

Colossians

In interpreting the books of the Bible, it is possible to demonstrate that the underlying thought in each book of Scripture is God's eternal economy. It is here that we may find the purpose for a book's inclusion in the canon of Scripture and, hence, even a case for its divine inspiration and authority. By God's economy we perceive not only His plan to justify humankind through Christ's redemptive work but also His intention to dispense Himself into humanity in order to transform the latter into His very expression. It is succinctly expressed in Athanasius's famous declaration: He was made man that we might be made God (54:3). We become God through partaking of the divine life and nature (John 1:12-13; 2 Pet. 1:4), but we do not participate in His Godhead.

There are three major implications that can be drawn from this statement. First, Christ is both central and universal in God's economy. He is God, as the embodiment of the Triune God, and He has become human, to represent the entire creation. In who He is and what He has done, the entire plan of God is contained, from eternity past to eternity future. Second, in order for humankind to become God, Christ must be subjectively experienced by the believers. We will argue that the revelation of Christ in Colossians, although apparently objective in its various aspects, has the Christian's subjective experience of Christ as its immediate context. Third, and following from the first two, the issue of the economy of God is a corporate entity, the Body of Christ, which is God expressed in humankind.

Paul's Epistle to the Colossians establishes the revelation of Christ as everything in the church to the exclusion of all else, particularly the philosophy and religious practices of the heathen. It appeals to the believers to hold fast the Christ whom it presents as the Head, for it is upon this holding fast that the growth of the Body of Christ and, hence, the accomplishment of the economy of God depend (2:19).

Before proceeding, it would be helpful briefly to summarize the main points of the revelation of Christ in Colossians. Concerning God, Christ is declared to be the mystery of God (2:2) and the fullness of the Godhead embodied (v. 9). Concerning creation, He is the Firstborn, and in Him all things were created and now cohere (1:15-17). Concerning God's new creation in resurrection,

He is the Firstborn from among the dead (v. 18); He is both the Head and the constituent of the church (v. 18; 2:19; 3:11). Concerning the believers particularly, He is their portion, their life, their constituent, and their hope (1:12; 3:4, 11; 1:27). And concerning all the positive things in the universe, He is the body, or substance (2:16-17). It is only such a Christ, who encompasses God, creation, the church, the believers, and indeed all things, to whom we may give the first place in all things (1:18). It is evident that the revelation of Christ in Colossians is extremely broad and inclusive.

Christ, the Portion of the Saints

In chapter one Paul gives thanks to the Father "who has qualified you for a share of the allotted portion of the saints in the light" (v. 12). The phrase, *a share of the allotted portion* (*merida tou klērou*) is a reference to the allotment of the land of Canaan to the tribes of Israel and occurs frequently in this context in the Septuagint (Deut. 10:9; Num. 18:20; and Psa. 16:5 where *klēronomia* replaces *klēros*). "For anyone familiar with the Jewish scriptures it would immediately evoke the characteristic talk of the promised land" (Dunn 75-76). The authority of darkness in Colossians 1:13, from which the believers have been delivered, may be analogous to the children of Israel's slavery in Egypt, a land of darkness (Exo. 10:21). They were delivered from that authority to receive an inheritance in the land which had been promised to their forefather Abraham, a land full of the light of Jehovah's countenance (Psa. 43:3; 44:3; 89:15; Num. 6:25; Isa. 2:5).

A question often arises as to the precise nature of the New Testament believers' inheritance. Most commentators view this inheritance as a future one, pertaining to the possessions of the believer in the coming kingdom (Vine 599, Dunn 76) or even heaven (Johnson 344). Although the term *inheritance* in the New Testament does denote an expected portion, it is "not merely future. It can be recognized already now in faith" (Eichler 300). It is something that is partaken of by the believers today in the way of foretaste (Eph. 1:14). Viewing it only as a future matter removes it from the subjective experience of the believers today and severs it from Christ, by projecting it to some future "condition and possessions" (Vine 599). Rather, *portion* here refers to a present portion for

the believers which is nothing less than Christ Himself typified by the good land of Canaan. The basis for this understanding is as follows.

