

1-1-2007

He Raised the Bar All the Way to the Top: Colossians 3.1-17

Thomas H. Olbricht

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Olbricht, Thomas H. (2007) "He Raised the Bar All the Way to the Top: Colossians 3.1-17," *Leaven*: Vol. 15: Iss. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol15/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

He Raised the Bar All the Way to the Top: Colossians 3.1–17

THOMAS H. OLBRICHT

In Colossians Paul declared the superior status of the “beloved Son” (1.13). He was God in every respect. He was Lord of the physical universe, of history, and of all things heavenly. Through him all things were created (1.15–17). He was the head and progenitor of the church (1.18–19). As the result of Christ’s salvific action on the cross all things were reconciled, earthly as well as heavenly (1.20). It is because of who Christ is and as the result of his mission on earth that humans are challenged to aspire to the highest attainment. They comprise a significant aspect of God’s reconstituted universe. Those who have accepted Christ look to him as exemplar. He raised the bar all the way to the top!

Marianne Meye Thompson in her recent theological commentary on Colossians poignantly expressed the challenge,

Through the cross God does not simply deal with the situation of the individual, but undertakes to bring wholeness to the whole world. The predicament of humankind and that of the cosmos are intertwined: both are in need of being rightly reordered by God, and neither will be so in isolation from each other. Sin ruptures not only the divine-human relationship but also the relationships of humans to each other and to their world, and all those relationships must be repaired. But what is in view is not a return to the past, simply patching up an old piece of pottery that has been cracked. Rather, it is remaking the old in terms of a new model. This puts the renewal of humankind at the center of the redemption of the world, because human beings are the world’s “most problematic inhabitants,” the “cause and center” of the disruptive effects of sin.¹

THE RHETORICAL STRATEGY

Paul was fearful that the believers in Colossae might succumb to the bombardment of influential religionists regarding add-ons for attaining the superior spiritual life. The Colossians lived in a market place of competing powers. The believers in Christ may have been especially tempted by the claims of religionists of Jewish background who assimilated into their practices regional Hellenistic outlooks and procedures. They held that God is ultimately in control, but through intermediaries. They observed festivals, new moons, and sabbaths. They worshiped angels, entertained visions, paid deference to the *stoicheia* (cosmic powers), and developed avoidance codes of behavior (Col 2.16–22). Paul did not attack these beliefs head-on, nor deny their allure. Rather he focused on the centrality of Christ and his creating of and reconciling all things. The potency of these add-ons pales in comparison with the status of the one in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col 1.19).

Paul challenged the Colossians that rather than being taken in by the pseudo practices, to turn their backs on the self-designated “pious ones” and continue their walk in Christ. “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving” (Col 2.6–7). Paul’s rhetorical strategy was to undercut the aberrations early in his letter by launching a solid constructive offense. Every possible

1. Marianne Meye Thompson, *Colossians & Philemon* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 121.

existent entity and power was centered in the Son. Readers who may have been tempted to look away from Christ to other powers are simply deluded. Christ Jesus is not one among many. He created everything; he reconciled everything. He is superior to all the powers. Persist in loyalty to him. Don't get blown away by the claims for lesser deities, powers and rituals.

For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God

The world that God is reconstructing takes all its cues from Christ Jesus. He is the one who is actively at work transforming reality. The aspirations of believers must be lifted to the heights he attained. "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Col 3.1). Those who ignore the new redemptive work of God in this universe have set their minds "on things that are on earth" (Col 3.2). Obviously those in Christ are engrossed in his new mission of reconciling all things. They now "have died" and their "life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory" (Col 3.3-4). As Thompson wrote,

The church of Jesus Christ is situated between fulfillment and consummation. The mission of the church is not to undertake the messianic task of bringing about that consummation, but rather to live as God's obedient people in anticipation of God's final redemptive act. Those who are reconciled to God and to each other in the community of faith, the body of Christ, have Christ as Lord and example.²

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly (Colossians 3.5)

Jesus Christ in his life and word is the exemplar for the new work of God in humanity. Every human thought and action is to revolve about him.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col 3.16-17).

The believer must begin this journey by turning aside from every earthly trait and value. Human effort and determination are required in order to put to death these negative characteristics. But humans are not alone in this effort. Christ through his death has started the process and pointed out the way.

And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross (Col 2.13-14).

In his other writings Paul emphasizes also the work of the Spirit in promoting Christ-like action.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Gal 5.22-24).

Only once, however, is the Spirit mentioned as an enabling factor in Colossians, "and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit" (Col 1.8). But this one instance is enough to know that a significant source of love in the believer is the Holy Spirit.

When Paul gets down to the specifics in Colossians, though he has denied the value of avoidance behavior codes, he sets out two lists of five earthly characteristics that must be put to death, or taken off (3.5-11).

