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Let Me Tell You A Secret: Reflections on Colossians 2

R. TODD BOULDIN

I had planned on being at a Good Friday evening service, but instead I was sitting at dinner with a friend who questioned me for two hours about how I could possibly spend my weekend honoring a Christian faith that doesn't have a very good track record for love and peace. He expressed to me how he had turned from the Christianity of his youth. "Religion has caused most wars in the world. It is the catalyst for almost every conflict in the twenty-first century." That was just the beginning. "The people that say they believe the Bible are the meanest people I know. People who think they know the truth scare me." My friend still prays. He is a compassionate person. But he cannot reconcile how one can believe in something, whether the Christian faith or any organized religion, which obviously has resulted in so much violence and tragedy for the human race. He perceives Christianity as a religion that tells people to think badly of themselves, a faith that promotes guilt rather than happiness. And frankly, he's finding a lot more help in living a good life from books like the national bestseller *The Secret* than he ever did from his church. He is not alone. That book and others like it flood the tables at bookstores and regularly are at the top of best-seller book lists. Even Christians themselves are large consumers of this material because while their own churches are doing well at saving them from their sins, the churches are not saving them from themselves.

The apostle Paul's Letter to the Colossians addresses just such a dilemma in the earliest church: people who had accepted Christ found wisdom from outside the Christian community to be more alluring than their experience of the wisdom of Christ. Paul "struggles" to show the Colossians how the truth of Christ can lead to a different type of life than the one that results from a truth that depends on power and regulation to bolster its claims.

AN OVERVIEW OF COLOSSIANS 2

After chapter 1's universal and comprehensive vision of Christ's work of reconciliation through the vulnerability of suffering and the power of resurrection, Paul then begins in chapter 2 to address the specific issues which threaten the faith and community of the Colossian church. Many commentators have speculated about the exact nature of the "Colossian heresy" that Paul addresses in chapter 2. Because the textual clues point to a syncretism that is not characteristic of any particular known religion of the first century, most of the clues point toward a form of Diaspora Judaism.

The term "Colossian heresy" is problematic because the word "heresy" implies a perversion of the Christian gospel from within the Christian community. There is no indication of an internal unorthodoxy in the text. What does seem more obvious are the abundant references to Jewish rituals, feasts and regulations which would seem to point to some form of Jewish religion arising out of the known Diaspora synagogues in Colossae.¹ This false teaching as Paul describes it has the characteristics of passing judgment on those

1. This view is shared by most scholars, including James Dunn and N.T. Wright. James D. G. Dunn, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Press, 1996), 34; N.T. Wright, "Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20," *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 118.

who do not submit to regulations concerning food, drink, sex, or holy days (2.15, 16, 21, 23), and it has an interest in the worship of angels, visions, and asceticism. It is a “philosophy” which pretends to be true but is really deceit based on human traditions and principles of the universe. It seems to be wisdom, but in fact it is falsehood and unnecessary for those already having everything they need in the fullness of Jesus Christ. The chapter addresses this falsehood in three sections:

- Paul’s concern for the Colossians (2.1–5)
- An admonition to stay grounded in the fullness that is already theirs (2.6–7)
- The philosophy and warnings of its deception (2.8–23)

This article will not examine the details of this philosophy, but rather draw from Paul’s criticism of it to challenge our own understanding of the truth of the gospel in our time. Colossians presents us with a vision of the gospel for our age, an age that is suspicious of truth claims, that is skeptical of religion as power, and that is weary of violence in the name of faith. Colossians 2 presents a gospel whose truth is encountered as secret, limitation, and love.

THE TRUTH AS SECRET

My friend and many in our culture are suspicious of absolute claims to truth because of the tragic results of such claims. Instead they are drawn to “truths” that appear as mysteries and secrets. Ironically, these “secrets” may appear to be ambiguous or lacking in absolutes, but they themselves reveal their own set of truths such as “the law of attraction” which is said to be a universal principal.² This fascination with truth as secrets presents problems for Christians who believe in certainty and clarity in matters of doctrine and faith. Scripture speaks of the gospel as the magnificent mystery of God which is still unfolding, and the glory of Christ which is revealed but is still being revealed. In contrast to rich mystery, some would serve up the gospel to our culture as simple, formulaic, and easy to accept if one just follows a five-step recipe. Our culture knows better than to think that such profound truths can be boiled down to something so spiritless and simple, so they run past the “Christian” section of the bookstore to those authors and books that appear to cloak truth within secrets and mystery.

