

Thank You

Colossians 1:3-6

Dr. Pierre Cannings

I. Thanks For v.3

- a. Thank You - to express appreciation for benefits or blessings, *give thanks, express thanks, render/return thanks*
 - i. Giving continual thanks to God was characteristic of Paul's prayers (Rom. 1:8; 1 Cor. 1:14; Eph. 1:6; etc.), though he omitted this praise in Galatians and 2 Corinthians. Here **God** is recognized as the cause of goodness in His people. This thanks, Paul said, is rendered **when we pray**. And thanksgiving was given **because** Paul had **heard** (from Epaphras, Col. 1:7; cf. 4:12) about their growing **faith in Christ Jesus and their love ... for all the saints**. Prayer here is the broader, more inclusive act of worship including thanksgiving and intercession (cf. Matt. 6:7; Acts 16:25).
 - ii. The congratulatory element focuses as usual on their faith (Rom. 1:8) and love (1 Thes. 1:3; 2 Thes. 1:3; and, perhaps significantly, Phm. 5; also Eph. 1:15). That this is a matter of report rather than of personal knowledge confirms that Paul did not know the Colossian church personally (though cf. Rom. 1:8); the parallel with Phm. 5 is again worth noting. It also reminds us that news of his churches would reach Paul regularly along the trade routes, even to far-off Rome
 - iii. The congratulatory thanksgiving is concluded with a final note of appreciation to Epaphras, which also serves to make clear to the readership that Paul is well informed about their situation. Presumably it was to Epaphras (cf. again Phm. 23) that Paul owed knowledge of the threatening circumstances at Colossae, to which the main thrust of the letter is directed
- b. Praying for You
 - i. The unceasing nature of this prayer (πάντοτε, "always, at all times") is one of the most characteristic features of Paul's opening assurance of his prayers for his readers, whether attached to the εὐχαριστεῖν ("thank"—1 Cor. 1:4; 1 Thes. 1:2; 2 Thes. 1:3) or to the προσεύχεσθαι ("pray," as in Rom. 1:10 and Phil. 1:4). Phm. 4
 - ii. Since Paul often emphasized the activity of prayer, he wanted to share the fact that he actually remembered them in prayer. The joys and concerns of the Colossian congregation meant enough to Paul that he prayed about them. When this is compared with the other epistles, a sizable impression

emerges regarding the extent of Paul's prayer life. He prayed for all the churches.

II. For Your Faith and Love v.4

a. Heard

- i. The second factor which led to Paul's thanksgiving was the growth of the Colossian Christians. The structure of this Greek sentence, which began in v. 1, is somewhat complicated because Paul's mind moved quickly from one theme to another and one idea grew out of another. The participial modifier is "because we have heard" (1:4) and all that follows depends logically and grammatically on it.
- ii. Thus Paul had heard that the church was Christian. He further had heard that it was living its faith in the risen Lord. Its members were practicing, faithful Christians. In this commendation, Paul resumed what he introduced in 1:2 with the term "faithful brothers in Christ."

b. Faith **Ephesians 1:15**

- i. Faith is the soul looking *upward* to God Faith rests on the past work of Christ
 1. Its distinctive Pauline force is most evident in Romans 4, where he makes unforgettably clear the character of faith as sheer trust in the power and grace of God, as against a more typical traditional Jewish emphasis on faithfulness
 2. And in Gal. 2:16–3:26 he indicates by emphatic argument that this faith has now been given its eschatological focus in Christ to become the single most determinative characteristic of the new phase of God's saving purpose introduced by Christ. What Paul and Timothy commend here, therefore, is the way in which the Colossians received the message about Christ (as Abraham received the promise of a son, Gen. 15:6; Romans 4; Galatians 3) and committed themselves in trust to the one so proclaimed, making Christ the focus and determinant of their lives from then on (see on 1:2, "in Christ").

c. Love **Ephesians 1:15**

- i. love looks *outward* to others love works in the present
- ii. All Saints *believers, loyal followers, saints* of Christians as consecrated to God
 1. The Colossians' love extended to "all the saints" (Col. 1:4), or all believers, probably not only at Colosse but everywhere (cf. 1 Thes. 1:7–8 for a similar commendation).
 2. Presumably, therefore, this is what was in mind here—an active concern for one another among the Colossian Christians which did not stop short at self-sacrifice of personal interests—and not just for one another, if the "all the saints" is to be taken seriously. Here

may be indicated a network of mutual support and encouragement as Christians moved among the different towns in Asia Minor;

3. The second evidence of the Colossian Christians' growth was the presence of love. Typically, Paul employed the term *agapē* for Christian love, as he did here. Of significance, however, is the fact that he used the article with the noun, pointing to a specific expression of love. It is "the love you have for all the saints." The employment of the articular noun ("the love") and the qualifying phrase ("you have for all the saints") reveals two truths about the nature of the church's concern. First, it was sacrificial. The term *agapē* reminded them of the sacrificial love of Christ for them. Second, within the Christian community it was indiscriminate. The love was directed to all the saints.

iii. Love in the Spirit

III. For Your Hope v.5-6

- a. Hope - **with some reason for confidence respecting fulfillment, hope, expectation** hope looks *forward* to the future. hope anticipates the future
 - i. Because of Hope –
 1. Hope provided the basis for Christian growth since the most basic elements of faith toward God and love toward others grow out of hope. In reality, without hope there is no reason for faith or love, and everything is directed to ourselves and our world. Paul modified the concept of hope in two ways.
 2. Faith and love "spring from" (*dia*, lit., are "on account of") "hope," confidence in what God will do in the future. This confidence led to a greater trust in God and a deeper love for others. This confident expectation of Christ's return, called "the blessed hope" (Titus 2:13), influences believers' conduct (cf. 1 Thes. 4:13–18; 1 John 3:3)
 3. At all events, the formulation here serves to underline the eschatological and forward-looking character of the gospel message that called forth the Colossians' faith and stimulated their love for their fellow saints
 4. The hope, then, would be for a destiny that outmaneuvers (cf. Rom. 8:38–39) and defeats these powers (see on 2:15) and reaches right into the presence of God. The sense that there are powers of evil abroad which are often strong enough to crush whole peoples as well as individuals is, of course, not dependent on the worldview presumed here. But however such realities are conceptualized, hope remains a constant feature of the Christian gospel.
 5. ("hope"), should immediately appear in close connection. For the linking of the three is another distinctive feature of Pauline teaching (1 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:5–6; 1 Thes. 1:3; 5:8; cf. Rom. 5:1–

5; see further Hunter 33–35). “Hope” itself is almost as distinctively a Pauline feature in the New Testament (36 of 53 occurrences). In contrast to the more uncertain, fearful note typical of classical (and modern) usage, the sense here is characteristically Jewish: hope as expectation of good, confidence in God. As such it is closely related to faith, confident trust in God.