The word for *allotted portion*, *klēros*, is not the usual word for *inheritance*, which is *klēronomia*. The former is used for *inheritance* only here and in Acts 26:18. All other occurrences in the New Testament refer to a present, shared portion. For example, Judas Iscariot had a portion (*klēros*) of the ministry of the apostles (1:17); Peter declared to Simon of Samaria in 8:21 that he had no share (*merida*) or portion (*klēros*) in the present matter of the giving of the Spirit (both words occurring in Colossians 1:12 are present in this verse); the elders shepherd the believers as their present allotment (*klēros*) from God (1 Pet. 5:3).

In Acts 26:18, those whose eyes have been opened, who have been turned from darkness to light and from the authority of Satan to God, receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance (*klēros*) among the sanctified ones. This verse closely parallels Luke 4:18-19 and suggests that the commission given to the apostle in Acts was the continuation of the Lord's commission to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, the year of jubilee. The two main aspects of the jubilee were the release from slavery and the return of the inheritance which had been lost. These are fulfilled in the New Testament gospel by the release from the bondage of sin through forgiveness and the recovery of the forgiven sinners' participation in God through Christ as grace (John 1:16).

In the book of Colossians itself, the notion that Christ, as the land, is for the believers' present portion is confirmed in chapter two where Paul speaks of walking in Christ (v. 6), just as Abraham and the Israelites possessed the promised land through walking in it (Gen. 13:17; Deut. 11:24-25). The metaphor "having been rooted...in Him" is also used of Israel's possession of the land of Canaan (Col. 2:7; Psa. 44:2) and confirms that the possession of Christ as the good land begins at the commencement of the Christian walk. Moreover, Paul was commissioned to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ to the Gentiles (Eph. 3:8). Only the good land in the Old Testament, it seems, can typify in an inclusive way our Christ of unsearchable riches, and the description of the abundance of the land in portions such as Deuteronomy 8:6-10 can be interpreted as an itemization of these riches (see Lee, *All-inclusive*).

The significance of the land of Canaan, as promised to Abraham, was that it was inclusive of all that God intended for His people, and their possession of it was the means for the fulfillment of His purpose among them. Eventually, through Israel's possession of the land, the kingship was established and the temple was built as the solid dwelling place for God. This represented the peak of

the history of Israel as the people of God in the Old Testament. In a book where Christ is revealed as the centrality and universality of God's economy, the term *allotted portion* refers to Christ Himself in His riches as the portion of the believers for their present participation.

It is worthy to note at this juncture the apostle Paul's application of the type of the land in Galatians chapter three. There it is one aspect of the twofold promise given to Abraham, the other aspect of which is the seed. These aspects are fulfilled in the new covenant by Christ as the seed who justifies us and the Spirit as the land, the promised blessing of the gospel (Gal. 3:16, 22, 14). A comparison of Paul's use of the land in these two books—its application to Christ in Colossians and to the Spirit in Galatians—provides the key to the entrance into the possession of Christ as the land. Christ, the last Adam, in resurrection became the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45), and it is as the Spirit that we have received Him as a bountiful supply (Gal. 3:2, 5; Phil. 1:19) in order to possess Him in full.

Far from representing some future state or material blessing in heaven, the believers' allotted portion for which they are qualified by the Father through Christ's redemption is Christ Himself in His unsearchable riches, as portrayed by the land of Canaan promised to Abraham and his descendants. This Christ is present and available to the believers today because He has become the life-giving Spirit, as the blessing of the gospel. Later in this article we will see that Colossians shows us the way to possess this Christ today as our inheritance.

Christ, the Indweller and Glorifier

In Colossians chapter one we read, "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (v. 27), and later in chapter three, "Christ our life...with Him in glory" (v. 4). Generations of Christians have confessed with ease "Christ in me," yet for theologians the phrase has proved a problem. It is seemingly at variance with the traditional notion that strictly speaking it is the Spirit rather than Christ who is *in* the believers, and many prefer to translate it Christ "among you" (e.g., Moule 85). Thus, the phrase has been considered as descriptive of the believers' "personal communion with God understood in terms of Jesus Christ" (Dunn 123), rather than denotative of a substantial indwelling of the believers by Christ. The former position is likewise limited to an objective interpretation of the phrase *Christ our life* as the "identification between Christ and believers which in practice amounts to the complete submission of the believers' selves to Christ as their Lord" (208).

