PUTTING ON THE NEW SELF: AN EXEGESIS OF COLOSSIANS 3:5-11

The letter written to the Colossians packs a Christological punch for Christian theology. The great Christ hymn and its focus on the cosmic Christ in 1:15-20 exemplifies the thoroughly Christocentric nature of the letter. This being the case, many have dichotomized the book of Colossians exegeting, teaching, and/or preaching chapters 3 and 4 as isolated imperatives. In this paper, the aim will be to properly place the imperatives of Colossians 3:5-11 in relation to the Christological focus of the letter. In so doing, one should be able to better understand both the flow of the letter to the Colossians and the relationship between the indicatives and imperatives in the letter. This proper approach to the textual horizon will allow one to move towards understanding the passage in light of its epochal, canonical, and contemporary horizon.¹ These four horizons will form a natural outline of exegesis for this paper. The majority of time will be allotted to the textual horizon on the basis of its foundational nature in relation to the other three. When the exegetical work is done, the author hopes to prove that Colossians 3:5-11 provides imperatives to live in relation to one’s position in Christ. It is to the exegetical task at hand that we now turn, first dealing with the textual horizon.

¹ The textual, epochal, and canonical horizons are borrowed from Richard Lentz while Brian Payne has added the contemporary. While the textual horizon can be approached with no particular Christian presuppositions, the epochal and canonical rely heavily on a belief in the divine author of the Christian scriptures, who guides and directs his divine storyline through the Christian canon. The contemporary horizon, not unlike the epochal and canonical, believes that God’s drama continues through his church and that the holy scriptures are indeed living and active, speaking both cross-culturally and diachronically.
The Textual Horizon

Within the textual horizon of Colossians 3:5-11 there are a few introductory matters that help set the context for these verses. These introductory matters find their importance in that the letter to the Colossians must be read on its own terms. This means understanding the author of the letter, the audience to which he is writing, date/place of writing, the overall purpose of the letter, and how 3:5-11 fits into the broader context of the letter. After these matters are briefly addressed, the focus will be turned to a closer handling of the passage at hand.

Authorship

The letter to the Colossians has undergone considerable debate in regards to the introductory matters discussed above, and authorship is no exception. In his commentary on Colossians and Philemon, Doug Moo cites Raymond Brown, who says that about 60 percent of current scholars do not think Paul wrote Colossians.² The problem arises, however, in that Paul claims to have written the letter himself (1:1; 4:18). Because of this internal evidence, the view of those who do not hold Pauline authorship is forced to be: a pseudepigraphical work written by a follower of Paul sometime after his death. This type of pseudepigrapha has not been proven to exist and goes against the view held up until the 19th century that Paul himself wrote the letter.³ The reason that these scholars believe that the letter could not be written by Paul is based on the supposed non-Pauline language and theology. While one could discuss these areas at length, it is sufficient to say here that the burden of proof lies on those who hold to a pseudepigraphical type that has no precedent for canonical acceptance by the early church. The differences in the author’s Greek and theology are only moderately different from Paul’s and should be attributed

to the contextual and temporal situatedness of the letter. Would Paul’s language and theology not adapt and have different emphases over time and in relation to the people and situation he is addressing? All this is to say that the presupposition for this paper is that Paul is the author of Colossians. This presupposition is helpful in making connections with other Pauline ideas and letters, most notably the very similar letter to the Ephesians.

**Colossae and its Audience**

In regards to the city of which Paul’s audience lives, there is no sure agreement as to the significance of Colossae when the letter was written. In his commentary on Colossians, J.B. Lightfoot claimed that, “Colossae was the least important church to which any epistle of St. Paul was addressed.” F.F. Bruce, on the other hand, argues that, “there is inscriptive evidence that Colossae retained its importance into the second and third centuries A.D.” Whatever the case may be regarding size, the city was known commercially for its production of a dyed, dark red colored wool that was known as “Colossian.” The general ethical and cultural makeup of the city is fairly speculative, with most arguments being tied to one’s particular view on the

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3 By “this type” I mean to say the type in which the author’s message is accepted as authoritative even though it is clearly written pseudipigraphly.

