Greece via Macedonia (Act_20:4). Having preceded Paul to Troas, where they waited for him, they traveled with him to Palestine. He is next mentioned as accompanying Paul to Rome (Act_27:2). There he attended Paul and shared his imprisonment. He is mentioned in two of the letters of the Roman captivity, in the Epistle to the church at Col. (Col_4:10), and in the Epistle to Phm. (Phm_1:24), in both of which he sends greetings. In the former Paul calls him "my fellow-prisoner." According to tradition he was martyred during the persecution of Nero.

This has got long enough! I will continue tomorrow with a look at Mark, the cousin of Barnabas.

Christian Character

Colossians 4:10-14 LITV (10) Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, greets you, also Mark the cousin of Barnabas, about whom you received orders. If he comes to you, receive him. (11) And Jesus, the one being called Justus, those being of the circumcision, greet you, these only fellow workers for the kingdom of God, who became a comfort to me. (12) Epaphras greets you, he of you, a slave of Christ, always striving for you in prayers, that you may stand full-grown and being complete in every will of God. (13) For I bear witness to him, that he has much zeal on your behalf, and those in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis. (14) Luke the beloved physician greets you, also Demas.

This passage opens with a note of reconciliation "Mark the cousin of Barnabas, about whom you received orders. If he comes to you, receive him."

Mark, otherwise known as John Mark set out with Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey only to turn back once they left his home ground of Cyprus. There is much speculation about why Mark left but the reason was not one that pleased Paul. The phrase "separating from them" in Acts 13:13 may imply some sort of an argument.

Paul was sufficiently unimpressed to not want to take John Mark along in Acts 15 and Mark seems then to have gone to serve with the Apostle Peter. Over time the well-known breach was repaired and here, some ten years later, Paul tells the Colossians to welcome him. He joins Philemon in being "now useful". (2 Timothy 4:11. Philemon 1:11)

Epaphras is an intercessor "always striving for you in prayers, that you may stand full-grown and being complete in every will of God." Epaphras sees the maturity of believers as the main focus of prayer - and indeed this topic is also the focus of many of the prayers of Paul.

The greatest thing we can help produce is a man or woman of God. Therefore the greatest thing we can pray for is that our fellow believers will become men and women of God. Like Epaphras we should pray that they will become mature in Christ and that their Christ-likeness will be evident to the glory of God.

Epaphras did not take prayer lightly but was "always striving" - he prayed with passion and agony and power and persistence. How can we pray like that? First pray for the right things, the things of the Kingdom, then just keep on praying. Pray long, pray often, pray always. Nothing teaches prayer like praying. Pray at home, pray in prayer groups, pray at church, pray at work, pray on the bus, keep a prayer list on you at all times, just keep praying. Persistence and practice will prove powerful in prayer.

Epaphras had a BIG prayer vision - "he has much zeal on your behalf, and those in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis." Epaphras just didn't pray for his own place, but also for the mission outposts and other churches. This was a passion in him, a burning zeal for the state of the church in those areas. Let's not just pray for our own churches but also for missionaries and for those that the Lord gives us a burden for.

Finally we come to Luke and Demas. "Luke the beloved physician greets you, also Demas." What a contrast! Luke stuck with Paul through thick and thin, while Demas loved the world (2 Timothy 4:10)! Luke gets the appellation "the beloved physician" while Demas gets no

commendation at all. Demas the disappointment, Luke the true friend in Paul's last hour he would write to Timothy "only Luke is with me". (2 Timothy 4:11).

In these few verses we see Mark who made a mistake then recovered and Demas whose mistake was final. We see characters like beloved Luke and passionate Epaphras and a few ordinary hard-working saints. These verses tell us we have a life course, determined by character and forged at certain decisive turning points. Life is not trivial, who we turn out to be really does matter. No-one really cares if Demas bought a big house if he lost his chance of spiritual greatness in the process and no-one worries about Mark's mistake if he bounced back again into Christian service.