2. Ibid., 143.

These are to be followed by two sets of five characteristics with which Christians are to clothe themselves (3.12–6). It is not immediately clear why in each case the number of characteristics totals five, for no contemporary household codes of behavior extant stress five either in Judaism or in Hellenistic circles. The German New Testament scholar Martin Dibelius was one of the earliest to compare the household codes of desirable and undesirable characteristics with other writers contemporary with the New Testament.³ His basic comparison was with Stoic codes.⁴ Later writers, however, found the strongest parallels in Jewish writers, especially Philo and Josephus.⁵ More recently David Balch has established that such codes are characteristic of Hellenistic street preaching behind which one may discover formulas located in Aristotle's writings.⁶

It is clear that these contemporaneous codes are informative in regard to the situation in which the early Christians found themselves. All those who have studied these matters, according to Suzanne Watts Henderson in a recent essay, "agree at least on this point: the writer here [i. e. Colossians] both *adopts* the prevailing cultural views about household structure and *adapts* their practice in light of the 'new life in Christ.'" Henderson suggests, I think appropriately, that even today the believer informed by Christ sets out to determine what is "wise conduct toward outsiders." We too are to "engage with the surrounding (non-Christian) world so as to transform the prevailing practices."⁸

The first set of five earthly traits (3.5) to be put to death is: (1) fornication, (2) impurity, (3) passion, (4) evil desire, and (5) greed (which is idolatry). The first four are focused upon sexual improprieties. At the basis of all five is self-gratification. The efforts to subdue bodily desires that Paul opposed were directed to parts of the body itself as if the body was the seat of the evil: "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" (Col 2.21). Paul rather locates the damaging action in the improper desires that prompt these illicit relationships. These actions to be avoided are not uniquely forbidden to Christians, but are also declared off base by Jewish and Hellenistic moralists. The censure of sexual impurity and greed is common in the Pauline writings.

Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity (Eph 4.17–19).

Fornication in this case specifies both the improper relations of single persons as well as that of the married, though the latter are more often identified as adultery. Fornication includes both consensual and prostitutive affairs. Impurity most likely implies sexual relationships of all kinds, but may possibly include a life of cheating, cutting corners and lying to get ahead. Passion most likely infers sexual lust, but it can include the passion of anger that leads to murder. The word passion itself seems not that much different from evil desire, that is the determination to take advantage of or destroy another or their efforts. Greed is clearly self-indulgence in the acquisition of things and honors even at the expense of others. It may seem a puzzle as to why greed is equated with idolatry. But greed idolizes the things of this world rather than God—"...because they served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen" (Rom 1.25). Andrew Lincoln sug-

3. Martin Dibelius, *An die Kolosser, Epheser, An Philemon* (HNT 12; 3rd ed; Tübingen: J. B. C. Mohr, 1953).

4. See also Karl Weidinger, *Die Haustafeln: Ein Stück urchristlicher Paränese* (UNT 14; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1928).

5. James E. Crouch, *The Origin and Intention of the Colossian Haustafel* (FRLANT 109; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972), 37-46, 84-119, 147.

6. David Balch, "'Let Wives Be Submissive': The Origin, Form and Apologetic Function of the Household Duty Code (Haustafel) in I Peter" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 1974), 112-114.

7. Suzanne Watts Henderson, "Taking Liberties with the Text: The Colossians Household Code As Hermeneutical Paradigm," *Interpretation* 60 (October 2006): 429.

8. *Ibid.*, 431.

gested that immorality, greed and lust are idolatrous because they are personified in Hellenism as the gods Eros, Mammon and Mars.⁹ These five censured traits are more than simply undesirable. “On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient” (Col 3.6). We live in a time in which self-gratification is an admissible goal. Yet the outcomes from such aspirations and passions are destructive of numerous facets of personal, community and international relationships. A much-needed prophetic stance in this age is to call into question the viability of such self-aggrandizement.

The second set of five negatives that is characteristic of the world apart from God entails (1) anger, (2) wrath, (3) malice, (4) slander, and (5) abusive language. These mannerisms feature dispositions that grow out of egotism, arrogance and vindictiveness, fueling a desire to do damage to others. Anger and wrath are probably synonymous as in Proverbs 15.1, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” In our time public display of rage has become widespread and in some degree tolerated. Overhearing persons loudly berating others on cell phones in airport terminals and supermarkets is commonplace. Likewise drivers encounter various expressions of road rage daily on crowded highways. The new persons Paul envisions are much less self-assertive. Rather, they show deference to others. Malice, or evil intent, is an action undertaken to do damage or to put others in harm’s way. It is now a standard political strategy to do as much injury to an opponent’s reputation as possible, even to the extent of employing subterfuge and misrepresentation. In corporate struggles unethical means of promoting one’s self while deprecating rivals are more and more accepted. These actions often involve slander, that is, lying and distorting the truth about others. As an outcome, cooperation and good will are tenuous and fellow workers are estranged and wounded rather than reconciled. Abusive language is another disruptive behavior. Increased abuse is reported in our time—child abuse, spouse abuse, elder abuse. Despite increased restrictive legislation, abuse has accelerated because intensified brutish conduct is rampant. Abuse sometimes is physical, but verbal abuse is much more common. Lying (3.9) is mentioned separately but in a sense is an aspect of the last two destructive manners of speaking.