4 Helpful arguments for Pauline authorship can be found: Wright, pp. 31-34; O’Brien, pp. xli-xliv; Moo pp. 28-41; For an alternative view, James Dunn (pp. 35-39), largely borrowing from Eduard Schweizer, argues for the possibility of joint-authorship between Paul and Timothy.


6 F.F. Bruce, *NICNT: The Epistle to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 5. Bruce critiques the citation of Strabo who called Colossians a “small town,” claiming that “the inference is invalid because of a lacuna in Strabo’s text at this point.” (p.5) He explains himself in f.7 of p. 5. Interestingly enough both Moo and O’Brien largely base their argument for the cities insignificance to this quote by Strabo (O’Brien explicitly, Moo implicitly by his quotation of Lightfoot who gathers his evidence from Strabo [Lightfoot, p.16, f.1]).

“Colossian Heresy.” There are indeed two general truths known about the people of Colossae. The first of these is that, as according to Douglas Moo, “its location on an important highway at a time of considerable mobility and the mixing of different ethnic groups that typified the Roman Empire meant that the population of Colossae was very diverse.” The second is that there was a significant Jewish population in Colossae. As to exactly how significant this Jewish population has been debated. Josephus is often cited as stating that the Seleucid ruler Antiochus III had settled two thousand Jewish families in the general area in 213 B.C. (Antiquities 12.3.4.) If this were the case, there would have certainly been a significant population at the time the letter was written.  The majority of the letter’s audience probably consisted of Gentile converts. Paul’s message to this church is very similar in language and polemics as some of his other letters, something a look at the dating and place of writing might help to explain.

**Date and Place of Writing**

There are numerous hypotheses over the dating of the book of Colossians and its provenance. There seems to be only one surety in this matter, namely that Paul was in prison at the time (4:3, 10, 18). The other factors taken into account are the trips spoken of in the letter, the names mentioned at the end, and the theology of the letter. A fourth factor not mentioned as often is the close relationship between Ephesians and Colossians. Many favor a Roman provenance dated from 60-62 for the book of Ephesians; it seems that the similarities of Colossians and Ephesians would place them near to each other. That being said, most dates for an Ephesian provenance would put Colossians between 52-57, a substantial amount of time

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9 Bruce provides a helpful section on this entitled “Jewish Settlement in the Lycus Valley,” pp. 8-13.
before the composition of Ephesians. While there is some able evidence for an Ephesian
provenance, a Roman provenance in 60-61 (before the earthquake in Colossae) is to be
preferred.11

**Purpose of the Letter**

As with the rest of the introductory matters, there is a bit of disagreement as to why
this letter was written. The majority of scholars believe that it was written to combat some sort
of false teaching within the church, while some believe that the idea of a specific false teaching
in the church is speculative. What can be gathered from the letter is that Paul is writing to the
church in Colossae to strengthen their hope in the sufficiency of Christ for knowledge and
spiritual growth. Paul has heard from Epaphras about this congregation which he had not yet
visited (1:7-8). His message to them seems to be pointed towards specific problems that he has
heard about in the congregation. Paul writes to encourage them not to be “taken captive by
philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of
the world.” (2:8) His alternative to this is to look to Christ “in whom are hidden all the treasures
of wisdom and knowledge.” (2:3) Along with the philosophies that they are tempted to hold to,
Paul criticizes the asceticism to which they have been persuaded to hold. Paul says that these
things, “have an appearance of wisdom,” but are indeed “of no value in stopping the indulgence
of the flesh.” (2:23) All of these false ideas are proactively critiqued by Paul in his setting forth
of a high Christology. Included in this is the “Christ Hymn” included at the beginning of the
letter (1:15-20). The preeminence of Christ is followed by his reconciling work on the cross

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10 See O’Brien pp.xxviii-xxx; Moo pp. 27-28
11 On the plausibility of an Ephesian provenance see Moo p. 41, Wright p. 34, O’Brien, p. lii. Some
different views on provenance and date: Wright, Ephesus, 52-55 (p. 37); Dunn, prefers Rome, last “Pauline” letter
(p.41); O’Brien, prefers Rome, 60-61 (p. liv); Bruce, Rome, early 60s (p.32); Moo, prefers Rome, 60-61 (p. 46).
(2:10-15). In this section lies the ammunition to defeat asceticism. The law has been fulfilled in Christ, and only a lifestyle lived in light of one’s position in him is profitable for sanctification. The commands and imperatives of chapters three and four are possible only because the old self has died with Christ and the new self is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator (3:9-10).