6. What precisely the hope is, or is directed to, is not mentioned here, but the picture becomes clearer with the other two references to hope in the letter, as to both its source (“the hope of the gospel,” 1:23), its focus (“Christ in you”), and what is hoped for (“glory”; see on 1:27). The location of what is hoped for is, however, specified here: “in the heavens.” What is hoped for, therefore, could be the exalted Christ (“their Lord in heaven,” 4:1),
7. Paul believed that the hope offered in Christ inspires assurance and, as a result, produces spiritual fruit. The basis of believing Christ (faith) and serving others (love) is that this world is not the end. There is an afterlife where the deeds done here will be evaluated and rewarded. Christians have an understanding of the rewards and blessings of heaven.

ii. Laid up in Heaven

1. Laid- **to reserve as award or recompense, *reserve***, a common term in honorary documents expressing appreciation for sense of civic or other communal responsibility
2. The verb has the basic sense of “be put away, stored up” (as in Luke 19:20). But it readily gathered to itself the richer sense of something held in reserve for someone or some occasion as a destiny *Colossians and Philemon* 18; so 4 Macc. 8:11; Heb. 9:27) and in Jewish and Christian thought of something retained by God for the appropriate time in God’s foreordained plan (Gen. 49:10; Job 38:23; *Joseph and Asenath* 15:10: “your wedding robe ... laid up in your chamber since eternity”), including eschatological reward
3. **1:5a–b** The first statement about Christian hope was that it is a present reality. It was preserved for them in heaven. In Scripture the term “hope” may be used subjectively, as an attitude of heart, or objectively, as the reality for which hope is expressed. Paul used the subjective meaning in Rom 5:1–11; 8:24, where he stressed the attitude of trust necessary to provide Christian security in the world

iii. Previously Heard Word of Truth **1 Thessalonians 2:13**

1. Gospel **Romans 1:8**
 - a. Without Christ’s Ascension to heaven (Acts 1:10–11) and His present intercession there on behalf of believers (Heb. 7:25; 1 John 2:1), they would have no hope (cf. 1 Cor.

- 15:16–19). This message is **the Word of truth** (cf. Eph. 1:13; 2 Tim. 2:15; James 1:18), **the gospel** as Paul defines it here and elsewhere (cf. 1 Cor. 15:1–3; Rom. 10:9–10).
- b. Some preach a “different gospel—which is really no gospel at all” (Gal. 1:6–7). This is because it is a gospel of grace plus works, or faith plus works. But the true gospel is one of grace alone (Rom. 11:6; Eph. 2:8–9; Titus 3:5–7).
 - c. though the effect is the thoroughly Pauline one of expressing full confidence that the sure purpose of God, not yet fully unveiled, will be revealed and realized in God’s good time. This emphasis on the forward looking character of the gospel may well be a first counter to a too realized element in the teaching to be countered in the body of the letter
 - d. At all events, there is probably a further implication (as in Galatians) that this is a truth that has to be stoutly maintained against teachings that (in this case) deny or diminish the eschatological thrust of the gospel’s emphasis on hope (cf. pp. 33ff. above).
 - e. But here it could simply denote the success of the gospel in winning more and more to belief in Christ Jesus and in the hope offered. The unclarity is not helped by the ambiguity of the second verb, which can mean either that the gospel “is causing (its converts) to grow” (1 Cor. 3:6–7)—that is, in knowledge (1:10), righteousness (2 Cor. 9:10), or faith (2 Cor. 10:15)—or that the gospel “is (itself) growing,” that is, like a plant (Matt. 13:32; Mark 4:8)
 - f. It is not a gospel at all, real or counterfeit. His statement stresses the truth and should be read “the truth, which is the gospel which came to you.” Paul, therefore, emphasized the fact that the gospel message they heard was, in fact, sufficient as a word of truth. They should have had no need to seek some new teaching. The preachers of the gospel had given them the word of truth.

g.

2. Bearing Fruit and Increasing **Philippians 1:3**

- a. Bearing Fruit - **to cause the inner life to be productive, bear fruit**
 - i. As a tree bears fruit and grows in size, so the gospel produces spiritual “fruit” in believers’ lives (cf. “the fruit of the Spirit,” Gal. 5:22–23; “the fruit of righteousness,” Phil. 1:11) and spreads to and influences others (cf. the same words “bearing fruit” and “growing” in Col. 1:10). Heresies (such as the one at Colosse) are local and harmful; but truth is universal and helpful.

- ii. the closeness of the two verses favors the idea of growth in character, but both ideas may be implied—the success of the gospel in producing so many mature and moral people. Either way, the note of triumphalism (“in all the world”) is striking, as also the implied eschatological finality of Paul’s apostolic mission
- iii. It is not too fanciful to imagine Epaphras, anxious to share the good news with his own townsfolk, volunteering to evangelize Colossae and devoting
- iv. Paul saw the gospel as “in motion,” moving from place to place and incorporating gospel preachers into it. It was not the property of those who preached it. The gospel belonged to God and was his way of saving the world
- v. The actual terms used, when pressed to their original ideas, suggest reproductive capability (“bearing fruit”) and maturing capability (“increasing”). Together the terms teach that the gospel is productive; it accomplishes the work God intends. Significantly, the same terms occur in v. 10 in Paul’s prayer for the Colossian Christians and their growth in the knowledge of God’s will.
- vi. Although he had a major concern about spreading the message of the good news of the cross, the life communicated through the message captured his imagination here. The advance of the gospel is in reality the advance of the work of God in changing the lives of those who hear and believe the proclamation.

b. **1 Thessalonians 2:14 Suffering**

3. Day you Heard it and Understood

- a. Understood - **to have knowledge of someth or someone, *know*** with the pre. making its influence felt, *know exactly, completely, through and through*
- b. The Colossians **learned it**, the gospel, **from Epaphras** who apparently founded the church at Colosse (cf. 4:12). Paul called him a **dear fellow servant**
- c. Either way the verb denotes the experience (Ernst, *Philipper, Philemon, Kolosser, Epheser* 159) as well as the intellectual apprehension of God’s outreaching generosity (“grace”) as transforming power (cf. Rom. 3:24; 5:15, 17; 1 Cor. 1:4–5; 15:10; 2 Cor. 6:1; Gal. 1:6, 15; see on 1:2,

“grace”). The addition of “in truth” reinforces the overtones of 1:5 (“the truth of the gospel”) that their encounter with the gospel was an opening of their eyes and lives to reality, what actually is God’s purpose for humankind (see on 1:5), a purpose of grace, with the further implication that this truth first learned thus should continue to be the touchstone of their ongoing discipleship

Word Studies

Thanks - **to express appreciation for benefits or blessings, *give thanks, express thanks, render/return thanks*** (as 'render thanks

Saints - *believers, loyal followers, saints* of Christians as consecrated to God

Laid- **to reserve as award or recompense, *reserve***, a common term in honorary documents expressing appreciation for sense of civic or other communal responsibility

Hope-**with some reason for confidence respecting fulfillment, *hope, expectation***

Bearing - **to cause the inner life to be productive, *bear fruit***

Understand - **to have knowledge of someth. or someone, *know*** with the prep. making its influence felt, *know exactly, completely, through and through*

Commentary Studies

someth. someth. = something

prep. **prep.** = preposition(al)

1:3–4. Giving continual thanks to God was characteristic of Paul’s prayers (Rom. 1:8; 1 Cor. 1:14; Eph. 1:6; etc.), though he omitted this praise in Galatians and 2 Corinthians. Here **God** is recognized as the cause of goodness in His people. This thanks, Paul said, is rendered **when we pray**. And thanksgiving was given **because** Paul had **heard** (from Epaphras, Col. 1:7; cf. 4:12) about their growing **faith in Christ Jesus and their love ... for all the saints**. Prayer here is the broader, more inclusive act of worship including thanksgiving and intercession (cf. Matt. 6:7; Acts 16:25).