Of course, *The Secret* and other books like it pretend to be revealing a secret but are in fact “philosophy and empty deceit.” Some biblical truths are contained within these books, but the books make no ethical judgments about what one should desire or who one should be. Rather, life is just a reflection of our desires, and the consequences that we experience as a result of what we think or do are the only standard of good or evil. From this vantage point, “sin” is simply not believing in your own capacity to create what you want for your life. Nothing could be further from the biblical truth about creation, fallenness and the reconciliation of our natures. But apart from any theological concerns, these books present simple truths as secrets that really are not a mystery at all. While Christians do believe that God has been revealed supremely in the image of Christ, we do not have to change the gospel or go in search of some mystery to speak credibly to this cultural longing for something mysterious and beyond ourselves. This element of mystery is embedded into the core of the gospel itself. Listen to Paul from Colossians 2.2, “I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s mystery, that is Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

As one loves and grows in this mystery, an adventure ensues to find “all the treasures of knowledge and wisdom” of Jesus Christ (see also 1.26–27). Paul insists that what has been revealed has been a mystery,

2. Rhonda Byrne, *The Secret* (New York: Atria Books, 2006). The book opens with this truth claim about the law of attraction: “The law began at the beginning of time. It has always been and will always be. It is the law that determines the complete order in the Universe, every moment of your life . . . The law of attraction is forming your entire life experience, and this all-powerful law is doing that through your thoughts” (page 5).

and that this mystery contains glory and depth that must be discovered. Just as the cloud blinded the disciples to the glory of the face of Jesus at the Transfiguration, so knowing God does not result in less mystery but in more (Luke 9.34). When the apostle Paul contemplates the conundrum of whether all Jews will be saved, he states his conviction about the truth of Jesus Christ (Rom 9—10), the equally true promise of God to Israel (Rom 11), but then finally confesses that some things are beyond human knowing, “O the depth of the riches and wisdom of and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom 11.33). Paul wrote the Corinthians who were boasting in their knowledge, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face. Now I know *only in part*; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor 13.12). Truth does not cancel out mystery, nor does mystery cancel out the possibility of truth.

Anselm, who claimed that God is conceivable, also wrote that the eye is darkened when gazing upon the Lord, “Surely it is both darkened in itself and dazzled by you. Indeed it is both obscured by its own littleness and overwhelmed by your vastness.”³ In chapter 15 of his *Proslogion* Anselm defines God, “Therefore, Lord, you are not merely that than which a greater cannot be thought; you are something greater than can be thought.” As Peter Rollins writes in his excellent theology of God, *How (Not) To Speak of God*, “Revelation, far from being the opposite of concealment, has concealment built into its very heart.”⁴

Where mystery is missing and certainty dominates one’s understanding of truth, particularly scriptural truth, there is no room for dissent, doubt or interpretation because any hint of error can lead to one’s damnation. Truth is perceived as literal, absolute, and never ambiguous. Anything elusive, complex or mysterious is an invitation to error and sin. Such claims to truth ultimately resort to power and authority, or subtle manipulations, to defend themselves. Andrew Sullivan, in his recent book on the changing face of conservatism, describes our dilemma as human beings in regards to the truth, “Neither beasts nor angels, we live in twilight.”⁵ And as we give grace to ourselves to live in the twilight between the truth we know and the truth we do not, we also give the same grace to others who we perceive do not embrace the truth we know. “Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders . . . Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know *how* you ought to answer everyone” (3.5). Notice here that Paul is not concerned that we have an answer for every question, as this has historically been interpreted in some traditions, but with *how* we answer the question: with wisdom and an acknowledgment of our common humanity and mutual need for grace.

If my friend heard that God’s glory has been revealed in mystery, and that we Christians know we do not know all the truth but have only begun to see it, he might better hear the truth we do know. To confess that we believe *in* God but remain provisional with what we believe *about* God permits us to enter authentically into the experience of common humanity with those who honestly admit that they do not understand God. Christians too have a secret. But it is a secret that has been revealed, and is being revealed, as we become grounded in Christ and experience Christ in the world. “Continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith” (2.6–7).

THE TRUTH AS LIMITATION

To acknowledge that the richness and depth of what God has done in Jesus Christ is yet a mystery requires us to acknowledge limitations in our ability to comprehend God or the truth of Jesus Christ. If we cannot live with this limitation, we will attempt to transcend our limits by claiming that our understanding of truth, faith or the world is God’s own. Such false claims give us the illusion of power, and we then seek to exert that power through the most evil of means. This version of truth defends itself by creating a holy war between good and evil, truth and falsehood, the powers of God and the powers of evil.

3. St. Anselm, *Monologion and Proslogion*, trans. Thomas Williams (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996), 109.

4. Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), 16.

