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Living in Difficult Times: Insights from Ancient Colossae

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Abstract: The current challenges facing Australian Churches in the light of national and international tensions are critical. A response is required, one that is spiritual and educational, that draws on the wisdom of the Christian tradition and speaks to the current lived experience of people. This response will also affirm the ongoing thirst for “spirituality” in our world. The tendency in some methodologies to emphasise doctrinal content needs to be balanced by one that affirms our cultural and historical present, and the spiritual quest of people. The *Letter to the Colossians* speaks a balancing voice to doctrinal exclusiveness. A study of the author’s concern expressed in the letter reveals an emphasis on “knowledge” with its unique nuance, and a christological focus that reflects a desire to “educate” in difficult times. In addition, the author addresses the tendency to adopt a form of religious exclusiveness and asceticism divorced from the real world and the faith tradition into which the audience were baptised.

SECULAR PROGRESS PRESENTS A CHALLENGE to Australian Christian Churches. In his writings on spirituality, David Tacey identifies the price that Australians are now paying for secularity – and all that goes with it.¹ Secular progress has resulted in a decline in moral standards, a lessening of love, trust and respect, and an inability to identify what deeply sustains or nurtures. In his wide reaching analysis of social and economic trends in Australia, Tacey also recognises a counter movement. This is the movement of the soul, a deep desire among us to live differently, not forced into a way of being that is shaped by monetary, military and political power. For Tacey, spirituality is a public issue that needs to touch politics and transform governments.² It also needs to be reclaimed by our churches. The recognition by the churches that more people are now attracted to “new-age” movements and are searching for

1. D. Tacey, “Spirituality and the Common Good”, *South Pacific Journal of Mission Studies* 20 (1998), 3-6; D. Tacey, *Re-enchantment: The New Australian Spirituality* (Sydney: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000); D. Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality* (Sydney: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003).

2. Tacey, “Spirituality”, 6.

a sense of truth and meaning outside of traditional religious practice is a valuable insight. This acknowledgment is also an invitation to look for ways in which the Christian churches can tap into this search for the spiritual among those disenchanted by a world that promises so much but seems to offer so little. Many struggle to retain a sense of joy in the present and an optimism for their future, in the face of a growing awareness of vulnerability in the light of national and global events.

This experience of disenchantment, to take a lead from Tacey, reveals the underside of something deeper that is moving within people. This time of difficulty is also, potentially, a time of grace. For the Christian churches it is an opportunity for renewal, re-formation and learning. The experience of crisis touches the core of religious faith. Where is God in our world? Our faith – what we believe about the world, God and humanity – sustains and enables us to interpret what is happening. It enables us to live with a sense of optimism and freedom, even though we may know that we live in difficult times.

The acknowledgment or recognition that this is a historically timely moment for the churches touches on *what* is believed and *how* to believe. If there is a need in our churches today, then, it is not only structural renewal that links with ministry, leadership and authority. It is also about spirituality and education, about how we envision our future and tap into the deepest movement of the Spirit within our personal lives and institutions, and how to sustain future generations with confidence with a spirit-filled vision. For the Christian community, education is key to this. It has always part of our attempt to understand the present and look to the future with confidence. Through a process of reclaiming foundational truths and interpreting these in the light of the present, believers have found their hope restored, faith renewed and charity deepened. Authentic education affirms and deepens the recognition of the spirit within. It helps to reclaim our souls.