1:5. Paul thanked God for their **faith and love that spring from ... hope**.

This trilogy of virtue—faith, love, and hope—is a favorite of Paul’s (cf. 1 Cor. 13:13; 1 Thes. 1:3) and Peter’s (1 Peter 1:3, 5, 22). Faith is the soul looking *upward* to God; love looks *outward* to others; hope looks *forward* to the future. Faith rests on the past work of Christ; love works in the present; and hope anticipates the future. Even though “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb. 11:6), and “hope does not disappoint us” (Rom. 5:5), nevertheless “the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13). The Colossians’ love extended to “all the saints” (Col. 1:4), or all believers, probably not only at Colosse but everywhere (cf. 1 Thes. 1:7–8 for a similar commendation).

Faith and love “spring from” (*dia*, lit., are “on account of”) “hope,” confidence in what God will do in the future. This confidence led to a greater trust in God and a deeper love for others. This confident expectation of Christ’s return, called “the blessed hope” (Titus 2:13), influences believers’ conduct (cf. 1 Thes. 4:13–18; 1 John 3:3).

This hope is **stored up ... in heaven** because Christ, the essence of this hope, is there. Without Christ’s Ascension to heaven (Acts 1:10–11) and His present intercession there on behalf of believers (Heb. 7:25; 1 John 2:1), they would have no hope (cf. 1 Cor. 15:16–19). This message is **the Word of truth** (cf. Eph. 1:13; 2 Tim. 2:15; James 1:18), **the gospel** as Paul defines it here and elsewhere (cf. 1 Cor. 15:1–3; Rom. 10:9–10).

1:6. Paul thanked God because the **gospel** was spreading **all over the world**. In fact, in an obvious hyperbole, Paul wrote in verse 23 that the gospel was being “proclaimed to every creature under heaven” (cf. Rom. 1:8). But Paul stressed not only the universality of the gospel but also its practicality, for it was **producing fruit and growing**. As a tree bears fruit and grows in size, so the gospel produces spiritual “fruit” in believers’ lives (cf. “the fruit of the Spirit,” Gal. 5:22–23; “the fruit of righteousness,” Phil. 1:11) and spreads to and influences others (cf. the same words “bearing fruit” and “growing” in Col. 1:10). Heresies (such as the one at Colosse) are local and harmful; but truth is universal and helpful. One of the unmistakable characteristics of the true gospel is **God’s grace in all its truth**. Some preach a “different gospel—which is really no gospel at all” (Gal. 1:6–7). This is because it is a gospel of grace plus works, or faith plus works. But the true gospel is one of grace alone (Rom. 11:6; Eph. 2:8–9; Titus 3:5–7).

1:7. The Colossians **learned it**, the gospel, **from Epaphras** who apparently founded the church at Colosse (cf. 4:12). Paul called him a **dear fellow servant**, a humble description from a great apostle, and a **faithful minister of Christ**, as opposed, no doubt, to those unfaithful ones who here and elsewhere were disturbing the faith of God’s flock (cf. 2 Cor. 11:15; 2 Peter 2:1–3, 12–19). Paul also called Tychicus “a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord” (Col. 4:7). Epaphras was in Rome with Paul, for Paul called him “my fellow prisoner” (Phile. 23). “Epaphras” is a shortening of “Epaphroditus,” referred to in Philippians 2:25 and 4:18. These could be the same person or different persons since both names were common.

Epaphras, said Paul, ministered **on our behalf**, probably as Paul's representative (cf. Phil. 2:25; 4:18 for a similar situation). This implies, of course, that Paul had not visited Colosse himself (cf. Col. 2:1). But even though Epaphras was sent by Paul, he was primarily a "minister of Christ."

1:8. Not only did Epaphras carry the good news of Christ to Colosse, but he also brought back to prisoner Paul the good news about their **love in the Spirit** for Christ. Believers are in the Spirit and the Spirit is in them (Rom. 8:9). Thus their "love ... for all the saints" (Col. 1:4; cf. v. 5) stemmed from the indwelling Holy Spirit. Elsewhere Paul urged that by "the love of the Spirit" (Rom. 15:30) believers manifest the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22).¹

feature of the ancient art of letter writing was the congratulatory thanksgiving.⁷ In Paul, too, it follows a regular pattern: a thanksgiving (εὐχαριστεῖν) addressed to God; stressing his (unceasing) prayerful concern for the readers, with the subject of thanksgiving usually the faith they display (in 1 Corinthians their rich experience of grace rather than their faith). The closest parallel here is 1 Thes. 1:2–3 and, perhaps significantly, Phm. 4–5. The plural "we thank" may

¹ Norman L. Geisler, "[Colossians](#)," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 669–670.

⁷ Schubert 158–79; Doty 31–33; summary in Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* 12; but see now Arzt. See also the introduction to Phm. 4–7 below.

imply a consciously double authorship (Timothy and Paul), since elsewhere in Paul the singular is more usual (Rom. 1:8; 1 Cor. 1:4; Phil. 1:3; Phm. 4; but note also 1 Thes. 1:2 and 2 Thes. 1:3).⁸

The most interesting variation here is the insertion of the phrase “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” It is a phrase that Paul uses a number of times—usually in the form “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 1:3; 11:31; also Eph. 1:3, 17; 1 Pet. 1:3). Contained in it is the implicit Christian claim that God, the one God made known to Israel, is now to be understood no longer simply as Father of Israel, but most clearly as the Father of Jesus Christ, and only as such “our Father,” Father of Gentiles as well as Jews (see on 1:2).

More to the point, here again, as in 1:2, there may be a deliberate attempt to stress the sole sovereignty of God at the beginning of a letter that focuses so much on the divine status of Christ (see again on 1:2). The significance is all the greater, the greater weight we see in the attachment of κύριος (“Lord”) to “Jesus Christ” (see also on 2:6). Given the degree of heavenly majesty and divine authority that that title carried (particularly Rom. 10:13; 1 Cor. 8:5–6; Phil. 2:9–11; see further, e.g., my *Romans* 607–9), it is important to recognize that Paul and Timothy begin by reminding their readers that God is the Father of Jesus Christ the Lord, or in the fuller formula Paul uses more often, that God is the *God* and Father of our *Lord* Jesus Christ. From the outset, therefore, Paul and Timothy wish it to be understood that the high christology to be enunciated shortly is kept within the constraints of Jewish monotheism. God the Father is the one to whom prayer should properly be offered (in 3:17, as in Rom. 1:8, the thanksgiving is directed to God “through him/Jesus Christ”; Conzelmann 134 thinks the mediatorship of Christ is implied also here), just as he is the ultimate source (“Father”) of all creation and all being, including the dignity and authority of Jesus’ Messiahship and Lordship.

The unceasing nature of this prayer (πάντοτε, “always, at all times”) is one of the most characteristic features of Paul’s opening assurance of his prayers for his readers, whether attached to the εὐχαριστεῖν (“thank”—1 Cor. 1:4; 1 Thes. 1:2; 2 Thes. 1:3) or to the προσεύχεσθαι (“pray,” as in Rom. 1:10 and Phil. 1:4). Phm. 4, as here, could be taken either way. Paul could have meant that every time he prayed he remembered his various churches. Perhaps he maintained the Jewish practice of prayer three times a day (cf. Dan. 6:11; Acts 3:1; 10:3; *Didache* 8:3), or perhaps he used the long hours of travel and of work in stitching to hold his churches before God (see also on 1:9 and 4:2). But not too much should be made of the language since it is an epistolary flourish characteristic of the period (O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* 10). The use of περί (“concerning”) rather than ὑπέρ (“on behalf of”; see n. 2) is sufficient to indicate that Paul saw his prayers not as a substitute for their own prayers but as a natural expression of Christian love and concern.

