

New Testament 501
Term Paper 2- Development of Paul's Theology
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CHRIST IS ALL AND IN ALL

Exegesis of Contested Text

The pericope I have chosen to compare and contrast with Galatians 3:28 is Colossians 3:11, which states, “*In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all*” [NRSV]. Both pericopae utilize what scholars refer to as the “*baptismal reunification formula*”,¹ although there are some changes of both wording and of intended use in the epistle to the Colossians. The formula itself- where former antinomies and standard cultural identifications are dissolved in the unity of being “in Christ”- seems to function on a few different levels, all of which are bound up with one other. The *theo-spiritual* dimension is that with this baptism ‘in Christ’ “one returns to the state of creation, as in Genesis 1:26, when all humanity was unified”.² In *The Wisdom Jesus*, Cynthia Bourgeault writes that this is “a path” whereby we “acquire Jesus’ consciousness... a state we would nowadays call “nondual” or “unitive” consciousness”.³ And Alan Segal argues that these types of passages in Colossians (and in Ephesians) “give irrefutable evidence about the popularity of Paul’s mystical teaching among his earliest disciples and the direction in which these teachings were interpreted”.⁴

Whether or not many of the congregants of the early churches were actually experiencing full mystical “divine union”⁵ or not is hard to say (and probably unlikely), but this sacramental *metanoia* must have been spiritually transformative to some degree for it serve its second function, which was as a source of *social cohesion*. Colossians uses a lot of the “language of belonging”,⁶ and the “emphasis on elements that promote the cohesion of the group and its internal harmony is even greater in Colossians than in the

¹ White, L. Michael. *From Jesus to Christianity*. USA: HarperCollins, 2004. p. 183. Also: Meeks, Wayne. *The First Urban Christians- The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983. p.88.

² White, L. Michael. *From Jesus to Christianity*. USA: HarperCollins, 2004. p. 183

³ Bourgeault, Cynthia. *The Wisdom Jesus- Transforming Heart and Mind, A New Perspective on Christ and His Message*. Boston: Shambhala, 2008. p.29-30.

⁴ Segal, Alan F. *Paul the Convert- The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. p.69.

⁵ “In theological language, [the mystic’s] theory of knowledge is that the spirit of man, itself essentially divine, is capable of immediate communion with God, the One Reality”. Underhill, Evelyn. *Mysticism- A Study in the Development and Nature of Consciousness*. New York: Dover, 2002 [1911]. p.24.

⁶ Meeks, Wayne. *The First Urban Christians- The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983. p.85.

authentic letters of Paul”.⁷ Colossians was likely written 20-30 years after Paul’s death and at a time when the church had begun to grow and have some success, and as I will speak to more in the section involving historical reconstruction, a core context/need for the congregation of Colossians was “community-stabilizing institutionalization”.⁸ The baptismal reunification formula would have helped to achieve this goal as it “dramatiz[ed] the break with the past and integration into the new community”.⁹ The fact that a version of the formula is also found in both Galatians (3:28) and 1 Corinthians (12:13), indicates that there is a strong chance that the author of Colossians was either familiar with these texts or with the oral transmission of the formula in some way.

The third function of the formula is as a basis of *ethical exhortation*. In Colossians, after a stunning reimagining of Christ in chapter 1 as the ‘Cosmic Christ’ who rules over all, which gets used as part of a polemic against false teachers in the congregation in chapter 2, chapter 3 offers a set of ethical instructions for what a life that has been baptized ‘in Christ’ should look like. In Col 3:10 the author states that this new behavior will be like putting on a “new self”, one that is “renewed” in the “image of its creator”. The baptismal formula that follows this in 3:11 might seem out of place or arbitrarily inserted, but the text makes it clear that it is to be understood within this greater context of the new life in Christ. However, different translations render the link differently. I surveyed four different translations, and the NRSV begins 3:11 with “in that renewal there is no longer” etc. The New Jerusalem Bible says “in that image there is no room for distinction”, while the Revised English Bible and the New American Bible say, “there is no question here of”. Arthur Patzia argues that, “The NIV preserves the continuity of thought by translating the Greek particle *hopou*, which commonly denotes place (“where”) as *here-* that is, within a new or renewed humanity”.¹⁰ I don’t think the differences in translations for this passage change the interpretative possibilities all that

⁷ Meeks, Wayne. *The First Urban Christians- The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983. p.127.

⁸ Macdonald, Margaret A. *The Pauline Churches- A Socio-historical Study of Institutionalism in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Churches*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. p.89.