Reclamation of the importance of the church's faith *content* with a sound educational *methodology* is fundamental to addressing the social concerns and theological issues that preoccupy us.³ Insights into this task might come from unusual sources, but the Second Testament is stocked with examples of how early Christian communities sought to understand its faith and discipleship of Jesus in the light of ever-new social issues. It is an important collection of writings that invites consultation, and perhaps emulation, today. My focus in what follows

3. Every act of teaching, however it is defined, requires an approach or method. In recent years within the churches, and particularly the Catholic Church, the emphasis has been on the orthodox presentation of what is authoritatively taught. While some educators might see here an emphasis that is exclusively content-driven and identified with catechetical texts guaranteeing an accurate "transmission" of content, implicit even in this restricted approach to education is an approach or methodology. Making educational methodology explicit might help in allowing the wisdom of Christian faith to engage fruitfully the world of participants.

is on a Second Testament writing, perhaps one that is least read today and a most unexpected witness to educational content and methodology, the *Letter to the Colossians*. A brief overview and scholarship's summary of the writing might be helpful.

OVERVIEW: LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

The *Letter to the Colossians* is addressed to a small Christian community of mixed Jewish-Gentile background living in an ancient Greco-Roman city in the Lycus River Valley region in south-central Asia Minor (or present day Turkey).⁴ My interest in the Letter was renewed a few years ago when I first stood on the site of ancient Colossae, about an hour's plane journey from Istanbul, and about as far away as Adelaide from Melbourne. Though the site is currently unexcavated, a project conceived in Australia to collaborate with civil and university authorities local to the ancient site will initiate excavation work in the next few years.⁵

The Letter to the Colossians was written sometime in the latter half of the first century CE, possibly in the mid 60s. While it has long been attributed to St Paul, a growing number of scholars would now associate its authorship with either a colleague or disciple of Paul, perhaps Epaphras, who felt authorised to write in Paul's name. Parallel to our experience, commentators have even suggested that the letter is dealing with churches in crisis. Paul's death, they argue, brought on a serious crisis amongst some of those Christian communities founded though the Pauline mission. New pastoral situations were freshly denting their religious confidence in Paul's earlier teaching.⁶ To address the situations being confronted and bolster faith in these times of crisis several letters were written bearing the stamp of Pauline authority or "legacy". One of these was the *Letter to the Colossians*, a foundational text used by the author of the *Letter to the Ephesians*. While there is a debate about the authorship of the *Letter to the Colossians*, there is no questioning its authenticity or importance in the Second Testament. Unfortunately, though, it is not one of our most read pieces.

4. There is some debate about the social matrix and make-up of Colossian Christianity, though the picture presented here is a summary of the majority of scholars. See, for example, Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000) 9-10; Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Ephesians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990) 2.

5. A cooperative archaeological venture has been established between Pamukkale University (the university closest to the site), and two South Australian Universities, through the schools of theology and archaeology of Flinders University and the Classics Department of Adelaide University. Formal survey of the site is planned in the next 12 months, with archaeological work due to begin soon after.

6. This is a central theme of M. MacDonald in *The Pauline Churches: A Socio-Historical Study of Institutionalization in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Its layout is similar to Paul's authentic letters: (I) a standard opening greeting; (II) a prayer of thanksgiving; (III) the body of the letter setting out key teachings and ethical implications for the Colossians; (IV) a concluding farewell. Colossians may be divided thus:⁷

- I. Introductory Greeting (1:1-2)
- II. Thanksgiving (1:3-8)
- III. Body of the Letter (1:9-4:6)
 - Pauline Indicative: Teaching about God and Jesus (1:9-2:15)
 - Pauline Imperative: Ethical living: ascetical practices, household life, social conduct (2:16-4:6)
- IV. Concluding farewell (4:7-18).

Though this literary pattern is familiar, its rhetorical style is not. The complexity of some of the Greek sentences with their unique vocabulary (some words appear nowhere else in the Second Testament), the spatial and cosmic imagery, and the writer's engagement with what might be considered a specifically local philosophical and religious context, make the Letter to the Colossians challenging to read and study. This may help to explain the reason that present-day Bible buffs would not place it at the top of their list of most favoured Second Testament texts. Its lack of popularity, however, disguises something fundamentally relevant for contemporary Christians seeking to live in difficult times.

THE WRITER'S CONCERN

The author is interested in responding to local theological and philosophical concerns that seem attractive to the letter's audience. These emerge in the body of the letter in chapter 2.