⁸ “There is no reason to think that St. Paul ever uses an ‘epistolary’ plural, referring to himself solely” (Lightfoot 229; cf. Gnllka, *Kolossierbrief* 32).

² Some important manuscripts have changed the περί (“concerning”) to ὑπέρ (“on behalf of”), presumably on the ground that it strengthens the intercessory character of the prayer, but the former is Paul’s more regular usage (Rom. 1:8; 1 Cor. 1:4; 1 Thes. 1:2; 2 Thes. 1:3; ὑπέρ in Phil. 1:4; cf. 2 Cor. 1:11 and Eph. 1:16).

1:4 ἀκούσαντες τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ τὴν ἀγάπην ἣν ἔχετε εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους. The congratulatory element focuses as usual on their faith (Rom. 1:8) and love (1 Thes. 1:3; 2 Thes. 1:3; and, perhaps significantly, Phm. 5; also Eph. 1:15). That this is a matter of report rather than of personal knowledge confirms that Paul did not know the Colossian church personally (though cf. Rom. 1:8); the parallel with Phm. 5 is again worth noting. It also reminds us that news of his churches would reach Paul regularly along the trade routes, even to far-off Rome, though in this case Epaphras seems to have made a special point of keeping Paul informed (1:8). To be noted also is the degree to which the vertical (“faith in Christ”) was integrated with the horizontal (“love for the saints”). Paul would never have wanted these two to fall apart.

Perhaps more than any other word, “faith” sums up the distinctive feature of the Christian gospel and life for Paul (see, e.g., G. Barth, *EDNT* 3.95). Rather like “grace” (see 1:2), Paul’s use of “faith” dominates New Testament usage (142 of 243 occurrences). Its distinctive Pauline force is most evident in Romans 4, where he makes unforgettably clear the character of faith as sheer trust in the power and grace of God, as against a more typical traditional Jewish emphasis on faithfulness (see on 1:2, “faithful”). And in Gal. 2:16–3:26 he indicates by emphatic argument that this faith has now been given its eschatological focus in Christ to become the single most determinative characteristic of the new phase of God’s saving purpose introduced by Christ. What Paul and Timothy commend here, therefore, is the way in which the Colossians received the message about Christ (as Abraham received the promise of a son, Gen. 15:6; Romans 4; Galatians 3) and committed themselves in trust to the one so proclaimed, making Christ the focus and determinant of their lives from then on (see on 1:2, “in Christ”).

One of the most interesting divergences from normal Pauline usage comes in the phrase πίστις ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (“faith in Christ Jesus”). For Paul never so speaks. Normally he uses the noun phrase in the form πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ or an equivalent (Rom. 3:22, 26; Gal. 2:16, 20; 3:22; Phil. 3:9; see also 2:12). Some take this in the sense “the faith (fulness) of Jesus Christ,” but almost certainly it denotes “faith in Jesus Christ” (see my *Pistis Christou* and *Galatians* 138–39). He also uses the verbal form πιστεῦειν εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν (“believe in Christ Jesus,” Gal. 2:16; so also Rom. 10:14; Phil. 1:29; see also 2:5). But nowhere does he use ἐν with the dative, as here (Gal. 3:26 is not an exception since the two prepositional phrases there are independent of each other, as is generally agreed).⁹ In contrast the letters more frequently accepted as post-Pauline

EDNT Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. H. Balz and G. Schneider (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990–93)

⁹ Despite strong support (e.g., Lightfoot 131; Dibelius, *Kolosser, Epheser, Philemon* 5; Moule 49; Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* 16; Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians* 41; Wall 44–45; cf. Masson 90 and n. 2), it is unlikely that ἐν Χριστῷ should be taken as referring to the sphere rather than the object of “your faith.” Where Paul uses nouns with “in Christ” (as in Rom. 6:23; 8:39; 1 Cor. 1:4; Gal. 2:4; 3:14), he has in mind the blessing that derives from Christ and is given “in Christ,” not faith directed to Christ; and the parallels in Ephesians and the Pastorals indicate clearly enough late Pauline or post-Pauline usage (cf. Mark 1:15).

use phrases similar to what we have here in 1:4 a number of times (Eph. 1:15; 1 Tim. 3:13; 2 Tim. 1:13; 3:15; also *1 Clement* 22:1; 43:1). Here then is another suggestion that with Colossians we are already moving beyond Paul's own usage. There is, however, no significant difference in meaning (if anything, the ἐν formulation is more static), and the thought is otherwise wholly Pauline in character and emphasis.

The other element that draws the prayerful congratulation of Paul and Timothy is the Colossians' "love for all the saints." Here within the compass of three short verses we have a third word (after "grace" and "faith") to which Christianity, and again Paul in particular (75 out of 116 occurrences in the New Testament), gave distinctive weight as a carrier of one of the important and far-reaching emphases marking out Christianity among other religions of the time. For of the different Greek words for "love," ἀγάπη was little used at the time: it appears only rarely in nonbiblical Greek before the second or third century AD (C. Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994] 1.8–22) and is relatively rare in the LXX, usually used there in reference to conjugal love (though note Jer. 2:2; Wis. 3:9; 6:18). Most of Paul's references are to human love (e.g., Rom. 12:9; 13:10; 1 Cor. 13:1–14:1; 2 Cor. 2:4, 8; Gal. 5:6, 13, 22); so also in Colossians (1:8; 2:2; 3:14). But it is clear that for Paul the self-sacrifice of Christ is the definitive expression of this "love" (Rom. 5:6–8; 8:31–35; 2 Cor. 5:14–15; so also Col. 1:13–14; see further, e.g., G. Schneider, *EDNT* 1.10–11). Presumably, therefore, this is what was in mind here—an active concern for one another among the Colossian Christians which did not stop short at self-sacrifice of personal interests—and not just for one another, if the "all the saints" is to be taken seriously. Here may be indicated a network of mutual support and encouragement as Christians moved among the different towns in Asia Minor; a more specific reference to the collection for "the saints" in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:16; 1 Cor. 16:1—as suggested by Ernst, *Philipper, Philemon, Kolosser, Epheser* 156) is less likely. Epaphras must have spoken very encouragingly of his Christian townsfolk. For "the saints" see on 1:2.

1:5 διὰ τὴν ἐλπίδα τὴν ἀποκειμένην ὑμῖν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, ἣν προηκούσατε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῆς ἀληθείας τοῦ εὐαγγελίου. Given the fact that faith and love have already been given prominent mention, it should occasion no surprise that the third member of the characteristic Christian trio, ἐλπίς ("hope"), should immediately appear in close connection. For the linking of the three is another distinctive feature of Pauline teaching (1 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:5–6; 1 Thes. 1:3; 5:8; cf. Rom. 5:1–5; see further Hunter 33–35). "Hope" itself is almost as distinctively a Pauline feature in the New Testament (36 of 53 occurrences). In contrast to the more uncertain, fearful note typical of classical (and modern) usage, the sense here is characteristically Jewish: hope as expectation of good, confidence in God (R. Bultmann, *TDNT* 2.519–23). As such it is closely related to faith, confident trust in God.