⁹ “A second way of dramatizing the break with the past and integration into the new community is found also in the language of the baptismal ritual to which allusions are made in Galatians 3:28, 1 Cor 12:13, and Col 3:11”. Meeks, Wayne. *The First Urban Christians- The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983. p.88.

¹⁰ Patzia, Arthur G. *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*. Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 990. p.77.

much. In each one the necessary link is made, which is extolling us to realize and affirm that “the consequence of being in Christ, of putting off the sins that exploit and divide humanity, of being renewed after the image of God, is the obliteration of all racial (Greek or Jew), religious (circumcised or uncircumcised), cultural (barbarian, Scythian), and social (slave or free) distinctions”.¹¹

Identification of Characteristic Theology

The fact that Paul and those carrying on the Pauline tradition used the baptismal formula in several different places (with a related passage in Ephesians 4:24) and in different ways, shows that “it was not a fixed formula so much as a cherished theme”.¹² The immediate social and theological context for Paul in Galatians was different than it was for the author of Colossians. In Galatians Paul is writing as the church and the delivery of his new revelation(s) regarding the consequences of the risen Christ are in their infancy, so there is a deep urgency and fragility at play. The primary divide that Paul is trying to overcome in Galatians is the one between Jew and Gentile, as the re-introduction of Jewish practices (such as circumcision) into the mostly Gentile congregation of Galatia was threatening to create terminal strife and divisions within the newly forming community.¹³ Thus the baptismal formula in Gal 3:28 was put in “strong terms”, with the point being that “not simply particular ethnic distinctions have been abolished, but the very possibility of such distinctions having any continuing meaning has ceased to exist”.¹⁴ To be “in Christ”, which for Paul we are to achieve via *faith* and not *the law*,¹⁵ is to render the dividing of humankind into two groups- Greek and Jew,

¹¹ Patzia, Arthur G. *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*. Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990. p.77.

¹² Dunn, James D.G. *The Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon*. USA: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996. p.223.

¹³ “Throughout this letter Paul seeks to maintain group integrity and reaffirm the social identity of the Galatians among whom he proclaimed his gospel of God”. Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch. *Social Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul*. USA: Fortress Press, 2006. p.179.

¹⁴ Dunn, James D.G. *The Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon*. USA: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996. p.223.

¹⁵ “Paul’s conversion entailed a single factor, faith, for the definition of a new community, not two different and equal factors, which risked creating different communities separating Jews and gentiles within Christianity”. Segal, Alan F. *Paul the Convert- The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. p.145.

circumcised and uncircumcised- “no longer appropriate”.¹⁶ This “singularity of the gospel” in Paul’s letter to the Galatians “radically extends Paul’s claim about the world-obliterating character of the gospel. As the gospel’s arrival obliterates the law, it also obliterates those other “places” with which people identify themselves, even the most fundamental places of ethnicity, economic and social standing, and gender. The only location available for those grasped by the gospel is “in Christ”.”¹⁷

The situation has changed somewhat when we get to the time period of Colossians. One of the main shifts is that Paul’s “imminent eschatology is gone”.¹⁸ Paul was convinced that the resurrection of Jesus was an eschatological event signaling that a turning of the age had begun, and that Jesus’ immanent return to earth would consummate this process. Thus at least part of his motivation for obliterating all former distinctions is that these earthly categories simply didn’t matter anymore, the completion of God’s salvific plan would wipe them clean anyway. But by the time we get to the context of Colossians, and this apocalyptic event has still not occurred, the emphasis shifts away from the imminence of the second coming towards community building and stabilization in the here and now. As we have seen, the baptismal formula is now set within the context of ethical guidelines and right living, and Colossians as a whole “serves primarily as ethical exhortation for living in the Roman world based on baptismal symbols”.¹⁹ These rules for living and their outward fruits also represent a new order and a new creation here on earth, and the church will act as a “signpost pointing to its final destiny but embodying now what God intended human life-in-society to be (Col 3:11; cf. Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 12:13)”.²⁰ It’s not that Paul was solely future oriented in his use of the baptismal formula in Galatians, for he “did not construe this unity to be merely “ideal” or “spiritual” or future, but took it to be an eschatological gift to be realized in the actual life of the congregation”.²¹ However, by the time of Colossians the emphasis has shifted

¹⁶ Dunn, James D.G. *The Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon*. USA: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996. p.223.

¹⁷ Gaventa, Beverly Roberts. *Our Mother Saint Paul*. London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007. p.68-69.