In 2:4, the writer wants to protect the Colossians from being deluded "by plausible arguments". In 2:8 and 2:16-23 the nature of such "arguments" becomes explicit:

...See that no one captures you through philosophy and empty deception according to the traditions of human beings, according to the elemental spirits of the cosmos and not according to Christ (2:8).⁸

...Therefore do not let anyone judge you in food and drink or in observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow

7. The simple structure offered here incorporates the scholarly consensus about the division of the letter. See, for example, E. K. Simpson and F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1980) 174-5; MacDonald, *Colossians*, vi; Lohse, *Colossians*, 3-4. The names for the division of the "Body of the Letter" ("Pauline Indicative", "Pauline Imperative") are borrowed from Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) 600, though the proposed verse division differs from Brown's.

8. Unless indicated, the texts are my own translation.

of what is to come, but the body is of Christ.⁹ Let no one disqualify you, insisting on false-humility and worship of angels, relying on visions, being vainly conceited by a human way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head, from whom every body, by means of ligaments and sinews is nurtured, being held together to grow the growth that is of God. If you have died with Christ to the elemental spirits of the cosmos, why do you live ruled by the cosmos? “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”? All these refer to things that perish with use; according to the rules and teachings of human beings. These have an appearance of wisdom through self-imposed piety, false-humility, and severe bodily discipline, but they have value only in satisfying self-indulgence. (2:16-23)

From these two texts the issues that the writer is concerned about emerge clearly. While theological interests pervade the writer’s agenda, here the main concerns are about rituals, beliefs and practice.¹⁰ Some Colossians seem to be influenced by a philosophy, regarded by the writer as an inauthentic human way of thinking (“empty deception according to the traditions of human beings” – 2:8), that emphasises the role of spiritual forces and powers (“elemental spirits of the universe” – 2:8, 20) that seek to entrap people. In the local cosmology these spirits hold sway and need to be assuaged. They could well be identified with cosmological “powers” and principalities and somehow linked to “the worship of angels” (2:18), which some scholars have argued is a cult focussed on angels.¹¹

9. See the discussion of this thesis by Martin Troy, “But Let Everyone Discern the Body of Christ (Colossians 2:17)”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (1995), 249-55, who argues that the writer is building up a positive argument rather than drawing a contrast between what the errorists teach (which is a shadow) and what the Colossian Christians are expected to do (in preparing for what is to come in Christ). In an unpublished paper, E. Prior, “Colossians 2:16-19”, proposes that the phrase translated above as “but the body is of Christ” can arguably also be the subject governing the verb of judgement. In other words, the body of Christ also becomes the judging agent of what is acceptable in Christian cultic practice. The body of Christ can judge in contrast to those others who cast judgement on the Colossian Christians. H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1975), 377, hints at the link between “body” and the “Body of Christ” throughout Colossians and Ephesians. This link could arguably be sustained in 2:17.

10. MacDonald, *Colossians*, 105. Taking a different tack, R. M. Royalty, “Dwelling on Visions: On the Nature of the so-called ‘Colossians Heresy’”, *Biblica* 83 (2002), 329-357, argues that, besides being dated post-70 C.E., Colossians was composed in response to an emphasis in Christian circles on apocalyptic prophetic activity and the visions of heavenly worship encouraged by John, author of the Book of Revelation. On use of the term “errorist” see n. 16 below.

11. V. P. Furnish, “Colossians, Epistle to the”, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (6 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 1.1092, and MacDonald, *Colossians*, 112-3, offer helpful summaries of the scholarly discussion. C. Arnold prefers to interpret the expression “worship of angels” as part of the author’s condemnation of magical practice in which angels were invoked as protection from evil: see *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae*. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1995).