However, it would seem that Paul has no such theological qualms, for "the thought of Christ as indwelling individual believers is completely in line with Pauline thought"

(Bruce 86). Further on in Colossians, Paul declares that Christ is in all the members of the new man (3:11). Throughout his Epistles, we read similar declarations: God revealed His Son “in me” (Gal. 1:15-16), “Christ...lives in me” (2:20), Christ is being “formed in you” (4:19), “Christ may make His home in your hearts” (Eph. 3:17), “Christ is in you” (Rom. 8:10), and “Jesus Christ is in you” (2 Cor. 13:5). These verses indicate that Christ’s dwelling *in* the believers is both real and effectual.

Since Christ is in us, Christ’s being our life indicates an indwelling which is intrinsic: we live because of Him (John 6:57), because He lives, we also live (14:19), and for us “to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21).

Chapter eight of Romans shows the interconnection between Christ’s indwelling, the Spirit, and life. Both Christ and the Spirit dwell in the believers (vv. 9-11); the Spirit is designated as the Spirit of life (v. 2); Christ’s indwelling results in the spirit of the believers being life in contrast to the body which is dead (v. 10); and the condition of life spreads to the believers’ mind (v. 6) and even body (v. 11) through the cooperation of a living which is according to the spirit (vv. 4, 6). To the Corinthians Paul declares that it is the Spirit who gives life (2 Cor. 3:6) and also that Christ became the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45). Hence, he can write on different occasions that Christ is with our spirit (2 Tim. 4:22) and that the Spirit is with our spirit (Rom. 8:16). The significance of this interchange of Christ and the Spirit in speaking of the believers’ subjective life is that in the believers’ experience Christ and the Spirit are one. He is communicated to us in all His wealth by virtue of His being the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17; John 16:15).

The life relationship between Christ and the believers through His indwelling has wonderful and meaningful consequences and ultimately consummates in glory. In this regard, it is instructive to consider the term *glory* with respect to the Lord Himself. For Him, glory was, on the one hand, a realm into which He was to enter and, on the other hand, a condition which was to be manifested from within Him. Concerning the former aspect, in His resurrection He entered into glory (Luke 24:26) and was glorified by God (Acts 3:13; Heb. 2:7). He is at the right hand of God in glory (Acts 7:55) and will come again in the glory of His Father (Matt. 16:27).

However, glory also refers to the divinity within Christ which, through incarnation, was concealed within His human body as within a shell. During His ministry on earth, the Lord anticipated His glorification as being accomplished by His death (John 12:23-24), which would cause the shell of His humanity to be broken for the release of His glory. Hence, He referred to His death as a baptism which would release Him from His present constraint and cause fire to be cast on the earth (Luke

12:49-50). The disciples caught a glimpse of this glorification on the Mount of Transfiguration and subsequently testified to seeing the Lord’s glory there (John 1:14; Matt. 17:1-2; 2 Pet. 1:17-18).

On the day of resurrection, Christ was begotten as the Son of God (Acts 13:33). Since He was the only begotten Son of God from eternity past (John 1:1, 14, 18), His birth as the Son of God refers to His humanity, which was transformed and uplifted into the sonship of the only Begotten. It was as the seed of David, in His humanity, that He was designated the Son of God, a designation according to the divinity within Him, the Spirit of holiness (Rom. 1:3-4). This was the fulfillment of what the disciples saw on the mountain. The second aspect of Christ’s glorification, therefore, involved a process of death and resurrection whereby His humanity was transformed according to His divinity.