¹⁸ White, L. Michael. *From Jesus to Christianity*. USA: HarperCollins, 2004. p. 269.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.262.

²⁰ Martin, Ralph P. *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*. US: John Knox Press, 1991. p.124.

²¹ Meeks, Wayne A. ‘The “Haustafeln” and American Slavery: A Hermeneutical Challenge’. *Theology & Ethics in Paul and His Interpreters*. USA: Abingdon Press, 1996. p.244.

toward recognizing and honoring a much more *realized eschatology*. We can see this in the different final lines of the two passages. In Galatians it says, “for all of you are one in Jesus Christ”; Paul’s emphasis is a *time-oriented* one, and he is most interested in enacting this faith generated internal transformation found ‘in Christ’. In contrast, the last line of the Colossians passage reads, “but Christ is all and in all”; the internal dimension remains but now Christ consciousness is spread throughout the earth and even the cosmos, so the shift here is to a *spatial-orientation*. In this move you can feel the grounding down of the earth-bound church to its needs and duties in the world of its own historical context, which we will now investigate in more detail.

Historical Reconstruction

A good majority of scholars are convinced that the disputed letters, including Colossians, “come from other Christians in the generation following Paul’s who saw themselves as standing in a tradition that he had established”.²² As was mentioned, the context has shifted away from the immediate intensity in Galatians where Paul was trying to both win converts to his new gospel and to mediate the conflict between newly integrating Jews and Gentiles, or between the former exclusive configuration of Judaism and those now entering Paul’s considerably expanded covenant. The use of the baptismal formula in Gal 3:28 was “an attempt to draw revolutionary consequences [of being “in Christ”] for the relations between members in the social realm. This is clearly what Paul is attempting to do with respect to the entry of Jews and Gentiles into the community...Paul’s primary interest is to legitimate his understanding of how the community should be built”.²³ In contrast, the church by Colossians time had become much more established, it had had some success, and now it was concerned with strengthening its community and its institutional foundations. As Lohse puts it, “Time was passing, and the church had to develop appropriate patterns for living in a changing world. A constitution of the church had to be developed, different ministries had to be

²² Fredriksen, Paula. ‘Historical Integrity, Interpretive Freedom: The Philosopher’s Paul and the Problem of Anachronism’. *St. Paul Among the Philosophers*. USA: Indiana University Press, 2009. p.63. Also: “The theological foundation affirmed as what was heard from Paul (Col 2:1-6) does indeed seem to be characteristically Pauline and of a relatively early sort, especially in its use of baptismal formulations (2:11-13; 3:1, 5, 9-12)”. White, L. Michael. *From Jesus to Christianity*. USA: HarperCollins, 2004. p. 263.

²³ Macdonald, Margaret A. *The Pauline Churches- A Socio-historical Study of Institutionalism in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Churches*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. p.103-104.

described, and certain requirements had to be met by those responsible for the Christian congregations”.²⁴

It also had to focus on ways of maintaining group cohesion, as “first century Mediterranean’s were collectivistic persons. Group integrity was far more important than individual self-reliance”.²⁵ We can tell from chapter 2 in Colossians that there was some sort of disruptive or heretical element in the congregation, although scholars are undecided as to what its exact nature was.²⁶ However, we do know it was disruptive enough to warrant a polemical response, and many of its features- such as worshipping the “elemental spirits of spirits of the universe” (2:8)- are described by the author. The response to the heresy is a startling and remarkable one, as the church’s mission becomes worldwide in scope and Christ is now seen as the head of the cosmos, with “cosmic dominion over all principalities and powers”.²⁷ The communal body-of-Christ is now of universal span and about as inclusive in nature as is possible.

The use and nature of the baptismal formula in Colossians reflects this overall context as well as its immediate cultural setting/makeup, as the divisions it wants to dissolve are “primarily ethnic cultural distinctions”.²⁸ According to scholars, the congregation “was probably a mixture of all kinds of classes of people”,²⁹ and the intended use of Col 3:11 is “to generate unity among group members”.³⁰ The pairing of Greek and Jew is maintained but a second rendering of it- circumcision and uncircumcision- is added, which Dunn argues, “must surely indicate that the primary challenge to the Colossian believers was posed by local Jews”.³¹ The dyad of “slave and

²⁴ Lohse, Eduard. ‘Changes of Thought in Pauline Theology? Some Reflections on Paul’s Ethical Teaching in the Context of His Theology’. *Theology & Ethics in Paul and His Interpreters*. USA: Abingdon Press, 1996. p.148.