Whatever the nature of such worship, the author's concern is about the visionary, ecstatic nature of a physical system of asceticism promoted by the writer's opponents. Reliance upon these human regulations and an multifaceted ascetical regime rather than on the heart of the Gospel – Christ – has compromised the faithfulness of the Colossian Christians.¹² They seek to submit to a cosmos apparently ruled by elemental spirits or angels with whom the Colossians need harmonious relationships. Only in this way, through rigorous asceticism and what appears to be an almost proto-Gnostic renouncement of the physical world, it is argued, will they be able to ward off evil and access the "pleroma", the divine fullness.¹³ Subservience, voluntary submission to the cosmic and angelic powers is the sure guarantee for participation in divine life. In this philosophy there is no room for Christ, or if Christ is central, submission to regulations has become more important.¹⁴ Alternatively, as Arnold puts it, access to angels is proposed as much easier than to God. Their worship becomes the divine substitute.¹⁵

A delicate balance needs to be struck by the writer. On the one hand there is a truth in the position of the "errorists" with their appreciation of the spiritual, the acknowledgment of human involvement in religious practice, the importance of an angelic cosmology.¹⁶ But the writer interprets their emphasis as one that leads the Colossians away from the fundamental grounding of their faith in Christ, the Christian community and its appreciation of ritual initiation into Christ's life through baptism. In the author's view, as Colossian Christians seek a path towards spiritual union, they seem to combine authentic Gospel insights with practices found in local Jewish and Gentile religions and Phrygian cults. I say "seem" because the exact nature of the religious syncretistic practice is unclear. Its hypothetical reconstruction suggested above is only possible through reading behind the text of Colossians and trying to reconstruct it from what is written in the letter, and what we know

12. For the recognition of the asceticism's multifaceted nature in the Greco-Roman world see V. L. Wimbush (ed.), *Ascetic Behaviour in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) esp. 20-21; and R. Valantasis and V. L. Wimbush (eds.), *Asceticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

13. See Lohse's interpretation of the syncretistic position of the writer's opponents as he gleans the main points of their philosophy from quotations and catchwords in the letter in *Colossians*, 127-31.

14. M. R. D'Angelo, "Colossians", in E. S. Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*. (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 319-20, presumes that the stance of the writer's opponents was not less Christo-centric. Their emphasis lay rather on ascetic practice and visions. See also MacDonald, *Colossians*, 116.

15. Arnold, *Syncretism*, 60.

16. "Errorists" is Arnold's term to describe the theological and christological position of those with whom the author is in debate (*Syncretism*, 95, 101).

about Phrygian and Anatolian folk traditions, local beliefs about angels, and Jewish practices.¹⁷

A discussion on the nature of the pastoral concerns that the letter seeks to address also goes along with the letter's purpose in linking the present audience with the authentic tradition that comes from Paul himself. Employing social science methods of biblical interpretation, Margaret MacDonald understands the letter as an attempt to legitimate the next stage of ecclesial existence, when the death of the significant preacher (Paul) has brought on a crisis amongst the Colossian Christians. The letter affirms the transition that has taken place as a result of Paul's death, the next stage of leadership in the community and the need to address the pastoral issues the community is facing in this new era. Though the Colossian Christians are without the benefit of the historical Paul's wisdom, Paul's teaching can still strengthen them. This teaching is reshaped and developed to address their situation and respond to religious opponents.¹⁸

Further, MacDonald suggests that the Colossian opponents should not be thought of as a single, identifiable syncretistic group, but rather as a number of people who exhibit a variety of religious and ascetical tendencies shared by several religious groups.¹⁹ These tendencies might have been adopted by Christian teachers and absorbed by some Colossian Christians into their religious lives and doctrinal aspirations. Their social practice would have also been influenced by this rigorous ascetical conduct.