The believers’ glorification is their ultimate conformation to the image of God’s Son (8:29). This glorification is not an instantaneous matter nor primarily an extrinsic one. It will be the conclusion of a process which commences at regeneration and proceeds through the continual transformation of the soul, from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18). The final stage of glorification will be the transfiguration of the body in glory (Phil. 3:21), which will happen when Christ returns to be manifested with the believers in glory (Col. 3:4). It is thus that we read that Christ comes to be glorified *in* His saints and marveled at *in* all those who believe (2 Thes. 1:10). Christ in us is the hope of glory, not because He is a token security of our extrinsic entrance into glory, but because He is the divine glory within us that will bring us fully into glory through His complete salvation. Such a salvation requires human cooperation, including a great struggle by the apostle on our behalf in order to reach its conclusion (Col. 1:28-29). Whether or not Christ’s coming will be a pleasant experience to His believers depends on their reaching maturity, and the possibility remains that some will be put to shame at His coming (1 John 2:28; Rev. 3:18).

Christ, the Mystery of God

In chapter two of Colossians we witness the apostle Paul’s polemic against the forces of philosophy, religion, and asceticism which threaten to bring the church into captivity. He struggled to bring the saints into “all the riches of the full assurance of understanding, unto the full knowledge of the mystery of God, Christ” (v. 2).

Undoubtedly, this last phrase *the mystery of God, Christ (tou mystēriou tou theou, Christou)* has provided much difficulty to the readers of Paul’s Epistle, at least in the early centuries, which has resulted in a number of textual variations. Most modern translations agree that the above reading is

the most authoritative, having support from the oldest witnesses. The reading, though, is not without ambiguity, and the genitive *of God (tou theou)* requires interpretation. The NASB and NRSV translations both opt for the possessive genitive, “God’s mystery, that is, Christ Himself.” Others, such as the NIV (“the mystery of God, namely, Christ”), are undecided. An alternative interpretation of the genitive here is appositional (Porter 94), where *of God* becomes a restatement of the governing term *mystery*. In this case, God Himself is the mystery, and *Christ*, placed grammatically in apposition to *mystery* (Lightfoot 173), is this mystery defined.

Preference for the former understanding leads many commentators to understand the mystery here as a reference back to its use in 1:26-27, the mystery which God willed to make known among the Gentiles. Contextually, however, there are two reasons for considering its use to be distinctive in 2:2. First, Paul’s thought has progressed from the task of confirming his ministry to proclaiming the economy of God’s salvation to his readers. He has come to his main desire that the Colossians would have the full assurance of the understanding and knowledge of Christ, which will guard them from the confusing influences of culture and religion. Second, the purpose of the book as a whole is to present the highest teaching concerning Christ as an antidote to philosophical wisdom. This teaching particularly concerns Christ’s divinity (1:15-19) and His relationship to the Godhead (2:9). Jesus Christ does not only constitute a mystery whom God willed to make known to the Gentiles through Paul’s ministry; He is the embodiment of the Triune God and, as such, is the unveiling of God Himself. In Him we are initiated into the very secret of God.

The mystery of God concerns the move of God, the coming forth of God, to accomplish His eternal economy (plan). This move is in Christ (Lee, *Mysteries* 17-36). It is significant that in the book of Colossians all of the steps of this move are particularly mentioned. They are as follows: First, in eternity past, Christ was God, the very image of God, the One in whom all the fullness was pleased to dwell (1:15, 19). The image of God is synonymous with His being the eternal Word, in which He is the means for the mysterious God to be presented to, explained to, and understood by humankind (John 1:1, 14). *The fullness* refers to the expression of God in completeness, and this fullness dwells in Christ. Second, Christ in incarnation is the embodiment of the fullness of the Godhead (Col. 2:9) as to His divinity, and the Firstborn of all creation (1:15) as to His humanity. The former designation indicates that the complete God—the Father, Son, and Spirit—dwelt in the human body of Christ in order that divinity might be fully expressed in humanity. The latter designation indicates that in His humanity, Christ was truly human and part of creation, because He was a creature, indeed the

Firstborn of all creatures. In the person of Christ, God was joined to humanity and even to the whole of creation as represented by the designation *first*.