**Place of 3:5-11**

As mentioned above the imperatives of chapter 3 and 4 are built off of the indicatives of chapters 1 and 2. The first four verses of chapter three appear to be pivotal in the turning point of the letter. In these four verses you have a sufficient answer to asceticism. The answer to that which is ill equipped in stopping the indulgence of the flesh is in ones position with the risen Christ. The answer for defeating sin and growing for sanctification for Paul is a reorientation to what has been done for the believer in Christ. If what has been proclaimed in chapters 1 and 2 about Christ is true, then the believer has all the necessary resources in Him to defeat what is earthly and to clothe themselves with Christian virtue. In this task we find both the negative parenesis (3:5-9) and the positive parenesis (3:12-16) not as burdensome, but as a joy. This is why the section of verses 3:1-17 ends with the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs *with thankfulness*. This sets the stage for understanding the placement of 3:5-11 within the letter.

**Textual Exegesis**

**v. 5** *Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.* The inextricable link between the indicatives, that which has been done and that which is true of the believer in Christ, and the
imperatives is made explicit by Paul’s language in v. 5. The first word in this sentence, *Νεκρώσατε*, makes a direct connection to a theological concept that has been drawn out in the first two chapters. Notice the language of death used so far in the letter:

1:22 “he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him…”
2:13 “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses…”
2:20 “If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world,”
3:3 “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

Put to death seems to be connected with the old life that has died. In this first set of moral commands there is an apparent connection to the indicative of one’s past participation in the death of Christ. Note the connection between verses 3 and 5: “For you have died” (v.3), “put to death therefore” (v.5).\(^{12}\) This would provide a nice correlation between verses 1-4 and the positive and negative parenthetical sections:

Vv. 1-4 …raised with Christ… seek things that are above… for you have died…

- Vv. 5-9a Put to death…

Vv.9b-11 having put off the old self and on the new self

+ Vv. 12-15 Put on then…

Here we see the explicit connection between the indicatives and imperatives for Paul. The motivation and empowerment for these moral commands comes from one’s participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. On this initial command Moo states:

We who have died to “the elements of the world’ (3:3; 2:20) and to the power of sin (Rom. 6:1-6) because of our union with Christ are to “become” dead to sin in the realities of everyday life. But this “putting to death” of sin is not only demanded by our incorporation into Christ; it is also empowered and effected by it… the imperative “put to death” in this

\(^{12}\) Moo states “As the similarity in wording indicates, the initial imperative in this paragraph –’put to death’ in v.1 – bears particular relation to the assertion in v. 3 that ‘you died.’” p. 252.
verse must be viewed as a call to respond to, and cooperate with, the transformative power that is already operative within us.\(^{13}\)

Most commentators agree that the phrase “τα μελη τα επι της γης” should be translated figuratively. This phrase in the Greek, literally reads, “the members which are upon earth.” This could be playing against the false teaching of asceticism. In contrast to “the asceticism and severity to the body,” Paul says that the severity should be “putting to death the members which partake of the old nature.”\(^{14}\) What is to be put to death is laid out in a list of vices. These lists were not something abnormal for Paul (Rom 1:29-31; 1 Cor. 5:11; 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:3-4). This particular list includes mostly sexual sins and may be contributed to a specific situation in Colossae. \(Πορνευω\) is a word originally used to describe relations with a prostitute “but probably covers a whole range of unlawful sexual intercourse.”\(^{15}\) The words impurity, lusts, and evil desires are all used often by Paul and also refer to sexual sins. The last in the list, covetousness, which is described as idolatry, is singled out by the \(κα\). This could perhaps be the root cause of the other sexual sins, a desire for more of something. It is described as idolatry because idolatry is precisely an over-desire of a good thing. It is turning a good thing into an ultimate thing. This is not to say that the sexual sins listed are good, but to say that sex is good but the unhealthy desire for sex in general produces these abuses. When these abuses take precedence over God’s commands and will regarding human sexuality, idolatry occurs.

v. 6 on account of these things the wrath of God is coming. The Lord will faithfully judge all sins. All wrongs will be put to right and his wrath will be satisfied. All false

\(^{13}\) Moo, p. 255.
\(^{14}\) O’Brien, p. 178.
gods and idols of the heart will be exposed for their insufficiency and those who have trusted in them will be punished for their sin and foolishness.