The writer considers that the spiritual knowledge and religious experience offered by the errorists' philosophy are in need of mature wisdom and appropriate discernment. It is this tactic, developed by the writer from the beginning of the letter, that I seek to explore. This will lead me to a brief consideration of the unique christology of the writer of Colossians and then to some concluding remarks regarding the importance of the Colossian letter for developing an authentic approach to education in the Christian community and affirming recent insights into spirituality.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUES:

"TRUTH", "KNOWLEDGE", WISDOM", AND "SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT"

17. Several suggestions have been offered as to the exact nature of the meaning of the "worship of angels" that the letter opposes, and the identity of the Colossian opponents, from Jewish Gnostics to Anatolian syncretists. For a summary, see Arnold, *Syncretism*, 1-3.

18. An example of development in Pauline theology seen in Colossians occurs in the shift of the understanding of "hope" from a temporal-eschatological orientation to a more spatial one (MacDonald, *Colossians*, 41).

19. MacDonald, *Colossians*, 11-12.

The first hint of the writer's concern for the Colossian Christians emerges immediately in the traditional Thanksgiving section (1:1-8) and is expanded in the body of the letter (beginning at 1:9-10). After the letter's opening greeting (1:1-2) and in an intricately dense and tightly constructed sentence (1:3-6), the writer thanks God, among several things, for the faith, love and hope of the Colossian which has come from the "word of truth of the Gospel" that is bearing fruit throughout the world, which the Colossians have "heard". Because of their hearing of the Gospel through the agency of the "faithful minister" Epaphras, they have experienced God's grace "in truth" (1:7). In the next section, as the body of the letter begins (1:9-10), the author prays that the Colossian Christians "may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and discernment" (1:9). If the author's interest has not become clear the next verse makes it so. Here the author prays that the Colossians may "grow in the knowledge of God" (1:10).

From a glance at these early verses it is clear that the author's unease centres on the Colossians' "knowledge" (*epignosis*). Ungirding this is the writer's concern about "truth" ("word of truth of the Gospel" – 1:5), "wisdom" and "discernment". As I discuss each of these (knowledge, truth, wisdom, discernment) I will argue that the author's fundamental preoccupation about the Colossians' "knowledge" is not only to affirm the *content* of their faith but their lived-out appropriation of that faith. What interests me is the author's concern for the experiential dimension of religious faith. This emphasis offers a corrective balance to contemporary approaches of faith education almost exclusively content-driven and deeply suspicious of the experiential dimension in learning.

When we read these opening sections of the Letter to the Colossians, we quickly notice what seems to be at the heart of what has ultimately motivated the writing of the letter – *the truth of the Gospel*. This has implications for the way that Christ is appreciated or regarded by the Colossians that is unpacked in the magnificently rich christological hymn of 1:15-18 with its extended commentary in 1:19-20. The Colossians have been faithfully taught this truth, we learn, through an inter-personal dynamic ("hearing") that has engaged them in the depths of their being. The writer's use of language and complexity of sentence structure reflect the seriousness of what is at stake here. It has been noted by commentators that the two aspects, "truth of the Gospel" and its "knowledge", are characteristics of latter Second Testament writings.²⁰ But here in Colossians they have a unique nuance. At stake are the meaning of salvation, credibility of the Gospel and the authenticity of the Christian community's teaching.

The expression "truth of the Gospel" can be taken in two ways. It could refer to the *body* of teaching, or tradition of catechetical teaching

20. Lohse, *Colossians*, 18-21.

preached by faithful ministers like Epaphras and imbued with Paul's spirit. By the second half of the first century this tradition had become standardised or "fixed". This is the emphasis of "the Gospel" in the Colossian phrase "truth of the Gospel".