²⁵ Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch. *Social Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul*. USA: Fortress Press, 2006. p.23.

²⁶ “There seems to be a consensus emerging that the heresy represents a form of Hellenistic Judaism that was receptive to the popular religious piety of the day. Certain features of this piety (such as cosmic speculation and asceticism) tend toward Gnostic speculation”. Roetzel, Calvin J. *The Letters of Paul- Conversations in Context*. USA: Westminster John Know Press, 1998. p.139.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p.139.

²⁸ Dunn, James D.G. *The Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon*. USA: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996. p.223.

²⁹ Patzia, Arthur G. *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*. Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 990. p.77.

³⁰ Macdonald, Margaret A. *The Pauline Churches- A Socio-historical Study of Institutionalism in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Churches*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. p.104.

³¹ Dunn, James D.G. *The Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon*. USA: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996. p.225.

free” is also carried over to the new list. There are two new additions, barbarian and Scythian, and they “are not juxtaposed antithetically but enumerated together as representatives of stigmatized groups. The mention of barbarian and of a race known to be especially barbaric is made to stress the fact that old designations referring to the cultural inferiority or superiority of nations are no longer relevant”.³² In Colossians Christ is truly “in all”, and the covenant is extended not only past all ethnic lines but to a community that includes all of creation.

Comparing Galatians and Colossians

In this section I want to expand the point of comparison between Galatians and Colossians out to a discussion of some the more general theological differences between the two, and I want to highlight four points in particular. But before I turn to that, it is worth noting the ways in which they also overlap or have thematic resonances. Roetzel speaks to this well when he writes- “Lohse has pointed out how the author of Colossians integrates major motifs from the genuine letters. Especially noteworthy are similarities of epistolary style, their view of Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles, the use of traditional ethical materials, the understanding of wisdom, and the significance of the suffering of the apostle”.³³ So there is clearly much continuity between the uncontested and contested Pauline tradition. However, the shifts in theology that occur are also fairly substantial ones. The first one to note is a change from a *future eschatology* to a *realized eschatology*, as “the full experience of salvation, reserved for the future in the undisputed letters, now moves into the present or even the past. The future dimension almost disappears”.³⁴ In Romans 6:5 for instance, Paul writes that “we *will* certainly be united with him in a resurrection like this”, referring to a future moment. In Col 2:12 however, the author states, “you *were* also raised with him through faith in the power of God”, speaking of an event that has already happened. For Paul the future end “was central to his understanding of the church, his instruction for believers, and his personal sense of

³² Macdonald, Margaret A. *The Pauline Churches- A Socio-historical Study of Institutionalism in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Churches*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. p.103.

³³ Roetzel, Calvin J. *The Letters of Paul- Conversations in Context*. USA: Westminster John Know Press, 1998. p.137.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p.137.

mission”,³⁵ while in Colossians the author “consistently presents salvation as already having taken place, not as something to be awaited in the future”.³⁶ The final line of the baptismal formula in Col 3:11 represents this realized eschatology when it states “Christ *is* in all”.

Two other substantial shifts involve a new understanding of Christ and his role. In Colossians the theme of the church as the collective body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-27) is carried forward, but now Christ is at the head of that body (Col 2:19) with the church viewed as the trunk. White argues that this is the result of the need for a “more highly regimented ethical instruction” in Colossians,³⁷ and thus it can be seen as part of that process of developing “appropriate patterns of living” that was mentioned earlier; with Christ as head and ruler it is pretty clear who and what teachings are in charge. But Christ is not just in charge of the church in Colossians, but rules over the whole cosmos as well, he is “the center of the cosmos- natural, social, and supernatural- that created the world and makes the world new each day”.³⁸ Although Prageant claims this cosmic emphasis was “the author’s own”,³⁹ there is a long lineage of this kind of thought both in the Jewish tradition (in the ‘wisdom’ literature and the prophets in particular) and in both Platonic and Stoic thought,⁴⁰ and it would seem likely that the author was drawing off of this rich tradition in some way. Meeks argues that the authors of both Colossians and Ephesians were using “this picture of cosmic reconciliation in order to glorify the unity of the Christian community and appeal to their audiences to maintain unity”.⁴¹ While I have no doubt that the cosmic Christ notion functioned (probably successfully) in this way, I find this claim to be too reductive. In the final section I will speak to how this cosmic understanding contains valid ontological content that has enduring and important significance for the church today.

³⁵ Roetzel, Calvin J. *The Letters of Paul- Conversations in Context*. USA: Westminster John Know Press, 1998. p.136-137.