**v. 7 in these you too once walked, when you were living in them.** This verse clarifies the judgment pronouncement of verse 6; God’s judgment falls upon those who as a position and way of life walk in these sins. As shall be seen in verses 9 and 10, the believer once walked in these sins as a part of the old self, but is now being renewed in the knowledge and image of the creator.

**v. 8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.** In verse 8 we have yet another vice list. In the same way that the first list was initiated by a phrase that reminded us of the indicatives of chapters 1 and 2, here we also have a reminder. As Dunn and Wright pick up on, the nuni de of v. 8 should remind the reader of the nuni de in verse 1:22:

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<tr>
<th>1:21-22a</th>
<th>3:8a</th>
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<td>“And you, who once (ποτέ) were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, are yet now (νυνίς ἐκ) reconciled (Ind.) in his body of flesh by his death…”</td>
<td>After a list of evil deeds that they were told to put to death, having once (ποτέ) walked in them… “But now (νυνίς ἐκ) you must put them all away (Impv.)…”</td>
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The textual evidence is strong enough to suggest a correlation between these two verses. Paul is pointing them back, made apparent by the similar words and language\(^6\), to the indicative of ____________________________
reconciliation at the cross. Not only is there at tie within the text to an indicative passage, but the word usage of \( \nu \nu \nu \ \delta \epsilon \) normally signifies the coming of an indicative for Paul. James Dunn’s comment on the \( \nu \nu \nu \ \delta \epsilon \) is helpful in seeing the change of lifestyle emphasized:

“But now…” \( \nu \nu \nu \ \delta \epsilon \) echoes the decisive \( \nu \nu \nu \ \delta \epsilon \) in 1:22: a fundamental shift in ethical norms and character of conduct has taken place, the equivalent in personal time and outworking of the ephochal act of reconciliation on the cross. Somewhat surprisingly, however, the verb which follows is in the imperative, where one might have expected the indicative, as usually in Paul (particularly Rom. 3:21; 6:22; 7:6; 11:30; 1 Cor. 15:20; Col 1:22; Eph. 2:13)\(^{17}\)

This uncharacteristic usage of \( \nu \nu \nu \ \delta \epsilon \) by Paul seems to beg the question why. If the lexical evidence and theological similarities between this parenesis and the indicative of 1:22 is taken into account, then Paul is (as he was in the “put to death…” of v. 5) making a strong connection between the indicatives and the imperatives. It has already been put forth that Paul commands (or gives imperatives) on the basis of one’s position established in the indicatives. It is because of the reconciliation attested to in 1:21 that the believer can now put to death and put off the indulgences of the flesh. Paul will further his argument on this in verse 9.

In this second list of vices one sees the command to put off, which carries the idea of casting off one’s clothing\(^ {18}\). The specific vices which the author commands to cast of in this verse are connected to the attitudes and manifestations of harsh speech. In speaking of anger, wrath, and malice, Moo states that “Paul’s purpose is not to single out three specific sins but to

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\(^{16}\) While there are only two direct lexical connections as shown in the chart above, there are other ideas shared. For example 1:21 talks about those who “were once alienated and hostile in mind (\( \delta i \alpha \nu \varphi o i a \)" and 3:2 says “set your mind (\( \psi \rho o i \gamma i t e \)) on things that are above.” While the greek words (one is noun and one is a verb) are different the connection can be seen. The same goes for the mentioning of death in both sections. The theme of death was mentioned above and while the words are different again in these passages, 1:22 – \( \theta \gamma \nu \varphi i t o u \) and 3:5 – \( \\nu \kappa r o \mu o t e \), the connection in ideas is certainly there.

\(^{17}\) Dunn, p. 218.

