

An Exegesis of Colossians 3:9-10
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⁹*Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices*
¹⁰*and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.*

Paul proposes in this text that in order for one to be a true disciple he must strip off his old ways and habits and allow God to clothe him in the virtues that build up relationships. This counters the argument of the perpetrators of the “Colossian Heresy”, who would say that one must practice asceticism and spiritual manipulation in order to be a true disciple. This paper proposes that the need for covenant relationships is Paul’s core argument against the heretical claims of his opponents.

The arguments for and against Pauline authorship of the letter to the church at Colossae are varied and ancient. Internally, the letter claims to be written by Paul (1:1, 23; 4:18), and in its “personal details” it closely parallels the letters to the Ephesians and to Philemon.¹ However, the document’s authorship has been questioned on several accounts including “vocabulary and thought.”² J. Paul Sampley writes, “as this document is probably by a follower writing after Paul’s death, some date after the mid-60s CE must be supposed.”³ In spite of these and many other arguments in modern scholarship, it is apparent that the “early church accepted Colossians as readily as any other letter of Paul.”⁴ Most scholars agree that Colossians was written about the same time as Philemon and Ephesians, based on the similar circumstances, overlapping themes and personal names. The origin and date of the letter are another hotly debated subject. It is apparent that all of these letters were written during one of Paul’s many imprisonments (4:3, 10,

¹ Boa, Kenneth D., et al. *The New Open Bible Study Edition: New American Standard Bible*. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 1369.

² Ibid

³ Meeks, Wayne A. general editor. *The Harper Collins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993)

18), but which one? Some adamantly claim a later date with Rome as it's city of origin, while others claim Ephesus at an earlier date, still others have suggested Caesarea.⁵ Each of these arguments are truly fascinating and well detailed in countless books, however for brevity's sake I will sum up the tomes by saying, "God only knows" where and when this letter was truly written. The recipients were the church at Colossae (1:2) and its neighboring town in the Lycus Valley, Laodicea (4:16). The city of Heiropolis was also located nearby. Although Heiropolis is not mentioned by name within the letter, some scholars suggest that Colossians was cyclical in nature and meant for the congregations throughout the Lycus Valley and perhaps even its surrounding areas.

Colossians focuses on the preeminent and cosmic Christ. In the epistle Paul warns the Colossians not to be led astray by strange worldly philosophies. The "Colossian Heresy", as it has come to be called, seems to have been an early form of Gnostic syncretism, whose advocates have been described as "philosophical, Judaizing, visionary, ascetic Christians."⁶ In Colossians 1-2 Paul argues that Christ is preeminent and completely sufficient for salvation, rejecting the heretical claim that a "mystical experience" or an ascetic following of the Old Law was necessary to be assured such salvation. Chapter 3, in which lies the pericope of the chosen text, contains the admonition by Paul to strip off the earthly sins of the past and to don the virtues of Christ. "The 'Old Self' (one's identity in solidarity with the sin of Adam) has been removed and a 'new self' (one's identity with the union of Christ) has replaced it... There is thus also a sense in which the believers now need to actualize what has already taken place

⁴ Marshall, Howard and Stephen Travis and Ian Paul. *Exploring the New Testament: A Guide to the Letters and Revelation Vol. 2.* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 160.

⁵ Ibid, 158.

⁶ Spence, H.D.M. and Joseph S. Exell, editors. *The Pulpit Commentary, Vol. 20: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), v.

spiritually – they need to take off the old self and put on the new self.”⁷ There is some speculation in varying traditions that this phraseology refers to an “early Christian baptismal practice of removing clothing before being baptized nude and then putting on a new garment.”⁸ This would make sense in regards to Paul’s argument, where in the previous chapter he refers to the “circumcision not done by the hand of men” where one’s sinful nature is “put off” when one is “buried with him in baptism” (2:11-12). The pericope is followed by a list of “Household Codes” applying practical application to the daily life and relationships of the readers. The genre of the chosen pericope is a paraenesis within an epistle (3:5-4:1), which focuses primarily on exhortations to holiness of life.

The text is a transitional verse between the taking off and the putting on. It is preceded by a list of five sensual sins (“Sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed”) and 5 “antisocial vices” (“anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language”) that must be stripped off.