"Truth of the Gospel", with the focus now on "truth", can also refer to the *reception* of this tradition by the audience.²¹ The apostolic proclamation is received with comprehension and affirmation by the Colossian Christians. In other words, what is important is not simply the understanding of the meaning of the apostolic teaching, but its implications for the daily lives of those who "hear" and attend to its meaning. As Eduard Lohse has argued, "understanding" is intimately linked to "discernment" and "to the probing of things which a Christian ought to do and leave undone".²²

If what Lohse has suggested is correct, and it is certainly supported by 1:9, then we have here in Colossians an important development. It represents a significant difference from the conventional link between knowledge and truth found in other Second Testament writings, especially the Pastoral Letters (for example, 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Tim 3:7), with their concern for the preservation of apostolic formulation of teaching. This static formulation becomes significantly enhanced in the Letter to the Colossians. Noteworthy is the writer's interest in the *experiential reception* of the Gospel's truth in the lives of believers and the impact that this has in attitude and conduct.²³ This essential emphasis is what the writer means by "knowledge" – the principal preoccupation evident in the early sections of the letter. "Knowledge" concerns the personal and communal appropriation of the truth of salvation, the truth of the Gospel, the life that originates from God, revealed through Christ and into which the Colossians are initiated through baptism. This baptismal life is lived out in their world. It is this experiential dimension, not independent of, but linked to the Colossians' appropriation of what they understand to be their faith, that is important. This is the "wisdom" and "spiritual discernment" that the Colossians need, of which writer speaks in 1:9.

In verse 9, the adjective "spiritual" modifies "discernment" in the NRSV translation. The adjective could also be associated with "wisdom". Rather than seeing these virtues as ways of comprehending the universe – as in Greco-Roman literature – Colossians, in line with the wider biblical tradition, links them to God. They are purely God's gifts to believers. They do not come from human achievement, but from God's Spirit. They are also related to the human spirit. This is the

21. MacDonald, *Colossians*, 38; Lohse, *Colossians*, 18-19

22. Lohse, *Colossians*, 20

23. For more on the link between "knowledge" and "experience" see TDNT 1.706-7; Lohse, *Colossians*, nn 71-75: as connected to correct teaching that affects life.

reason they are described as “spiritual”.²⁴ Through them the Colossians come to an intimate, experiential knowledge of God. It is a knowledge not merely cognitive, but deeply relational. It touches the core of the Colossians’ humanity and their relationship to God through Christ.

THE COLOSSIAN CHRISTOLOGY

Reading behind the lines of the letter, it is possible to infer that, while the errorists may not deny that Christ was central for religious life, this centrality has in fact become displaced by the emphasis given to ascetical and ritual practices, the angelic cult and the cosmological role played by the “elemental powers”. In affirming the importance of knowledge, and especially its experiential dimension, the writer carefully builds up a radical christological picture in the first two chapters of the letter. This christology is developed in three steps, with the third (2:9-10) representing a christological zenith of the later Second Testament.

(i) The first major exposition of the role of Christ is evident in the famous christological-wisdom hymn of 1:15-18a.²⁵ Here Christ is presented as the visible presence of the invisible God who has domination over all cosmological powers and entities. In him God’s fullness dwells (1:19), enabling him to be the supreme agent of reconciliation (1:20-22).

(ii) In 1:27, God’s mystery, equated with the hope of glory, is the presence of Christ within the Gentiles, the audience of the letter. Christ then is not only a cosmological power and presence. He is also a personal presence with the believer. This identification of Christ as God’s “mystery” recurs in 2:2.

(iii) These christological assertions early in the letter prepare for and lead to what is a high point for late First Testament christology in 2:9-10 where the writer is engaged in serious critique of the errorists’ point of view:

...because in him the whole fullness of the deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority (2:9-10).

This exalted and optimistic christological vision is a masterpiece of theology. It presents Christ in images reminiscent of the prologue of the Fourth Gospel (Jn 1:1-18): his exaltation and pre-eminence over creation; his authority and iconic reflection of God; his ministry, coming

24. The link between “spiritual” and the ability to discern is supported by MacDonald, *Colossians*, 48; Lohse, *Colossians*, 27. This is a positive human capacity, originating from God, that enables the Colossians to interpret their world.