EDNT Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. H. Balz and G. Schneider (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990–93)

TDNT G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76)

The connection with v. 4, however, is slightly puzzling—“on account of the hope....”¹⁰ NEB/REB (and NIV similarly) resolve the puzzle by translating: “both [faith and love] spring from the/that hope....” And that is probably a fair rendering, since the preposition must be taken to indicate that the faith and love are in some sense a response to, derived from, or in some way dependent on the hope. In which case, unusually in Paul, the hope is being presented as the basis for the faith and love, somewhat in contrast to 1 Cor. 13:13 and Gal. 5:5–6 (hope in God as the basis for faith in Christ and love to all). At all events, the formulation here serves to underline the eschatological and forward-looking character of the gospel message that called forth the Colossians’ faith and stimulated their love for their fellow saints (cf. Wolter 52–53).

This sense is reinforced by the description of the hope as “laid up (present tense) for you in the heavens.” The verb has the basic sense of “be put away, stored up” (as in Luke 19:20). But it readily gathered to itself the richer sense of something held in reserve for someone or some occasion as a destiny (LSJ and BAGD s.v. ἀπόκειμαι; Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* 18; so 4 Macc. 8:11; Heb. 9:27) and in Jewish and Christian thought of something retained by God for the appropriate time in God’s foreordained plan (Gen. 49:10; Job 38:23; *Joseph and Asenath* 15:10: “your wedding robe ... laid up in your chamber since eternity”), including eschatological reward (2 Macc. 12:45; 2 Tim. 4:8).¹¹ The imagery thus gives “hope” a less typically Pauline sense of “that which is hoped for” (rather than as the subjective experience of hope), which some regard as

¹⁰ The older debate on the connection of these words is reviewed by Abbott 196 and Masson 90 n. 3.

NEB New English Bible

REB Revised English Bible

NIV New International Bible

LSJ H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. H. S. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940; with supplement, 1968)

BAGD W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979)

¹¹ There is no thought here, however, of something stored up (in heaven) by human effort (as in Matt. 6:20; Luke 18:22; cf. Philo, *De praemiis et poenis* 104, cited by Dibelius, *Kolosser, Epheser, Philemon* 6) and no ground therefore for seeing here an echo of the apocalyptic idea of a treasure of (good) works laid up in heaven, which appears in *4 Ezra* 7:77 and *2 Baruch* 14:12 (as thought by Lohmeyer 24; Gnllka, *Kolosserbrief* 33; Ernst, *Philipper, Philemon, Kolosser, Epheser* 157).

another mark of post-Pauline authorship (e.g., Bornkamm, “Hoffnung” 207; B. Mayer, *EDNT* 1.439), though the effect is the thoroughly Pauline one of expressing full confidence that the sure purpose of God, not yet fully unveiled, will be revealed and realized in God’s good time. This emphasis on the forwardlooking character of the gospel may well be a first counter to a too realized element in the teaching to be countered in the body of the letter (e.g., R. P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* 48; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* 12), though the letter itself has a stronger realized emphasis than the earlier Paulines (see on 2:12 and the introduction to the comments on 3:1–4).

What precisely the hope is, or is directed to, is not mentioned here, but the picture becomes clearer with the other two references to hope in the letter, as to both its source (“the hope of the gospel,” 1:23), its focus (“Christ in you”), and what is hoped for (“glory”; see on 1:27). The location of what is hoped for is, however, specified here: “in the heavens.” What is hoped for, therefore, could be the exalted Christ (“their Lord in heaven,” 4:1), making for an interesting tension with 1:27 (“Christ in you”), or the Colossian Christians’ final salvation, consisting in their being taken up to heaven and transformed into heavenly/spiritual form (“glory”; cf. Rom. 8:17–25; 1 Cor. 15:44–49; 2 Cor. 5:1–5; 1 Thes. 4:14–17).

The plural form “heavens” should not be ignored, since it is hardly found in nonbiblical Greek and therefore reflects the common Jewish view that the heavenly realm above had a number of regions, if not many (note the repeated Old Testament phrase “heaven and the heaven of the heavens,” Deut. 10:14; 1 Kgs. 8:27; 2 Chron. 2:6; 6:18; Neh. 9:6). If the usual topography is in mind here (anything from two to ten heavens; see H. Traub, *TDNT* 5.510–12), the implication would be that the lower reaches of heaven were populated by (normally hostile) “principalities and powers” (cf. particularly Eph. 6:12; see on 1:16), with God and his angels in the upper regions or beyond all the heavens (cf. 2 Cor. 12:2; Eph. 4:10; see on 2:18). The hope, then, would be for a destiny that outmaneuvers (cf. Rom. 8:38–39) and defeats these powers (see on 2:15) and reaches right into the presence of God. The sense that there are powers of evil abroad which are often strong enough to crush whole peoples as well as individuals is, of course, not dependent on the worldview presumed here. But however such realities are conceptualized, hope remains a constant feature of the Christian gospel.

In Greek the sentence runs on: “which [hope] you heard about earlier....” The reference presumably is to their first hearing of the gospel from Epaphras. How much earlier is not stated. JB/NJB assume that the force of the *προ*-implies a hearing “recently,” “not long ago.” But neither the Greek nor 1:7 and 4:12–13 are so specific. This gospel came to them in the word of preaching (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18; 2:1–4; Phil. 1:14; Col. 4:3; 1 Thes. 1:5–8; 2:13). The eschatological focus implied

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JB Jerusalem Bible

NJB New Jerusalem Bible

in the centrality of the theme of hope (as in 1:23, “the hope of the gospel”) suggests a preaching not unlike that of 1 Thes. 1:9–10, which is often taken as a summary of the gospel as preached directly to Gentiles.

“Gospel” is another word baptized into Christian vocabulary by Paul (60 of the New Testament’s 76 occurrences are Pauline). It was known in wider Greek usage, but almost always in the plural, in the sense of “good tidings” (LSJ s.v. εὐαγγέλιον), and the singular is unknown in biblical Greek outside the New Testament. The reason that Paul, I, and presumably others among the first Christian missionaries, lighted upon it, however, is fairly obvious. For the related verb, “preach/announce good news,” was prominent in the second half of Isaiah (40:9; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1), that is, in passages that are remembered as having influenced Jesus’ own self-understanding of mission (Matt. 11:5/Luke 7:22) and as summing up his mission (Acts 10:36), just as they also influenced others in that time (*Psalms of Solomon* 11:1; 1QH 18:14; 11QMelch 18). It was natural, then, that the noun chosen by the first Christian preachers to encapsulate their message about Jesus was derived from this verb. Implicit in this developed vocabulary is the sense of eschatological hope (so powerful in the Isaiah passages) already fulfilled in the coming of Messiah Jesus (cf. again the *Psalms of Solomon* and DSS references). That the gospel is summed up here in terms of “hope” (as again in the only other use of “gospel” in the letter, 1:23) is a reminder of how closely its original eschatological force still clung to the word. We should also note in passing how much distinctively Christian vocabulary appears in these first five verses (grace, faith, love, hope, gospel).