In putting to death these destructive traits the believers have paved the way for clothing themselves “with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator” (Col 3.10). The new self constantly dwells upon Christ in word and deed and seeks to “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col 3.17). The believer is a new creature. The deeply ingrained distinctions between various types of people have dropped by the wayside among those who are in Christ Jesus—“In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!” (Col 3.11).

NEW PERSONS IN CHRIST JESUS

The characteristics of the new person in Christ are now proclaimed. The first set of five traits is (1) compassion, (2) kindness, (3) humility, (4) meekness, and (5) patience. The possession of these characteristics is a sure sign that the recipients have been chosen as God’s agents in the reconstituted reality that is on its way (3.12). God has already positioned believers in his emerging kingdom. “He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1.13–14). God’s new persons, rather than taking advantage of their associates, will express heartfelt compassion as did Jesus toward the hungry and the sick. Rather than trying to elbow out rivals they will be kind even to their enemies. Humility and meekness stress the same quality, that of not thinking more highly of one’s self than one ought. Jesus possessed this quality, “he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Phil 2.8). Those comprising the world under reconstruction will be gentle and considerate with their companions. They will grant that other persons on the road also have the right to get where they are going. They will not explode with anger over uninformed and inad-

9. Andrew T. Lincoln, “The Letter to the Colossians,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 646.

equate responses, but will show forbearance in regard to the shortcomings of others and will readily exhibit patience.

The second set of five new characteristics is not as explicitly formulated as the first, but does constitute five additional traits (1) bear with one another, (2) forgive, (3) love, (4) be at peace, and (5) be thankful (3.13–15). People who feel wronged often bear grudges against others, but Paul calls for the opposite, that is, forbearance. Those now in Christ Jesus are to forgive insults and neglect and put away a hypercritical attitude. Love is a chief attribute in the kingdom of God's dear Son, for it brings perfect harmony to the church body. Elsewhere Paul identifies love as the greatest of the gifts (1 Cor 13.13). Believers are to be at peace rather than on edge and always agitating. They must let the peace of Christ reign in their hearts. Rather than constantly tracking down slights and wrongs they should realize how blessed they are and be thankful. Thompson observed,

The one who is in Christ will demonstrate what it means to be renewed in Christ when problems and complaints arise in the body; then graciousness toward others appears. Such a gracious stance toward the other depends on mutuality, on an understanding of the Christian life as an ongoing renewal with the ultimate goal of maturity in Christ.¹⁰

Believers in Christ constantly rejoice over the redemptive work of God with which they are surrounded. They look on expectantly as the whole of reality is being transformed into the image of God. They set their sights high, that is, with Christ who is seated at the right hand of God. He has situated the bar at the top. Those in Christ have been emancipated from fleshly entrapments. They are hidden in the heavenly Christ. When he who is their life appears they will be like him. "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col 3.17). "And through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Col 1.20).

COMMENTARIES AND ESSAYS

Dunn, James. *The Epistle to the Colossians and Philemon*. A Commentary on the Greek Text. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.

Lincoln, Andrew T. "The Letter to the Colossians," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 11. Nashville: Abingdon, 2000.

Lohse, Eduard. *Colossians and Philemon*. Hermeneia. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971.

Thompson, Marianne Meye. *Colossians & Philemon*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005.

Porkorný, Petr. *Colossians: A Commentary*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991.

Olbricht, Thomas H. *The Message of Ephesians and Colossians*. Abilene: ACU Press, 1983.

_____. "Colossians and Gnostic Theology," *Restoration Quarterly*, 14:2 (1968): 65-79.

_____. "The Rhetoric of Colossians," Pgs 308-328 in *Rhetoric, Theology and the Scriptures, Pretoria Conference, 1994*, Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht, editors. Sheffield: The University of Sheffield Press, 1995.

Walsh, Brian J. and Sylvia C. Keesmaat. *Colossians Remixed*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004.

THOMAS H. OLBRICHT IS DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF RELIGION, PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY, MALIBU, CA. HE AND HIS WIFE, DOROTHY, LIVE IN RETIREMENT IN SOUTH BERWICK, MAINE.

10. Thompson, *Colossians & Philemon*, 84.