25. About the wisdom-inspired nature of this hymn see D’Angelo, “Colossians”, 317-8. J. C. Beker, *Heirs of Paul* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1992) 67, also explores the Sophia influence in Colossians.

to a climax in his death and resurrection, that brings about human community; the cosmic implications of his activity. As in John's prologue, all these features reflect the author's desire to provide a fresh christological portrait, closely reminiscent of the work of Sophia (Wisdom), the logic of which will be unmistakable for the Colossian audience: alignment to Christ and incorporation into him through baptism will ensure their union with the one who has total power and authority over those forces, powers and authorities which they see as threatening. Union with Christ is the only ascetical practice needed for the Colossian Christians. No other beliefs, rituals or practices can substitute for the importance of this in their lives.

CONCLUSIONS

Several conclusions can be gleaned from this brief overview which also affirm the need to tap our spiritual desires and which have implications for the present practice of education in the Christian community.

(i) *Pastoral Sensitivity*: The Pauline writer reveals sensitivity to the real issues facing his audience. As MacDonald notes, he wants to support them in a difficult time of change and leadership transition. The writer also wants to respond to the inauthentic theological and ascetical issues proposed by the writer's opponents. In constructing a response, the author adopts the vocabulary of the letter's opponents, and dramatically redefines their language in the light of a theological and christological tradition familiar to them. The approach adopted counteracts the attraction of an ascetical theology and life style, and draws on the wisdom of the audience's faith tradition. The writer is convinced of the power of Paul's teaching to speak freshly to the present situation. As the writer sees it, at issue is religious truth, the method of its presentation and the manner of its engagement.

(ii) *Cultural Awareness*: The letter radically affirms a style of human authenticity that respects the tradition of faith in which the audience has been baptised. At the same time it acknowledges and addresses the religio-cultural concerns that seem to be assaulting the Colossians' faith. The letter honours people's cultural experience, recognises the tensions of their lives, and calls them back to their relationship to God through the Christian community in their baptism. This is captured, in the first half of the letter, in a fresh christological formulation that is familiar from Paul's teaching but which is extended and articulated in a way that might address essential religious aspirations of the Colossians.

(iii) *Christo-centrism*: The writer clearly calls the Colossians back to the heart of the Gospel: the nature of Christ and his role in the cosmos. The writer engages the memory of their relationship with Christ initiated through baptism, redefining their understanding of him in

terms with which they are familiar.²⁶ This redefinition builds on an earlier Pauline presentation and offers a radical christological formulation drawing on cosmic imagery. It defines Christ in terms of the cosmos and its powers, over which he holds sway. This christo-centrism seeks to renew the audience's confidence.

(iv) *Religious Interiority and Human Experience*: At the heart of the author's approach in the letter is the concern to affirm the religious experience of the Colossian Christians and deepen the theological implications of their baptismal relationship to Christ and his community. Implicit is an agenda to dethrone the quasi-theological spiritual hegemony that has been propagated among the Colossians and to reclaim the central truths of the faith in which they already live.

Faced with a central pastoral task – one that could arguably cohere with the task of contemporary educators – the author uses a language that:

- speaks to those attracted to the theological presentations of the letter's opponents;
- affirms the faith tradition into which the Colossian Christians have been baptised;
- counteracts their open and indiscriminate use of a belief system derived from the opponents;
- and offers a radical christological response to their questions, attractions and concerns.

The author is concerned, as we are today, with the issues of discerning theological truth, and recognising and affirming the place of authentic religious experience. For the author, the authenticity of the Gospel as proclaimed by Paul and his colleagues, and the role which religious experience plays in validating this Gospel was at stake. In other words, apart from its approach – which could arguably be described in contemporary terms as education – Colossians is especially concerned with the centrality of religious interiority, experience and enlightenment in the growth of faith. These are necessary elements connected to deepening the Colossian Christians' appreciation of their inherited faith tradition.²⁷

26. R. Yates, "From Christology to Soteriology", *Expository Times* 107 (9/1996) 268-70, suggests that the christology of the letter is a response to the failure of the Colossian Christians to take seriously the implications of Christ's ministry in terms of their salvation and ethical life-style.