5. Andrew Sullivan, *The Conservative Soul* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006), 175.

Paul speaks often of the “powers and principalities,” and in Colossians 2 he makes a very definitive statement that the authority of Christ has defeated these powers and revealed their impunity. This statement has led some traditions towards a charismatic interpretation of this text, which would view these powers as demonic forces of evil in the world. Other traditions, including the Catholic and Restoration traditions, have used this text to claim that the work of Christ defeated all human powers and governments in particular. Despite the fact that Paul and Christ both speak to the legitimacy of government (Rom 13), some use this text to further a pacifist or apolitical stance by the church. The reasoning is this: If Christ has triumphed over the powers, then why participate in them? I believe this is an unfortunate reading of this text. While there may be other biblical or Christian reasons to abstain from political or military service in the name of Christ, to limit the understanding of “principalities and powers” to governmental authorities, or to demonic powers, is to miss the point. Paul’s point is not to denigrate government, but to show that all systems which rely on power to enforce their truth claims are destroyed in the face of the vulnerability, suffering, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In fact, Paul seems to be identifying religious truth regimes in particular as the “powers and principalities” that Jesus has defeated, and not governmental ones specifically. Immediately prior to this text in 2.15, and immediately after it, Paul suggests that Christ has put an end to all religious systems that seek to enforce its truth through legalism (v. 14) and moral regulation (v. 16). Paul is making a much larger claim: Jesus has “shown up” every institution or truth claim that uses power or authority to make its way in the world, through his own cross and resurrection that bring freedom and not enslavement (2.15).⁶

However one understands the “Colossian heresy,” the heresy Paul opposes seems to impose repressive moral regulations about drinking, eating, sex, and proper days to worship (Col 2.14; 2.16, 20–21). But Paul rejects this regulation of all human enjoyment and material goods as more “worldly” than to enjoy freedom in these matters “from above” (3.2). Moral legalisms are part and parcel of powers and principalities that rely on power to bring conformity with its demands.

I suggest that Christians in America in the twenty-first century should consider whether they have attempted to position Christianity as one of the principalities and powers rather than as the vulnerable servant of the powerless. Frustrated with their inability to influence culture through conversion or transformation, Christians since Constantine have turned to the “powers and principalities” of this world—its militaries, its superpowers, its multinational corporations, its media and entertainment, and its political institutions—to embody and enforce their truth. Christians themselves may even seek the highest places of

6. John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and Lee Camp have rightly claimed that the church should not use the instruments of politics, power or the military to bring about the kingdom of God. “In any case, the New Testament does consistently assert that Jesus overcame the rebellious principalities and powers through his suffering and service, rather than through powermongering and controlling and dominating, even on behalf of the ‘good guys.’” Lee Camp, *Mere Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), 84. Camp later asserts that the “crucified God” stands in judgment upon kings, powers and rulers (page 97). What if these rulers are good ones? Camp seems to assume that the “powers” here are governmental authorities. While Camp and these theologians make a truthful claim about the way of the cross in relation to power, many have interpreted this claim by the authors to mean that Christians should withdraw from politics or governmental service altogether because their only obligation is to “be the church” in the world and not to promote any good through governmental power. While this author agrees that the cross upstages all power, I cannot agree with the tendency among Yoder and Hauerwas, and those in the Restoration tradition who follow their lead, that all power, and specifically all political power, is evil. To suggest that power is not God’s means for bringing about the kingdom of God does not necessarily require us to assume that all rulers or governments are evil or contrary to God’s purposes. This view also does not take into account the view of government and power throughout the biblical canon where government often is portrayed as a legitimate form of order and even “the servant of God” (Rom 13). Christians may do good and bring about justice in government while still believing that God’s kingdom will not be established through that same power but by love and service. Furthermore, if Christ is all in all (Col 1), and if Christ is reconciling all to himself, then does this redemptive action not include governmental bodies or political powers? This is not to legitimate any government or its policies, but rather to challenge the idea that political institutions are somehow so dirty that they are left out of the redemptive restoration of God in Jesus Christ. I would suggest that Christians may affirm certain forms and expressions of political power and participate in them, but must not rely on them to bring about the kingdom of God. To see a further critique of Hauerwas and Yoder, see Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

influence in politics, entertainment, and business, and rejoice when “one of ours” succeeds in these spheres. Christian groups call themselves an “army of God” ready to take over the world for Jesus. Others seek to squash the Enemy’s “foothold” with more subtle means. Rather than resorting to physical violence, those who claim to know the truth seek to undo or prohibit civil protections and liberties for those with different views. These Christians have created an alternative universe of “Christian” schools, books, movies, and music that alienate the believer from the questions, views or influence of the unbeliever. They fund Christian radio and television programs that inspire donations through assertions that the “Enemy is winning” and proscribe for Christians which movies they should accept and which ones they should reject, which politicians are deemed Christian and which ones are not, and which legislation is “Christian” and which is not. This wholly regulated life ends up in a suspicious if not total rejection of the world, rather than an embrace of the world that is made for, is sustained by, and is going to Jesus Christ (1.20).