\(^{18}\) Moo argues that it does not necessarily carry this meaning in the NT and should be understood as “put off,” p. 263.
use the three words together to connote the attitude of anger and ill will toward others that so often leads to hasty and nasty speech.\footnote{Moo, p. 264.}  These specific sins of the mouth are like the sexual sins in that they are visible and damaging to the recipient.  These two specific groups of sins are those that can do much harm and cause much division.  Even in these commands Paul remains very christocentric in that Jesus had much to say about one’s speech.\footnote{Moo notes that the phrase “εκ του στόματος αὐτοῦ” is the identical phrase used by Jesus in Matt. 15:11, 18; p. 264.}

v. 9-10 \textbf{Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.}  After giving a second vice list Paul gives a direct imperative and then gives the grounding and motivation for why the believers should obey.  It is in these two verses that Paul further reveals the connection between the indicative and the imperative.  The motivation and empowerment for the moral imperatives comes from one’s position in the new man.  The allusion here to Adam and Genesis 1:27 cannot be ignored.  As in Adam all died, in Christ all live (Rom. 5:12-18).  The similarities between Colossians 3 and Romans chapters 5 and 6 are striking.  In both Romans 6 and in Colossians 3 dying with Christ and being raised with him is spoken of as that which brings to death the old man and enables them to live in freedom and victory over sin.  The theological truth of one’s position in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ is also the grounding for the moral imperatives of Romans 6.\footnote{Only after the proclamation that in the crucifixion of the old man freedom from sin has been one does Paul give them imperatives: “not present your members to sin as instruments of unrighteousness,” Rom. 6:12-13}  In putting on the new man, the believer is participating in the restoration of humanity to its original created purpose.
The new man is indeed Christ, the first fruits of the new creation, who is restoring humanity to the image of its creator. As N.T. Wright states:

At last, in Christ, human beings can be what God intended them to be. This passage clearly looks back to 1:15-20; the intention of creation is fulfilled in redemption, and, conversely, redemption is understood as new creation.\textsuperscript{22}

In this newly created humanity found in Christ, all men are seen as equal. This leads to Paul’s egalitarian pronouncement in verse 11.

\textit{v. 11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.} The “here” in verse 11, \(\circ\pi\omega\), is speaking in regards to place. It is in this new humanity that all racial, religious, cultural, and social barriers are torn down.\textsuperscript{23} There is no racism or cultural elitism in this new humanity. The Jews have no more of a privileged position than slaves. This is quite a scandalous claim. In the new creation, Christ will be the only superior being and all men will be equally defined in him.

\textbf{The Epochal Horizon}

Within the New Testament era, Paul is writing to the church in Colossae to teach and establish them in the faith. His apostolic word testifies to the preeminence of Christ in the cosmos and the sufficiency of Christ in their growth in the knowledge of God. They are to live as believers who see the fulfillment of the law and all of its shadows in Christ. To live in light of this reality they must understand that there are no class divisions in the new covenant community of God. In this case the epochal horizon relates to us today as believers living post-Pentecost.

\textsuperscript{22} N.T. Wright, \textit{The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon}. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 138-139.

\textsuperscript{23} O’Brien, p. 192.
The implications for this text on modern believers will be discussed below in the contemporary horizon.

**The Canonical Horizon**

The letter is written in the time of the new covenant. At this point in redemptive history, the Christ event has happened and his apostles are laying the foundation of the faith, proclaiming that the Cosmic Christ is making all things new. In this particular text, humanity has reached its intended purpose in the person of Jesus Christ. In Christ there is the fulfillment of the image of God where Adam fell in the garden. With their union with Christ, believers have cast off the old life in Adam and have put on Christ. Through this union they can now act as a people not under the law, but as a people who have the law written on their hearts. This new humanity is the reversal of Babel, all men are equal in relation to their union with Christ. The spirit of Christ indwells all and empowers them to live morally from their position in Christ.

**The Contemporary Horizon**

The majority of this text speaks as clearly today as it did 2000 years ago. The Christian is to live as one who has put off the old man and put on Christ. This will manifest itself in new ways as there are new temptations to fight when dealing with sexual sins and sins of the tongue. Increased revenues and availability of media have taken the fight against sexual temptation to a new level. The believer must learn to make no provision for the flesh and put to death any sin that arises. The Christian must also be aware of racism within his culture and church. America has had a history of racism and Christians must fight to live out the reality of the new humanity. This means building cross-cultural and interracial relationships, moving into ethnically diverse neighborhoods, or perhaps even pioneering with adopting children of a
different race. The church must be the sign and agent of the new creation. All are one in Christ and the church must work to see that this gospel reality is practiced.