At first glance the opening phrase of verse nine appears to belong to the preceding verse as a sixth antisocial vice: “μὴ ψεύδεσθε εἰς ἀλλήλους” traditionally rendered, “*stop lying to one another.*”⁹ However, the word ψεύδεσθε “to lie” with the negative μὴ preceding “forbids a manner of life”¹⁰, therefore this phrase could also be rendered, “*Stop living a lie before one another.*” In this rendering the phrase becomes part of the argument in the following verse as to why those vices are inappropriate to those in the community of faith. “Two parallel aorist participial clauses give the two fold reason for

⁷ Arnold, Clinton E., et al. *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Vol. 3.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 395.

⁸ Keck, Leander E., et al. *The New Interpreter’s Bible Vol. 11.* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 643.

⁹ Nestle, Erwin and Barbara and Kurt Aland, editors. *Novum Testamentum: Graece et Latine.* (Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993), 528.

¹⁰ Rogers Jr., Cleon L. and Cleon L. Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 467.

this abandonment of evil ways.”¹¹ “*Since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge, in the image of its Creator.*” ἀπεκδυσάμενοι – to take off completely, to strip off of oneself. πράξεσιν - deed. “The plural describes the individual deeds which characterized the former life.”¹² ἐνδυσάμενοι - to put on oneself, to clothe oneself ἀνακαινούμενον - To make new again, to renew. The use of the present tense indicates a continual action, passive tense indicates the action is performed by another.¹³

Had Paul not gone further than 3:8 and the list of vices, one would have thought that he was agreeing with the “Colossian heresy” supporting asceticism. Paul’s argument continues however, explaining that the motivation for doing away with vices is due to the fact that God has already begun a transformation within us and has provided a new “set of clothes.”

The text is followed by a list of 5 virtues that God has provided to cover the nakedness of the “stripped” believer (“compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, and love.”) The admonition to “clothe yourself” with these virtues implies that the donning of these virtues is a conscious act on the part of the believer. However, as we saw in the chosen text of v. 10, the renewal that comes as a result of “putting on” these virtues is an ongoing act of God upon the believer. Verse 11, which follows the pericope gives an example of what the community dressed in its new wardrobe look like. “Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.” In the new clothes, the church no longer is seen

¹¹ O’Brien, Peter T. *Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 44*. (Word, Incorporated, 1982), 175.

¹² Rogers, 467.

¹³ Ibid

within the social, ethnic or national context to which its parts once belonged, but now they reflect the image of Christ by donning the wardrobe he has left for them.

Paul's primary purpose of the image in this text is to show that if the Christians at Colossae and its surrounding cities followed the heretical call to asceticism, they would be left naked and vulnerable. If the believers followed their admonishment to seek a "spiritual experience" the relationships within the church would break down leaving them naked and vulnerable. The vice list preceding the text focus on the individual and his personal fulfillment in the here and now, instant gratification. The virtue list which follows the text focus on the community and the building of relationships that will last beyond the here and now. By allowing themselves to be "led astray" by the heretical philosophy, they were returning to their old ways of focussing on self. This would cause individualism and division within the community by separating those who had been able to achieve a "spiritual experience" and those who had not, and those who were the most ascetic and thus most "righteous." Paul encourages the community to focus on the corporate renewal that is an act of God not of men, and the virtues that will help them build up the community rather than divide it. Hence the text can be paraphrased in this way, "Stop trying to kid one another. That's not who you are anymore, that old way and its habits were stripped off and you have put on a new you, that is constantly being rejuvenated by the knowledge you have received, into the image of the Creator."

The church today often lives out the "Colossian heresy" on a weekly basis. People come together, pretending to be something they are not, searching for a "worship experience" that will help them to find God. They focus on what they can get out of the service so that they can maintain their personal relationship with God. Paul would say, "It's not about you." The church must don the clothes provided by God so that we can

corporately be renewed into the image of God in our relationships with one another. It's not about individual experience, but relationships built on honesty. Stop lying to one another, that is not who you are anymore. Individual experience is the way of the world, the new self has nothing in common with that philosophy, for it puts Christ and His body above the self. The ultimate spiritual experience, for Paul, is to be transformed into the image of Christ. This transformation occurs in reflecting the covenant relationship, the divine life that is manifested between the Father and the Son.

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