Paul reminds the Colossians that Christ has triumphed over all powers and institutions that would hold us captive to their truth claims. Therefore, they should not turn to any kind of power regime, including religious regulatory schemes, to become God’s church in the world. Instead, live in the truth of Jesus Christ, who gave himself up, who accomplished his “power” through suffering. Turn to compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, forgiveness, love, and peace as the way of bringing God’s rule into the world (3.14). Then the gospel remains good news.

THE TRUTH AS LOVE

In the face of cultural or religious challenges to their Christian faith, Paul asserts that the Colossians who live a life in the face of a cross and resurrection must turn from truth understood as power to truth practiced as love. As they grow in love and as Christ lives out his life among them, the knowledge and mysteries will be revealed to them. “I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, *so that* they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s mystery that is Christ himself” (2.2; 3.14). After delineating the lifestyle of one raised up with Christ in chapter 3, Paul places one virtue above them all: “Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds together everything in perfect harmony” (3.14; cf. Gal 5.13–14).

Love becomes impossible for many Christian communities because someone decides that truth is more important than relationship. But this presupposes that truth is the opposite of relationship and love. What if truth *is* love, and that the failure to love *is* error? The Gospel of John over and over reminds us that truth is not limited to scripture as some Jews believed, or to propositions as the Greeks espoused. Rather truth is a person who loves and seeks to be loved (John 1.1; 5.39; 14.6), and love becomes the essence of what it means to be human, to believe the truth, and to follow Jesus Christ (John 13.34; 1 John 4). Unlike religions or ideologies that make substantive truth claims, Christian truth is most fundamentally a relational truth that results in a transformed reality. Truth is both objective (the real that is beyond our knowing) and subjective (the real that transforms our knowing).

My friend and many like him suspect that there is some problem with Christian faith if the Christ we proclaim says love is the primary value but our interpretation of the Bible keeps leading us to violence, hate, and discrimination. The medieval age and the modern age led us to read biblical texts as law codes and as neutral texts from which objective truth can be mined and applied. Under this interpretative system, we seek neither to read into the text nor to interpret it but rather to draw out its specific literal or original meaning. This enterprise of modernism works as long as everyone accepts the authority that is determining the precise or original meaning. But that’s just the problem. It relies on authority and power to enforce the interpretation. What if love is the exegesis and compassion the interpretative lens (Mark 2.27; Luke 10.25–37; John 8.11; Gal 5.13–15; Phil 2.2–4)?

The story is told of a commander of troops that occupied a mountain village who said to the mayor of the village, “We know you are hiding a traitor. Unless you give him to us, we shall harass you and your

people by every means possible.” The village indeed was hiding a man who was loved by all the people, so the mayor was unsure how to proceed. The mayor finally turned to the priest for help, and they together came up with a text that said, “It is better that one man die to save the nation.” So the mayor turned over the innocent man to the commander, and his tortuous screams were heard throughout the village as he was put to death. Twenty years later, a prophet came to town and confronted the mayor, “This man was sent here by God to save the village. How could you have done this to him?” The mayor replied, “What else was I to do? The priest and I simply followed what the scriptures commanded.” “That’s where you went wrong,” the prophet replied. “You should have looked into his eyes.”⁷

To be “faithful to the text” is not to read the Bible with scientific or historical objectivity and then to make pronouncements outside of the context of complex human lives. To be faithful to the biblical text which serves to witness to God in Christ is to interpret it creatively and relationally in light of Jesus Christ so that truth is upheld and love prevails most of all. Read this way, scripture then becomes a living voice of truth, interpreted from the place of vulnerability and not power. Scripture then is not an end in itself but rather is the tour guide to the place where love always triumphs, and where grace and truth kiss in the streets.

COLOSSIANS AND THE GOSPEL FOR OUR TIMES

Colossians 2 presents a faith that becomes a possibility for my friend and for many who have come to equate Christianity with violence, and vacuous “secrets” as wisdom. Mystery is the way to truth and not its hurdle. Truth is a person who loves, not a truth to be imposed. The truth known in Jesus Christ is best experienced in weakness and limitation rather than in power and knowledge. In those concepts is the wisdom of God that transforms the world still today. To the extent that we cling to our systems of truth and the power structures that follow them, we will be powerless to speak to our world that is waiting for a gospel that can lead it into the way of love, life, and peace. If Christians can be more creative, more courageous, and more thoughtful about how such a gospel of mystery, weakness and love might be experienced in today’s culture and church, I believe we would see a renewal of interest from all those like my friend who still love God but struggle to understand how the Christian gospel is a force of good when the track record is so bad. The secret has been revealed. May we discover it again.

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7. Anthony De Mello, *The Song of the Bird* (Image Press, 1984), 45-6.