27. I recognise that the use of the contemporary term "education" as a description for what the Colossian author is saying is, of course, anachronistic. Still, given the cultural and chronological gap between the Colossians' world and our own, the aims of the letter's author and religious educators today seem parallel: to make sense of the present in the light of the inherited faith wisdom of the past. While the term "education" is contemporary, a community's desire to instruct and nurture people in the core sustaining beliefs and practices of its religious tradition is ancient. For a summary of educational tradition and history in the Mediterranean world before Christianity, see J. L. Crenshaw,

(v) *Liturgy and Worship*: The emphasis and use of the christological hymn in 1:15-18 leading to the christological highlight of 2:9-10, underscore the importance of liturgy and worship. What seems to be a worshipping and prayer style familiar to the Colossians is shaped around a reworked traditional hymn about Jesus drawn from liturgical sources and reshaped in the light of present needs. Rather than simply presenting information or instruction about Jesus, the writer is keen to draw on the liturgical and spiritual tradition of the audience. A careful integration of this material into the overall direction in which the letter moves enables the rhetoric to touch the spiritual life of the Colossians at depth. This appeal to human interiority or spirituality is one of the highlights of the letter. It recognises that human change or religious conversion is not simply a matter of cognition. The theological method evident in the sage use of various exhortatory and liturgical elements is further deepened by the content of what is presented.

(vi) *The Role of the Senses*: A brief note was made above about the role of the senses in coming to experience the truth of God in Christ. While “knowing” and “knowledge” is frequently associated with “seeing”, the opening section of the letter explored a different sensual activity. The Colossians’ faith grew through *hearing* the preaching of those who proclaimed the Gospel. “Hearing” is different from “listening”. The first is an active, personally engaged interaction with the speaker; the second is a passive reception of the content of what is said, which does not necessarily convey a sense of a person being radically engaged at their core. “Hearing” is emphasised twice (1:5, 6), being linked to their “faith in Christ Jesus” – an important and central characteristic that the author seeks to clarify, modify and encourage in the Colossian audience. It is around this that so much of the letter’s rhetoric is centred and about which there seem to be differing opinions. Some of these are diverting Christians onto a path of religious life that the writer considers inauthentic, misleading and dangerous.

(vii) *Practical Living*: In the final section of the letter (2:16-4:6) the learning dynamic implied in the body of the document spills over into the lives of the letter’s audience. The Colossians are encouraged to live lives shaped by the union with Christ in baptism in ways that reflect communal harmony paralleling the kind of harmony brought about in the cosmos through the power of Christ. This amounts to peace-filled behaviour amongst themselves, as well as bearing witness in their lives to the wider world. The household code (3:18-4:1) is particularly important for this. As MacDonald has convincingly argued, the code witnesses to the author’s effort to address the temptation of the Christians to move away from the world in which they live, and

counteracts the tendency of the errorists to remove them from their world in a form of spiritual nirvana.²⁸ The code encourages Christians to remain committed to the cultural demands and social issues that they encounter.

In summary, the appreciation of human experience and the emphasis on cultural relevance present in the Letter to the Colossians provides a corrective to the popular educational methodology that exclusively emphasises doctrinal correctness and theological orthodoxy. Doctrinal truth and orthodoxy are, of course, necessary. But the Letter to the Colossians also recognises the importance of human experience in this search for truth and meaning. The need for people's lives to be touched and nourished at the deeper level is what sustains and deepens faith in a world of social change, cultural conflict and personal upheaval. The author offers a clarifying voice that helps the Colossian Christians discern how to grow in authentic spiritual enlightenment and wisdom. It is this enlightenment and wisdom that is needed today.

28. MacDonald, *Colossians*, 8, 159-69.