Third, in such a divine-human status He died a redemptive death, the significance of which is universally great, accomplishing the reconciliation of all things to God (vv. 20-22). Fourth, Christ resurrected as the Firstborn from the dead, generating the new creation, His Body, of which He is the Head (v. 18). Through the process of His resurrection, many sons of God were brought forth, who like Him, the Firstborn, possess both divinity and humanity (1 Pet. 1:3; Rom. 8:29). Fifth, in resurrection He became the life-giving Spirit, the pneumatic Christ, in order to enter and dwell in His believers as their life (Col. 1:27; 3:4; cf. John 20:22). Sixth, Christ ascended to the third heaven, bringing with Him all the ones whom He raised in His resurrection and is now in the heavens at the right hand of God (Col. 3:1). There He has been made Head of the Body (2:19). He is now carrying out His heavenly ministry to minister all His riches, “the things which are above” (3:1-2), to the members of His Body for its growth and building up (2:19). Finally, He is coming again to glorify His believers who have been regenerated in their spirit and transformed in their soul. He will transfigure their bodies so that they may be manifested with Him in glory (3:4) as the bride with the Bridegroom (John 3:29; Rev. 19:7).

All of these steps concern the move of God in His Trinity to accomplish His eternal economy. When seen judicially, they are the procedure for God to redeem created and fallen humankind through Christ’s vicarious death, for which incarnation provided the human body, and resurrection demonstrated God’s justification (Rom. 4:25). When viewed organically, however, these steps become the process whereby God Himself becomes joined and mingled with the humanity He created, in order that through death and resurrection He may be consummated as the Spirit in order to bring that humanity into divinity, thus producing the Body of Christ as His living organism, which in its ultimate consummation becomes the New Jerusalem, God’s eternal goal (Rev. 21—22).

Leading the believers into the full assurance of this understanding of the mystery of God required a great struggle on the part of the apostle. In another place, Paul speaks of Christ being the depths of God and of the Spirit searching these depths and revealing them, yet only to those who love God (1 Cor. 2:9-10). It was the full knowledge of this mystery which would combat the Greek philosophical wisdom (Col. 2:8), Jewish religious formalism (vv. 16-18), and practices of asceticism (vv. 20-23), all of which threatened to invade the church in Colossae. Only the possession of such a full knowledge prevents the believers from being carried off as spoil from Christ (v. 8). It might be that a serious and near universal lack of interest in exploring the

riches of Christ as the mystery of God is responsible for the situation in Christianity today, where present-day philosophy dominates theology, religious formality pervades Christian practice, and ascetic practices mislead serious seekers of the Lord away from the genuine experience of the indwelling Christ.

The Key to Experiencing Christ

In the last part of this article, we will examine three applications of the revelation of Christ in this book which the writer makes to the subjective experience of the believers. These are contained in the following requirements: to walk in Christ (2:6), to hold Christ as the Head (v. 19), and to let the word of Christ dwell in them richly (3:16). All three depend on, and indeed become meaningful in the light of, the fact that Christ is the embodiment of the Triune God and is realized as the life-giving Spirit. Furthermore, all three depend on the believers knowing and utilizing the human faculty through which the Spirit is received and realized in experience. This faculty is the human spirit, which, although not explicitly mentioned in Colossians, is the key to the believers' experience of Christ in these three aspects.