To be more precise, 1:5 speaks of “the truth of the gospel.” RSV/NRSV, NIV, and NJB put the two words in apposition, “the word of the truth, the gospel,” and JB breaks the sentence after “truth” (cf. GNB in n. 3). These renderings probably reflect recognition that the Greek idea of “truth” is involved here, that is, of truth as the unveiling of the “full or real state of affairs” (R. Bultmann, *TDNT* 1.238). Here again the eschatological overtones of the word and the context are

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DSS Dead Sea Scrolls

RSV Revised Standard Version

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

NIV New International Bible

NJB New Jerusalem Bible

JB Jerusalem Bible

GNB Good News Bible

TDNT G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76)

important: the claim being made is that the good news of Christ Jesus unveils the reality of human destiny in the sure hope that it holds forth (cf. again 1 Thes. 1:9–10; Acts 17:30–31). Equally, if “the word of truth” reflects a more Jewish assertion of the firm reliability (*’emet*) of God’s word (Ps. 119:43; *Testament of Gad* 3:1; *Odes of Solomon* 8:8), the effect is simply to reinforce the confidence in God’s purpose for the future already evoked by the word “hope” (see further Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* 18–19).

However, it is better to retain the fuller phrase, “the truth of the gospel,” since it probably also contains an echo of the same phrase used in Gal. 2:5 and 14. That is to say, implicit in the language is the emphatic Pauline claim that the gospel is for Gentiles also, without requiring them to become proselytes; the echo is still more explicit in 1:25–27. It was this truth of the gospel (or the truth of *this* gospel) to which Paul dedicated his whole life as an apostle. At all events, there is probably a further implication (as in Galatians) that this is a truth that has to be stoutly maintained against teachings that (in this case) deny or diminish the eschatological thrust of the gospel’s emphasis on hope (cf. pp. 33ff. above). This may lie behind NEB/REB’s elision of the phrase into “the message of the true gospel” (cf. Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians* 42: “the true message of the gospel”), with its implied warning against a false gospel.

1:6 τοῦ παρόντος εἰς ὑμᾶς, καθὼς καὶ ἐν παντὶ τῷ κόσμῳ ἐστὶν καρποφορούμενον καὶ αὐξανόμενον καθὼς καὶ ἐν ὑμῖν, ἀφ’ ἧς ἡμέρας ἠκούσατε καὶ ἐπέγνωτε τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν ἀληθείᾳ. The opening phrase could be translated “which is present among you,” recognizing the force of the present tense (Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* 19 nn. 53, 54). But in this case it can also mean “which has come to you” (and so is present among you). And that makes better sense of the preposition, which most naturally has the meaning “to or into” (Harris 19).

The congratulatory note continues: the gospel is (constantly) bearing fruit and growing among them; but since this is true all over the world, they should not feel particularly pleased with themselves. The implication may be that the Colossians should hesitate before making too much of the success of their own evangelism, and this prepares for the warning notes that become prominent from 2:8. Note should also be given to the dynamic, living character attributed to the gospel (cf. particularly Isa. 55:10–11): “just as a tree without fruit and growth would no longer be a tree, so a gospel that bore no fruit would cease to be a gospel” (Schweizer, *Colossians* 37).

The image of fruit-bearing is a natural one to indicate result, outcome (for good or evil), or success and was familiar in Greek and Jewish thought (F. Hauck, *TDNT* 3.614; Meeks, “One Body” 219 n. 26). In 1:10, as elsewhere, the fruit is thought of in terms of good moral character (the verb in Luke 8:15 and Rom. 7:4; the noun in Paul: Rom. 1:13; Gal. 5:22; Phil. 1:11). But here it could simply denote the success of the gospel in winning more and more to belief in Christ Jesus and in the hope offered. The unclarity is not helped by the ambiguity of the second verb, which

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can mean either that the gospel “is causing (its converts) to grow” (1 Cor. 3:6–7)—that is, in knowledge (1:10), righteousness (2 Cor. 9:10), or faith (2 Cor. 10:15)—or that the gospel “is (itself) growing,” that is, like a plant (Matt. 13:32; Mark 4:8) spreading throughout the world (cf. Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20), with the benefit of its fruit-bearing implied.¹² Only here and in v. 10 are the two verbs thus associated in biblical Greek (though cf. Mark 4:8); the closeness of the two verses favors the idea of growth in character, but both ideas may be implied—the success of the gospel in producing so many mature and moral people. Either way, the note of triumphalism (“in all the world”) is striking, as also the implied eschatological finality of Paul’s apostolic mission (cf. particularly Munck 36–55, 275–79); and though hyperbolic (cf. Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 2.138–39, 284) it must reflect not only an amazing boldness of vision but also a considerable measure of success (already within three or four decades of Jesus’ death), as in innumerable towns around the Mediterranean small groups met in the name of Christ Jesus, drawn together by the gospel (so also Rom. 1:8; 1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Thes. 1:8).

The congratulatory thanksgiving continues with a fulsomeness that results in a rather cumbersome repetition of “just as” (καθὼς καί) and a second relative clause (1:5: “which you heard earlier”; 1:6: “from the day on which you heard”). The clause simply indicates that the process of growth and fruit-bearing has been continual since the day of the Colossians’ conversion. This rhetorical courtesy would, of course, make it easier for the recipients to hear the subsequent exhortations more favorably.

The rhetorical flourish may also explain the use of the more elaborate form of the verb “to know” (ἐπιγινώσκειν) rather than the more common γινώσκειν, though some prefer to give the prefix more weight in intensifying the meaning (“understood,” JB, RSV, NIV; “comprehended,” NRSV). Either way the verb denotes the experience (Ernst, *Philipper, Philemon, Kolosser, Epheser* 159) as well as the intellectual apprehension of God’s outreaching generosity (“grace”) as transforming power (cf. Rom. 3:24; 5:15, 17; 1 Cor. 1:4–5; 15:10; 2 Cor. 6:1; Gal. 1:6, 15; see on 1:2, “grace”). The addition of “in truth” reinforces the overtones of 1:5 (“the truth of the gospel”)

¹² The similar combination in the Old Testament (Gen. 1:22, 28; 8:17; 9:1, 7; 17:20, etc.) has clearly in mind increase in numbers. Despite Gnllka, *Kolosserbrief* 35 (cf. Meeks, “One Body” 219 n. 25), the imagery is sufficiently common that it need not be attributed specifically to influence from apocalyptic thought, nor, alternatively, to Gnostic thought (cf. W. L. Knox, *Gentiles* 149 n. 5). Lightfoot 133 capitalizes neatly on the somewhat surprising order of the verbs: “The Gospel is not like those plants which exhaust themselves in bearing fruit and wither away. The external growth keeps pace with the reproductive energy.”

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that their encounter with the gospel was an opening of their eyes and lives to reality, what actually is God's purpose for humankind (see on 1:5), a purpose of grace, with the further implication that this truth first learned thus should continue to be the touchstone of their ongoing discipleship. NJB and REB catch the sense well when they translate: "recognised it for/learned what it [God's grace] truly is" (so also Moule, *Colossians and Philemon* 51). Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* 21, notes that "knowledge of the truth" assumes much greater importance in the later New Testament writings (1 Tim. 2:4; 4:3; 2 Tim. 2:25; 3:7; Tit. 1:1; Heb. 10:26; 1 John 2:21; 2 John 1).

