

SURVEY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS

 orcid.org/0000-0001-6460-8734

This survey of Colossians has been conducted as a socio-scientific study which approaches the letter by using rhetorical tools. Basic sources were Ben Witherington's socio-rhetorical commentary and Scull's doctoral thesis. Witherington is a specialist in the Greco-Roman rhetorics. The study was enriched by using socio-historical commentaries by James Dunn and N.T. Wright. They seek to reconstruct the socio-historical situation concerning Paul and Colossae. The chosen approach seeks to understand the letter from the viewpoint of the implied original reader.

This short survey of Colossians is in many ways a limited study concerning Colossians. For example N.T. Wright's metanarrative trumps some of the historical-grammatical principles. Ben Witherington's socio-rhetorical commentary does not take into consideration that Paul was not trained in rhetoric. It could mean that my presentation is too clear and I have not taken into consideration some of the Paul's side paths. Also detailed teaching about *probatio* is lacking. The survey is intended to serve as an overview and supporting material in the Bible school. A teacher should complete this presentation by word studies and using exegetical tools.

The survey does not follow the so-called "Traditional Perspective on Paul" (TPP). Since the time of Luther, the protestants have seen Pauline letters dividing into two parts: position and condition, or in other words, doctrine and application. This dichotomy is not substantiated by either socio-rhetorical study or linguistics but it reflects the fact that Luther and his much earlier predecessor Augustine suffered from the problem of a guilty conscience. This problem led them to avoid dealing with the application sections of the Pauline letters equally with soteriology because they doubt their salvation. The kind of reading leads to teaching that omits the teachings of the Bible concerning ethics and practical life.

The Pauline letters should be read through the *probatio* that serves as an interpretation key of the letter. Colossians should be read through what Paul presents in Colossians 1:21-23 (*probatio*) and Colossians 2:6-7 which could be a recapitulation of the *probatio*. Paul's concern in Colossians is that believers would be gradually moving from their alienation from the spiritual life towards maturity by following role models (Christ and Paul), by being rooted in Christ and behaving accordingly. Paul also instructs about the "body life", family life and professional life. Paul understands that the spiritual life is formed "inside out". However, it also flows from "outside to inside" meaning that believer's reactions and pro-reactions to exterior influences affect his growth towards maturity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Paul as an Agent of God

Paul did not provide his full biography for Colossians but introduced himself four ways: his deeds, personal suffering, self-effacing language, and Paul as an agent of God. The purpose his self-presentation was to show that the message of the letter, Paul's character and his deeds correspond coherently together. He built a bridge between him and Colossians by providing carefully selected information to help the Colossians comprehend the message of the letter.

Paul's sufferings serve as a model for the kind of behavior he expects from the community. He perseveres as he grows towards maturity, accomplishes good deeds despite of the imprisonment and sets aside his own achievements for the good of the community

1.2. Timothy as the Co-Author

Usually, Paul gave a limited role to his amanuensis concerning the content of this letter. However, the letter to Colossians fluctuates between the first-person plural and singular. Also, its style is different from the earlier Pauline letters. For that reason some have argued that the letter is pseudo-Pauline i.e. it is written by someone else. In my view Paul let Timothy play a substantial role in the composition of the letter. The letter's internal coherence, anyhow, comes from Paul. These changes in personal pronouns backs up my view.

1.3. Colossae

Colossae was in the southern part of the Roman province of Asia, which situates in the southern part of the modern day western Anatolia (Anatolia = Asia Minor = modern Turkey). In Roman times the relocation of the road leading north to Pergamum brought about both the growth of Laodicea, a city 10 miles away, and brought about Colossae's gradual decline (Elwell, 1988:496). So, at that point the city was already relatively small.

1.4. The Church of Colossae

The pastor of the Colossian church was Paul's co-worker, Epaphras, who was in Rome during the letter was written. From him Paul got to know that the Colossians were attracted by a "human tradition" which is characterized as "philosophy and empty illusion" (Bruce, 1984:17). Paul had himself never visited Colossae.

According to Wright (1986:43), Paul intended his letter to be read out in the church (4:16). This reminds us that we cannot understand the Pauline Epistles from a purely individualistic viewpoint. Each mature individual Christian has, of course, the responsibility to 'test all things'. But the Christian truth is a *corporate* possession.

2. EXORDIUM

2.1. Kolossalaiskirje 1:3-8

Paul's understanding of himself as a servant-apostle is seen in this section. He starts the letter with *exordium*. Its first part about thanksgiving, 1:3-8, forms a single complex sentence where Paul reveals his gratitude towards the Colossians. According to Witherington (2007:118) "*The function of any exordium is to establish the ethos of the speaker in such a way as to establish not merely contact but rapport with the audience and express the essential aim or function of the discourse*". Paul had never visited Colossae and knew personally only a few church members. So, it was necessary for him to create a positive connection and mutual feeling with them right at the beginning of the letter.

Gratitude in the exordium is corporate. The verb 'Εὐχαριστοῦμεν' is active indicative first person plural. Plural form could refer to Paul and his co-author. Their gratitude is both unconditional and conditional. He is united with the Colossians because of their mutual faith in Christ. This aspect of gratitude traces back to epistolary prescript where he uses household language to describe their unity. However, this unity is not only positional but includes a condition of mutual love. Union with Christ is a foundation of the unity between the authors and the Colossian church, but it is the mutual love that makes their unity deeper, active, and functional.

The *exordium* prepares the readers to understand and to accept the teaching of the letter. Its core is the Christian hope that Epaphras initially preached in Colossae (Wright, 1986:56). The hope in Christ is a means to bear the fruit that is revealed in mutual love (Col 1:5-9).

