

Article of the Month – January 2012

Missiological Observations in the NT (7) – Colossians

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Paul had a worldwide missions vision,¹ in contrast to many missionaries today, who know little beyond their own ministries; some are not even interested in what others do. Paul was interested in all fruit, not only in his own ministry in Ephesus, but also in that of Epaphras in the Lycus Valley.² Although the Colossians were not the fruit of his own ministry, Paul definitely took partner-responsibility, in that he prayed for them earnestly.³ His prayer included the ‘bearing of fruit in every good work’ – in which he indicates outreach in local evangelism as well as in cross-cultural missions.⁴

Encouragement to reach out lies in the ‘once enemies but now reconciled by Christ’.⁵ People, remembering their former misery, will have compassion with those still in it.

The words ‘if [you are] ... not moved’⁶ indicate that the Gospel is not a cheap message that, once accepted, will guarantee eternal benefits even if neglected. You can lose it. This becomes clear from the exhortation to ‘work out your salvation with fear and trembling’,⁷ and from other passages.⁸ Paul was as concerned about discipling his converts as about making them; he did not want his efforts to be in vain.⁹

His observation that ‘... the Gospel ... you heard ... has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven’¹⁰ was not meant to indicate that he considered the Great Commission as finished. There was still work to be done, as he said in some other letters.¹¹

Saving people also costs suffering from Christ’s workers.¹² Some believe that the more Paul bore suffering himself, the more his fellow-believers would be spared.¹³

¹ Col. 1:6

² Acts 19 & Col. 1:7 respectively

³ 1:9

⁴ 1:6-10

⁵ 1:21,22

⁶ 1:23

⁷ Philip. 2:12

⁸ Ez. 18:24; Hebr. 6:4-6

⁹ 1 Cor. 9:24-27; Gal. 2:2 & 4:11

¹⁰ Col. 1:23b

¹¹ E.g. in 2 Cor. 10:15,16 and Rom. 15:23,24. Even when imprisoned in Rome he had not yet visited Spain and might still contemplate going there after his expected release, Philip. 1:19,25,26; 2:24

¹² Col. 1:24; Philip. 3:10

¹³ O’Brien, referring to 2 Cor. 4:12, in Hawthorne, Martin & Reid, *Dictionary of St. Paul’s Letters*, 1993:625

Paul resisted every exclusivism. Some believers thought that they were better, i.e. more spiritual, than others, but he aimed at presenting ‘*everyone with all wisdom so that everyone [might be] perfect in Christ*’ (italics mine);¹⁴ this meant a real struggle for him.¹⁵

Paul was serious about discipling converts as part of his missionary follow-up program,¹⁶ and sums up some aspects: encouragement of heart; unification in love; complete understanding of Christ in Whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge; living in Christ; being rooted and built up in Him; strengthened in the faith and overflowing with thankfulness. People who have been taught well in these areas will not easily be deceived.

In stating that there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but [that] Christ is all and is in all,¹⁷ Paul says that former unbelievers and believers can only be united in Christ; that doctrinal and educational differences between believers can only be solved in Christ;¹⁸ and that social and societal differences can only disappear in Christ. Only in Him these walls of enmity will be broken down.¹⁹

Paul asks for prayer to support his ministry, for open doors²⁰ and for the competency to explain the mystery of Christ clearly, as he asked earlier.²¹ He also asks the Colossians to pray for grace, for him to endure his imprisonment.²²

Later he encourages them to behave and converse wisely, so that they may keep their good witness and use the opportunities to testify about their faith in Jesus Christ.²³ Presumably he refers to local, relationship-oriented evangelism here.

Missionaries need to keep in touch with their sending churches.²⁴ These need to remain informed about what is going on at the mission fields and with the missionaries, so they can persevere in intercession.²⁵ Implied is Paul’s desire to remain posted about how the churches are doing. Church-mission relationships should be bilateral.

An early missionary attrition case, John Mark, who left the ministry 12-14 years earlier was now reconciled to Paul and probably back in the work of the Gospel.²⁶ Mark and Jesus (Justus) were Paul’s Jewish co-workers for the Kingdom and had been a comfort to him. Within cross-cultural ministry there can be much-needed comfort in mono-cultural friendships, especially when people are ministerial colleagues.

Paul praises his co-worker Epaphras before the church the latter had planted. There was no jealousy or competition in Paul, just enjoyment about his colleague’s success. Paul’s interest was in *the* Kingdom, not his own.

¹⁴ Col. 1:28; Paul expresses similar thoughts in 2:2,3,10 (‘full’, ‘complete’, ‘all’, ‘fullness’)

¹⁵ 1:29; 2:1

¹⁶ 2:2-4,6,7

¹⁷ 3:11

¹⁸ That is if we define ‘barbarians’ as simple, uneducated people and Scythians as ‘technically sophisticated nomad people’ (as in Reicke & Rost, *Bijbels-historisch woordenboek*, V, 1970:53)

¹⁹ Eph. 2:14-22. A similar thought was expressed in Gal. 3:28, where ‘male and female’ are added

²⁰ Col. 4:3,4

²¹ 1:26,27; 2:3

²² 4:3,18

²³ 4:5,6

²⁴ 4:7-9

²⁵ 4:2-4

²⁶ Acts 13:13; Col. 4:10,11

Some missionary pioneers are not good at finishing what they started; hence the exhortation Paul addresses indirectly to Archippus to complete his work.²⁷

²⁷ 4:17