Christian service can forge us a great character or display our worldliness for all to see. Who are you going to be like? Will you pay the price?

Fulfilling the Ministry You Have Received

Colossians 4:15-18 LITV (15) Greet the brothers in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the assembly in his house. (16) And when this letter is read before you, cause that it be read also in the Laodicean assembly, and that you also read the one of Laodicea. (17) And say to Archippus, Look to the ministry which you received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it. (18) The greeting by my hand, Paul. Remember my bonds. Grace be with you. Amen.

These verses have caused New Testament scholars much anguish..where is the lost epistle to the Laodicean church? There must be many of Paul's writings that have not been preserved. Perhaps the Laodiceans were so "lukewarm" that they did not bother to treasure it!

Again we get a glimpse into church life in the NT. The church met in houses "and Nymphas and the assembly in his house" across a city such as Colossae or Laodicea. Obviously in these places there would be many more believers than could fit in one house so there were probably many house-churches networked together with elders in each city acting as supervisors of the cell groups just as Paul told Titus to set in place elders in each city.

The city networks each then get an epistle which is read in the various cell groups, and perhaps, where possible at large gatherings. The city-churches are networked across regions such as Asia. The epistles are passed around with the Laodiceans getting to read the Colossian epistle and vice-versa. So individuals belong to cell-churches, which belong to city-churches, which have elders and leadership and which are networked across regions. It was a pattern not unlike the Internet in its ability to communicate.

The authenticity of the epistles was guaranteed by Paul's apparently distinctive signature "The greeting by my hand, Paul". One theory is that Paul had an eye ailment (Galatians 4:13-15) that caused him to write in large letters (Galatians 6:11) and have rather unique handwriting. "2 Thessalonians 3:17 LITV (17) The greeting of Paul by my hand is the sign in every letter; so I write.". The eye ailment caused Paul to use a scribe known as an amanuensis to do the writing at Paul's dictation for most of the letter with only the signature being added by Paul. The scribe for the epistle to the Romans apparently was one Tertius who added his own greeting "Rom 16:22 I, Tertius, the one writing the epistle, greet you in the Lord."

In the midst of these final greetings Paul adds an exhortation to Archippus. Archippus is addressed in Philemon as "a fellow-soldier" meaning a Christian worker. This is confirmed here where he is addressed as one having received a ministry in the Lord. He was probably the brother of Apphia, the wife of Philemon. According to Lightfoot this family of Onesimus, Philemon, Apphia and Archippus were all stoned to death during the reign of Nero. (Source International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia)

Archippus was told to "Look to the ministry which you received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it." Whether tiredness, discouragement or apathy or some distraction had overtaken Archippus we do not know. Rather we know what he was to do next - to pay attention to his ministry to fulfill it. Not to wander away into other things.

"Look to the ministry which you received in the Lord" means firstly that ministry is not a choice, it is not something we choose to do or not do. It is a precious gift which we receive from God and should pay attention to. Paul even said "woe unto me if I do not preach the gospel". Ministry is

not something we can forget about when it gets tough or put aside when fame and fortune beckon. A ministry is a destiny and we should fulfill it.

There are three things we should pay attention to in ministry. The first is our own character and the second is our doctrine and teaching of the word of God. "1Ti 4:16 Give attention to yourself and to the doctrine; continue in them, for doing this, you will both deliver yourself and those hearing you." The third is the quality, diligence and Christ-centeredness of our ministry "take heed how you build" (1 Cor 3:10-15). We are to be holy, we are to be scriptural and we are to be focused, diligent and centered on the gospel.

It's easy to think that one's ministry is "so small it doesn't count" and to feel that if you give up no-one will notice. But Paul did notice! He had an eye on his fellow-soldier and pulled this one back into the ranks and into service. If you have a ministry - pay attention to it, look to it, put your energy into it. Do you supervise others? Then encourage them to stay on task!