1:7 καθὼς ἐμάθετε ἀπὸ Ἐπαφρᾶ τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ συνδούλου ἡμῶν, ὃς ἐστὶν πιστὸς ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν διάκονος τοῦ Χριστοῦ. Paul and Timothy extend their note of congratulation to include the one who first brought them the gospel—Epaphras.¹³ As a native of Colossae (4:12) he presumably first encountered Paul and was converted through his preaching during Paul's long stay in Ephesus (Acts 19:8–10), some 120 miles distant on the coast and directly accessible by road down the Lycus and Meander valleys (see further pp. 20f. above). Whether he became a regular member of Paul's mission team, as did so many others whose names are preserved for us in Paul's letters (see Ollrog ch. 2), we cannot say. But it may have been Paul's missionary strategy to concentrate his own energies in major cities, while sending out mission teams to towns in the region (Conzelmann 134–35; cf. Acts 19:10). It is not too fanciful to imagine Epaphras, anxious to share the good news with his own townsfolk, volunteering to evangelize Colossae and devoting himself to laboring for the gospel there and in the nearby cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis (4:13). In Paul's terms, therefore, Epaphras may be called "apostle of Colossae" (cf. 1 Cor. 9:1–2), though the fact that the letter to Colossae was then written by Paul and Timothy, without including Epaphras as fellow author, despite his recent (?) presence (1:8; cf. Phm. 23), presumably implies that Epaphras saw himself simply as Paul's emissary (see on 1:1), or that the letter writer (Timothy?) did not wish to diffuse Paul's apostolic authority too far. This is reinforced by the reading "on our behalf" (see n. 6), which again clearly implies that Epaphras's evangelization in Colossae was at Paul's behest: "the apostle gives his seal to the teaching of Epaphras" (Abbott 199). In view of the double commendation of Epaphras in 1:7–8 and 4:12–13, Paul and Timothy

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¹³ Epaphras is a shortened form of Epaphroditus, but it is most unlikely that Epaphras is to be identified with the Epaphroditus named in Phil. 2:25 and 4:18, who is as much identified with Philippi as Epaphras is with Colossae.

⁶ The more strongly attested and more difficult reading is undoubtedly ἡμῶν ("our," followed by most commentators and translations except NRSV; see Moule, *Colossians and Philemon* 27 n. 1; Pokorný 44 n. 50; Wolter 56), though NA and UBS prefer ὑμῶν/"your" because of the breadth of support for the latter and because early copyists may have been influenced by ἡμῶν and ἡμῖν in close proximity on either side (Metzger 619–20; Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians* 40 n. 7).

may have concluded that Epaphras himself as well as his gospel needed some defense and support (Wall 42–43). At all events, 1:7–8 and Phm. 23 certainly seem to indicate someone who was eager to share the news of his success with Paul and who spent enough time with Paul to be imprisoned with him, but who remained deeply concerned for his townsfolk and fellow believers in Colossae.

The verb used (“as you learned”) may imply that Epaphras had seen his task in Colossae not simply as winning them to faith but as instructing them in the traditions and parenesis without which they would have no guidelines in translating their faith into daily living (cf. Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 4:6; Phil. 4:9; see also on 2:6).

Ἀγαπητός (“beloved”) is one of Paul’s favorite words for fellow Christians (Rom. 1:7; 12:19; 16:8), converts (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 4:14; 10:14; 15:58, etc.), and fellow workers (Rom. 16:9, 12; 1 Cor. 4:17; Col. 4:7, 9, 14; Phm. 1). It reinforces the sense of family belonging that seems to have been characteristic of the young Christian mission (see on 1:1, “brother”). Behind it probably lies Jewish election theology, the claim that the patriarchs, Jerusalem, and the whole people of God are loved and have been chosen by God (e.g., Deut. 33:12; Isa. 41:8; 44:1; Jer. 31:20; Dan. 3:35; Sir. 24:11) and therefore the sense that the first Christian churches shared in that election. If so, the term embodies an implicit claim first advanced by Paul and characteristic of a central thrust of his gospel (see particularly Wischmeyer).

“Fellow slave” (σύνδουλος) is a term that we might have expected to occur more often in Paul’s letters, since he so delighted in the use of συν-compounds (W. Grundmann, *TDNT* 7.786–87, plus “fellow prisoner,” “fellow worker,” “yoke fellow,” “fellow participant,” “fellow imitator,” “fellow soldier”), and he was quite prepared to use the term “slave” (of Christ) both for himself (Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:1) and for other Christians (1 Cor. 7:22; Col. 4:12; cf. Rom. 6:18, 22). In fact, however, “fellow slave” occurs only in Colossians (here and 4:7); Ephesians also has συν-compounds unique to it (2:19; 3:6; 5:7). On the basis of this evidence it is impossible to say whether this is the mark of a close disciple copying Paul’s style or Paul himself simply extending his usage in coining ever more συν-compounds.

The slave metaphor was a potent one since the basic image was essentially negative in Greek thought—slavery as the antithesis of the freedom that the Greek mind cherished so dearly, since, by definition, the slave was completely at another’s beck and call (K. H. Rengstorf, *TDNT* 2.261–65; H. Schlier, *TDNT* 2.493–96). Even so, “slave” could still be something of a honorific title, at least if one was slave of an important and powerful individual (D. B. Martin, *Slavery*), and this was reinforced by the more oriental tradition in which the devotee of the cult saw himself as slave of the god—not least in Jewish religious thought (e.g., Deut. 32:36; Josh. 24:29; Pss. 89:3;

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105:26, 42; Mal. 4:4; see further my *Romans* 7). Implicit in the designation, therefore, is the readiness to hand over one's life completely to a master (to sell oneself into slavery was a policy of desperation, but not uncommon), but to a master (Christ Jesus) whose power and authority were greater than that in any other master-slave relation. Presumably also implicit is the Christian conviction that only such unconditional handing over of oneself can prevent one becoming enslaved by a more destructive power (Rom. 6:12–23).

Epaphras is further described as a “faithful [see on 1:2] servant of Christ on our [see n. 6] behalf.” “Servant” (διάκονος) often retains overtones of its original sense, “waiter at table” (John 2:5, 9; cf. Mark 1:31; 15:41; Luke 10:40; 12:37; 17:8; Acts 6:2); and thus its range of meaning merges into “slave” as denoting obligation to offer humble service to a superior (note particularly Mark 9:35; 10:43–45). That the memory of Jesus' actions and teaching influenced Paul's idea and practice of service may be suggested by such passages as Gal. 2:17 and Rom. 15:8. At this stage the word seems to be still descriptive of an individual's sustained commitment (like “fellow worker”) and not yet the title of a clearly defined office (cf. Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6; 6:4; 11:23; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:23, 25; 4:7; 1 Thes. 3:2). If there are conscious overtones of the use of the term for cultic and guild officials (LSJ s.v. διάκονος; H. W. Beyer, *TDNT* 2.91–92; cf. A. Weiser, *EDNT* 1.304) we must assume that, as with Paul's use of priestly language elsewhere (Rom. 12:1; 15:16; Phil. 2:25), the cult has been secularized and the terms appropriated for all ministry on behalf of the gospel and Christ (see also on 1:25).