Paul's injunction to walk in Christ is qualified in two ways: "having been rooted" and "being built up in Him" (2:7). To walk in Christ first requires being rooted in Him and is simultaneous to our being built up in Him, suggesting our growth in the divine life. This can be likened to a tree in which the process of the downward growth of the roots is concurrent with the upward growth of the plant, resulting in an outward structure above the soil (Lee, *Crucial Points* 97). The rooting is a description of our union with Christ, a very organic metaphor as are the metaphors of grafting (Rom. 11:19) and the abiding of the branches in the vine (John 15:4-5). In both cases, roots and soil, branches and tree, there is the necessity of a correspondence in life, substance, and nature between the two for the union between them to be effective. This correspondence is a physical shadow of the spiritual correspondence between the Spirit of God and the human spirit, which the Lord strongly pointed out in reference to true worship in John 4:24. Moreover, regeneration, through which this life-union comes into being, occurs in the human spirit of the believer (3:6), causing the human spirit to be enlivened (Rom. 8:10; Eph. 2:5), to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:11, 16), and to be mingled with the Lord who is the Spirit (1 Cor. 6:17; 2 Cor. 3:17). To walk in Christ in Colossians 2:6, therefore, is to walk according to the spirit in Romans 8:4, a spirit which is neither exclusively the Spirit of God nor the human spirit but the mingling of the two. Attempts to walk in Him which take as their locus any other human faculty, such as the mind or emotion, are destined to result in walking according to the flesh.

The importance of the human spirit for the experience of Christ is further indicated by the context of the warning to hold Christ as the Head of the Body (Col. 2:19). This context is the believers' co-crucifixion with Christ from the elements of the world. The ordinances relating to the physical world, "do not handle, nor taste, nor touch," were elementary teachings in both Judaism and Greek philosophy which threatened to replace Christ as the Head. Such ordinances were dealt with on the cross (v. 14), and holding Christ as the Head requires the effect of Christ's death to be applied subjectively to the believers. Here also, the two spirits, divine and human, are of crucial significance, as a comparison between chapters six and eight of Romans bears out. Chapter six declares the fact of our identification with Christ in His death (vv. 1-5), exhorting us to know this and reckon this fact as ours (vv. 6-11). Chapter eight presents the practical way for us to do this, namely, that we are to put to death by the Spirit the practices of the body (v. 13). All who have attempted to know and reckon themselves dead with Christ have discovered how such a reckoning, if attempted as an exercise of the mind, causes sin to be even more alive within them. Deliverance from indwelling sin is to be found in the exercise of the human spirit (vv. 6, 13), in which the presence of the indwelling Spirit mortifies the indwelling sin in the believer's flesh, thus setting the believer free from the law of sin and of death by the operation of the law of the Spirit of life (v. 2).

Finally, the word of Christ's indwelling is a matter in which the human spirit must take precedence over the other human faculties. Colossians 3:16 closely echoes Ephesians 5:18-19, where the Spirit's filling is the focus. Ephesians 6:17 puts both the word and the Spirit together: "And receive...the sword of the Spirit, which Spirit is the word of God." Here, the Recovery Version translation supplies the second occurrence of *Spirit* to indicate that the antecedent of the word *which* (neuter) is *Spirit* (neuter), not *sword* (feminine). That the Spirit is the word here suggests that the inner substance of the word is the Spirit and that the function of the word is to convey the Spirit. Furthermore, the following verse indicates that the receiving of the word is a matter of the human spirit: "By means of all prayer and petition, praying at every time in spirit" (v. 18). Prayer for the receiving of the word should be with the exercise of the human spirit in contrast to, though not without, the mind (cf. 1 Cor. 14:15). Furthermore, the effect of the word's operation within the believers concerns the human spirit and its division from the soul (Heb. 4:12). When believers exercise the spirit to pray in receiving the word of Christ, it will dwell in them richly, implying the riches of Christ (Eph. 3:8), causing grace to be in their hearts and enabling them to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.

The portion of the saints, the Indweller and life of the believers, and the mystery of God are three great items of

the revelation of Christ in Colossians. When considered in the light of God's economy, they reveal an unsearchably rich Christ through whom God is dispensed into His redeemed in order to transform and glorify them for His expression. Holding to such a Christ as the Head is dependent upon the believers' exercise of their spirit in order to remain in the organic union with Christ and His death, and then to experience Him in His unsearchable riches.

by Jim Batten

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OUTLINE OF THE EPISTLE OF PAUL TO THE COLOSSIANS

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Subject:
**Christ—The All-inclusive One,
Having the First Place in All Things
as the Mystery and Embodiment of God,
as the Head and Constituent of the Church,
as the Allotted Portion, Life, Constituent,
and Hope of the Saints, and
as the Body of All Positive Things**