Diagram 21: From Hope to Growth

2.2. Intercession for Colossians - Colossians 1:9-14

Colossians 1:9 starts with the phrase 'Διὰ τοῦτο', meaning 'for this reason'. This Paul's intercession for the Colossians is followed by the ἵνα clause which brings in the main thought of the passage: advancement towards maturity. The Colossians were faithful believers and the church didn't have any major problems or apostasy. However, there was still room for improvement. Paul addresses those areas for improvement in the *probatio* later in the letter.

3. NARRATIO

3.1. Introduction

According to Witherington *narratio* (2007:128) is a story, a set of facts, that not only had bearing on the arguments that follow but that in some sense were their basis (Dio Chrysostom *Oratio* 40.8–19; 41.1–6). The requirements for a *narratio*, particularly in the deliberative discourse, are that it should be short and lucid, saying no more than was sufficient and necessary, and that it describes the problem that generated the discourse at hand

3.2. Supremacy of Christ

Colossians 1:15 starts the narrative section of the letter. Paul used in his letters narrative to make his point relevant to his readers. This is a case also in his letter to Colossians. However, the narrative in Colossians is interesting because it does not include Paul's biographical details but presents Christ as a Creator, the Redeemer, and the Head of His body. The content of the *narratio* indicates that Christological heresies influenced negatively the spiritual advancement of the recipients of the letter.

4. PROPOSITIO

4.1. The Life before and outside of Christ – Colossians 1:21

The sentence *"And you were at one time strangers and enemies in your minds as expressed through your evil deeds"* describes the background situation of the *propositio*. Colossians' former status as enemies of God and their condition as doers of evil deeds tell about the circumstances and events that provide the background to the main point. Their life before and outside of Christ is the basis for Paul's exhortation where he points out that our background influences retroactively on our walk with Christ regardless of our changed status.

4.2. Alienation from the Life of Christ – Colossians 1:22-23

The *propositio* highlights Colossians' present alienation from the life of Christ. Paul confirms that Colossians are redeemed persons for their status and wants to present them blameless before Christ already in the present time. Being blameless does not mean that *"God's action in Christ, and the Colossians' acceptance of the gospel, have automatically and instantly made them perfect"* (Wright, 1986:85), but being blameless is a condition of the mature believer. Being blameless in Paul's writings is synonymous with words like integrity, healthy, well-behaving, and just. Being blameless concerning the Torah means that a person does not have unreconciled sins.

5. PROBATIO

5.1. Argument 1 – Life of Christ (Colossians 1:24-2:5)

The first argument presents that the sufferings that Christ and Paul endured made them role models for spiritual life. For Paul, life was a battle. He often used military terminology and spoke about suffering as he described what it took to live spiritual life. So, the life of Christ imparted to the lives of believers is a mission which includes suffering (Col 1:24) and which focuses to the final destiny (Col 1:28) (Leach, 2010:915).

5.2. Argument 2 – Life in Christ (Colossians 2:6-3:4)

The second argument is built on the first argument. Colossians 2:6-7 includes important information concerning Christian living. First, Paul reminds his readers that they have received Christ. According to John receiving Christ equals believing in Christ (John 1:12). Receiving is a different thing from following Christ which on its turn means to pursue discipleship or spiritual maturity.

Paul uses the term to walk (περιπατέω) to connect our lives to our destiny (Col 2:6). The verb is in the imperative mood which implies that it is possible not to follow his instructions. However, this refusal has serious consequences. 'Walking' is an often used figure of speech about human behavior and the direction in life. In the New Testament 'walking' is a frequent used for the participation in the life of the body of Christ and blameless conduct empowered by the Spirit (e.g. Rom 8:1-17).

Walking with Christ and being rooted in Him helps them to experience their positional freedom from the indebtedness to God, to free them from the curses of human and religious traditions, and to enable them to experience cognitive renewal that leads spiritual transformation.

5.3. Argument 3 – Unity in Christ (Colossians 3:5-4:6)

6. PERORATIO

6.1. Introduction

In the Greek tradition, the *epilogos*, as the Greeks called the *peroratio*, focused on summing up the most essential points of the previous discourse. Usually it included also an attempt to arouse the deeper emotions in the readers (love, hate, compassion, envy), and finally, it also amplified some pressing matter (Witherington, 2007:197).

6.2. The Means of Maturity

In the *peroratio* Paul completes the goal set in *propositio* and argued in *probatio*. First, he instructs them to be connected to God through prayer. It should be consistent, filled with thanksgiving, and gospel-thriven. Then he reminds them concerning their behavior towards outsiders and also in the church.

7. EPISTOLARY CONCLUSION

7.1. Introduction

Paul wraps up the letter with the customary epistolary conclusion summarizing the purpose of the epistle without any superfluous details.

7.2. Mature Standing before God

Paul presented his thesis in Colossians 1:21-23 in which Colossians are exhorted to move on from alienation (from God) towards spiritual maturity. Paul's co-worker Epaphras was with him in Rome at that time as he prayed for Colossians (Col 4:12) "*so that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God*" (a better translation of the 'will of God' is the 'planned purpose of God'). Epaphras knew his people and his intercession follows along the lines of Paul's *propositio*. It is also the main point of the conclusion. Closing words reflect Paul's and his co-workers' sufferings and self-sacrifices. Their circumstances form the background for Paul's personal final point which is unusual ending for an epistle: "*Remember my chains. Grace be with you.*"

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