³⁶ Pregeant, Russell. *Engaging the New Testament- An Interdisciplinary Introduction*. USA: Fortress Press, 1995. p.418.

³⁷ White, L. Michael. *From Jesus to Christianity*. USA: HarperCollins, 2004. p. 267.

³⁸ Chilton, Paul. *Rabbi Paul- An Intellectual Biography*. New York: Doubleday, 2004. p.248.

³⁹ Pregeant, Russell. *Engaging the New Testament- An Interdisciplinary Introduction*. USA: Fortress Press, 1995. p.418.

⁴⁰ Fox, Matthew. *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1988. Pt. III.

⁴¹ Meeks, Wayne. *The First Urban Christians- The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983. p.90.

The final point of difference in the two theologies that is important to point out is the inclusion of the *Haustafeln* or household code of ethics in Col 3:18-4:1, which is not found in the undisputed letters. Some see this as the “inclusion of a less radical stance” in Colossians,⁴² as it reintroduces several hierarchies that were undercut by the baptismal formula in Gal 3:28. (The distinction male/female has been removed from the Colossians formula for instance). However, this development needs to be read against the cultural context of the time, and Macdonald summarizes this nicely when she writes, “It is evident that norms are developing as a result of the interplay of the ethical implications of being found in Christ with the standards prescribed by the society of the day”.⁴³ Even John Dominic Crossan, who writes that this difference represents “two absolutely divergent traditions”, concedes the pragmatic necessity of its source- “It seems most likely, therefore, that their purpose was to insist that Christian families were not at all socially subversive, but were as good as, if not better than, the best of those around them”.⁴⁴

Contemporary Application

We live in a time where the global capitalist economic system has grown to engulf the whole earth. As the political theorists Hardt and Negri write in their book *Commonwealth*, “One primary effect of globalization is the creation of a common world, a world that, for better or worse, we all share, a world that has no “outside””.⁴⁵ On the one hand this is bad news, for this economic system is a source of great inequality and systemic violence.⁴⁶ On the other hand, it has ushered in an unprecedented opportunity for human solidarity, as we have all been forcefully united within the web of this global world-system. Hardt and Negri have proposed the concept of *the multitude* as a way of conceiving of a new global citizenry under these conditions, and political theologians have picked it up. Rieger and Pui-lan write- ““Multitude” is a term that symbolizes this

⁴² Pregeant, Russell. *Engaging the New Testament- An Interdisciplinary Introduction*. USA: Fortress Press, 1995. p.419.

⁴³ Macdonald, Margaret A. *The Pauline Churches- A Socio-historical Study of Institutionalism in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Churches*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. p.105.

⁴⁴ John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed. *In Search of Paul- How Jesus's Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire With God's Kingdom*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004. p.123,116.

⁴⁵ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Commonwealth*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2009. vii.

⁴⁶ “Top down globalization, in its various manifestations, creates concentrations of power and wealth in the hands of a few, to the detriment of the majority of people”. Rieger, Joerg. *Globalization and Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010. p.6.

coming together in ways that respect different traditions, cultures, and ways of life. “The multitude” stands for what has often been described as unity in difference”.⁴⁷ It strikes me that at this moment in history the baptismal reunification formula could not be of more importance to both embrace and enact, and that the Christian church could be a leader in modeling this new global community, fusing the body of Christ with “the flesh of the multitude”.⁴⁸

But maybe dissolving these human distinctions (and creating a living unity-in-diversity) is today not going quite far enough. What if there was also no longer *man nor nature*, or *man nor earth*, or *man nor cosmos*? That is, are we ready to fully absorb the teaching of the Cosmic Christ and put on the mind of the cosmos? For this to happen I believe we will need to unite the realized eschatology of Colossians *with* the future eschatology of Paul, creating an evolutionary *panentheism* in the process. With this integration we can recognize the ‘kingdom of God’ that is already here as Jesus taught (Luke 17:21), while also actively serving Thy Will so that God’s future kingdom might come here on earth. I believe we can find our way out of the profound exile and injustice of our time through this *planetary metanoia*, through an alignment with the unfolding *cosmic apotheosis*, through an increasing collective recognition of the Christ that is all and in all.

⁴⁷ Jeorg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan. *Occupy Religion- Theology of the Multitude*. UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012. p.59.

⁴⁸ “The flesh of the multitude is pure potential, an unformed life force, and in this sense an element of social being, aimed constantly at the fullness of life”. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Multitude- War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin Press, 2004. p.192.

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