

Commentary on Message

Identifying the “trouble in the text” was easier than the “grace in the text”. Much more could certainly be said about each. Some of my grammatical observations below informed my decision regarding the latter. In one sense, it could be said that the grace in the text is the fact that they are hidden with Christ in God, and therefore they will not face the wrath of God which is coming (3:3, 6). But they have already received that grace prior to 3:1, so I asked, what is the new aspect of grace brought out in this text. There is certainly grace in the truth of the new self, which they have and are to put on, but the new man is the New Creation which is fully realized on the day of His appearing! I chose to focus on that appearing.

How a Reformed Hermeneutic Informed This Sermon

Grammatical

A key grammatical decision for this sermon was made in 3:1-2. What are the “above things”? My outline of these lines looked like this:

ta anō zēteite (the above things seek)

hou ho christos estin en dexia tou theou kathēmenos (where Christ is seated/enthroned
at the right hand of God)

² ta anō phroneite, (the things above think about)

mē ta epi tēs gēs (not the things on the earth)

There is a sort of chiasm (A-B-A) created by separation of the two occurrences of τὰ ἄνω with the phrase, “*hou ho christos estin en dexia tou theou kathēmenos*”. What does it mean to set my mind on things above? Looking at the BDAG lexicon, I discovered that when the object of *phroneite* (think about) is personal, especially if it is a divine personal, it has the sense of taking someone's side, or espousing their cause (1 Macc. 10:20; Matt. 16:23; Mark 8:3; Rom. 8:5). If Paul is referring to the Divine without using the name (e.g. kingdom of heaven = kingdom of God), then *ta anō* are the things of the throne of Christ... i.e. Christ Himself. To take Christ's side, or to espouse the cause of Christ (the King), is equal to seeking first His kingdom and His righteousness, alluded to in the directive to seek the above things – the things of the enthroned Christ.

Literary

This section is not a major unit within the letter, but a sub-unit, and therefore does not contain some of the more obvious epistolary markers for division. However, 2:20 and 3:1 each start with *Ei oun (if then)*. They are part of a string of *oun's (then's)* (2:16, 20; 3:1, 5, 12) that are built on the truths of 2:8-15. Given the limitations of time and mental capacity for one sermon, it is wise to break this larger section down into bite-size sub-units.

Treating this unit as a letter means that this sermon should be informed by Paul's opening comments, and especially the prayer report. The centrality of the supremacy of Christ in Colossians, puts bold text, underlining, and highlighting on the verses about Christ being seated at the right hand of God. This is His enthronement over everything in heaven and earth. The title "Christ" is used twenty-five times in this letter, which emphasizes His supremacy and enthronement as the messiah-king to come. Five of the twenty-five occurrences are in this text (3:1-11).

In the closing we find language that supports the emphasis I have placed on the significance of doing the work of the King.

¹¹...These are the only Jews among my *co-workers for the kingdom of God*, and they have proved a comfort to me. ¹² Epaphras, who is one of you and *a servant of Christ Jesus*, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. ... ¹⁸ I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. *Remember my chains*. Grace be with you. (Col. 4:11-18, Emphasis mine)

Historical

Concerning the situation in Corinth, John Polhill writes, "In his book of 1973, John Gunther pointed to forty-four different reconstructions of the Colossian teaching.?" If one were so inclined, one could probably greatly expand the list today."¹ This may be because there is not one particular false teaching that was rampant in Colossae. If there had been, Paul would likely have spoken directly about the false teachers as he does elsewhere. Given the historical situation, I tend toward the view that Paul is addressing a broader syncretism which affected the church. While this affects every church, Epaphras' report brought to Paul about the state of the church, raised it to the surface here.

1 John B. Polhill, *Paul and His Letters* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 338.

Theological

The Ascension, combined with the Resurrection, is arguably the most significant event in human history, the whole of the New Testament, and it is significant in the letter itself. The Ascension, much like the Resurrection in the shorter ending of Mark, is often underplayed. E.g. In Acts 1:9-11 it is almost a passing comment. The Ascension is truly hidden in the clouds. Yet it is the primary assumption of the advance of the Word in Acts.

The wisdom and ways of the King. Here I draw on two theological concepts. The first, in Paul. The wisdom of the cross speaks of the Divine wisdom that declares that in losing is finding, in dying is living, in suffering is glory, and that in giving up is gaining. For Paul, it is that wisdom which is to be put on display through the church (Eph. 3:10). It is the wisdom that undergirds the the command of love, which is the way of the Lord (see 1 Cor. 14:1).

We only know what love is by examining the cross. It calls us to lay down our lives for one another (1 Jn. 3:16). Paul's call to put to death that which brings pleasure and earthly satisfaction is nothing short of a call to love (expressed in the negative, whereas vv12ff express it in the positive). "Put to death" is another way of saying, "lay down your life for..." or "walk in the way of love." As Leviticus 19 expositis what love of neighbor looks like, Paul's virtue and vice lists do likewise. *Love* is undergirded by the wisdom of the cross rooted in the hope of eternal life.