1:8 ὁ καὶ δηλώσας ἡμῖν τὴν ὑμῶν ἀγάπην ἐν πνεύματι. The congratulatory thanksgiving is concluded with a final note of appreciation to Epaphras, which also serves to make clear to the readership that Paul is well informed about their situation. Presumably it was to Epaphras (cf. again Phm. 23) that Paul owed knowledge of the threatening circumstances at Colossae, to which the main thrust of the letter is directed (from 2:6 on). But here, as is appropriate in the letter opening, the note is all of praise, even though it involves repetition of what has already been said well enough in 1:4.

6 The more strongly attested and more difficult reading is undoubtedly ἡμῶν (“our,” followed by most commentators and translations except NRSV; see Moule, *Colossians and Philemon* 27 n. 1; Pokorný 44 n. 50; Wolter 56), though NA and UBS prefer ὑμῶν/“your” because of the breadth of support for the latter and because early copyists may have been influenced by ἡμῶν and ἡμῖν in close proximity on either side (Metzger 619–20; Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians* 40 n. 7).

LSJ H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. H. S. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940; with supplement, 1968)

TDNT G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76)

EDNT Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. H. Balz and G. Schneider (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990–93)

As hope is the main thrust of the gospel (1:5), so love (see on 1:4) is its main fruit (here cf. particularly 3:14). It is described more fully as “love in (or by) the Spirit” (NEB: “God-given love”; REB: “the love the Spirit has awakened in you”). This is another characteristic Pauline note (cf. particularly Rom. 5:5 and Gal. 5:22). The love that mirrors the love of God in Christ can only be aroused and sustained by the Spirit of God. The phrase carries overtones of an inspiration that wells up from within, charismatically enabled (Rom. 2:29; 1 Cor. 12:3, 9, 13; 14:16; 1 Thes. 1:5), and that depends on continued openness to the Spirit if its quality of unselfish service of others is to be maintained.

This is the only direct reference to the Spirit in Colossians—a surprising fact and further indication for many that the letter may not have been written/dictated by Paul himself. Schweizer, *Colossians* 38 and n. 19 notes several themes and phrases that attract reference to the Spirit (as a kind of reflex) in the undisputed Paulines but that do not do so in Colossians; he suggests therefore that ἐν πνεύματι here should be taken to mean “spiritual.” But see Gnlika, *Kolossierbrief* 38; Fee 638–40; and below on 1:9.²

EXPRESSED TO GOD IN PRAYER (1:3)

NEB New English Bible

REB Revised English Bible

² James D. G. Dunn, [The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 55–66.

1:3 The first factor to note about Paul's thanksgiving is that it occurred in prayer. While this may seem obvious, subtle emphases are to be noted here. First, the passage contains various synonyms for prayer. Together they demonstrate the importance of prayer for Paul. He could pray in times of difficulty, and he could pray in times of joy. The synonyms, particularly "pray" (*proseuchomenoi*) and "give thanks" (*eucharistoumen*), emphasize two aspects of prayer. The more general term "praying" speaks to the activity itself, while "giving thanks" is a specific form of prayer. In like manner, the word "asking" (*aitoumenoi*, 1:9), another synonym for prayer, emphasizes the specific request made. Thus the words collectively stress prayer in its various aspects.

Since Paul often emphasized the activity of prayer, he wanted to share the fact that he actually remembered them in prayer. The joys and concerns of the Colossian congregation meant enough to Paul that he prayed about them. When this is compared with the other epistles, a sizable impression emerges regarding the extent of Paul's prayer life. He prayed for all the churches.

Several factors appear regarding Paul's prayers. First, they were continual. The church was regularly in Paul's mind and thoughts. Second, the prayer was directed to God. Finally, the prayers were intercessory, "when we pray for you." This phrase indicates the prayers involved people more than events. While Paul feared the negative church-wide impact of the threatening heresy, he was more concerned with the effect on the individuals who would be swept away by it.

In praying to God, Paul added that God is "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." In a sense the focus of the entire epistle rests in this phrase since it contains precise details about the relationship between these two members of the Godhead. There is a major textual variant here regarding whether the phrase should be read "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" or "the God *who* is Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." This latter construction emphasizes the unique relationship between God and Christ and also demonstrates which concept of God Paul holds. As it stands, the construction is both ambiguous and rare. However, it seems best to understand the statement "the God *who* is Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" as the better reading.⁸ Thus, Paul believed strongly in one God, the one known in connection with Christ. He also drew attention to the fact that the avenue to and from God is Christ since the Son is the way to the Father.

In summary, this short clause reveals that Paul was a man of prayer. He had a significant prayer list of persons for whom he often prayed. He included Christians he had never met, such as the Colossians. Paul's concern for others included both thanksgiving and praise for God's working in people. There was obviously a close relationship between Paul's practice and his prayer. Finally, the ultimate source of blessing and the church's well-being was God who was revealed through Christ.

ENCOURAGED BY THE COLOSSIANS' CHRISTIAN GROWTH (1:4–8)

⁸ This is the more difficult reading, which is to be preferred if all other matters do not militate against it. A similar construction occurs in 3:17. For a fuller defense of this position, see Moule, 48–49.

The second factor which led to Paul's thanksgiving was the growth of the Colossian Christians. The structure of this Greek sentence, which began in v. 1, is somewhat complicated because Paul's mind moved quickly from one theme to another and one idea grew out of another. The participial modifier is "because we have heard" (1:4) and all that follows depends logically and grammatically on it. Thematically, however, the direction of the passage shifts with the introduction of "this gospel" in v. 6. Colossians 1:7-8 modify the term "gospel" and logically depend on it. The passage that remains, therefore, may be considered from the twofold standpoints of the nature of their growth (1:4) and the basis of their growth (1:5-8).

The Nature of the Colossians' Growth (1:4)

1:4 The presence of faith and love evidenced the Christian character of the Colossian church. Although Paul had never visited the church, he knew well its Christian experience and accepted it as genuine.⁹ The first of these, faith, marks the church as Christian. Without doubt, Paul was pleased to find Christians at Colossae, but the presence of faith was just the beginning. The construction used here stresses more. It suggests the practice of faith more than its presence. The phrase "faith in Christ Jesus" is not the same as "faith directed toward Christ Jesus." The latter statement would be written literally "faith into (unto) Christ Jesus." This construction, "faith in Christ Jesus," points to the sphere of faith rather than its object.¹⁰ Naturally, Paul assumed that the object of faith was Christ, for that is the only appropriate direction for faith. Thus Paul had heard that the church was Christian. He further had heard that it was living its faith in the risen Lord. Its members were practicing, faithful Christians. In this commendation, Paul resumed what he introduced in 1:2 with the term "faithful brothers in Christ."

Paul used various means to express different aspects of faith. This may be seen generally in the various prepositions used with the noun "faith." He spoke of faith as a conduit through which a relationship with God is achieved ("through faith"). He also spoke of faith directed toward God and based on Christ ("on faith") and faith as a sphere in which a Christian lives ("in faith").¹¹ This variety of expression represents Paul's more abstract view of faith. Generally, Paul contrasted faith with works. For him, like John and the other New Testament authors, only by faith can one approach God. Yet John spoke of faith as an activity which characterizes a Christian. He preferred the verb "believe" rather than the noun for faith and showed a decisive tendency toward using participles to describe believers. In the Greek text, these participles show the active, dynamic

⁹ The Greek construction of "because we have heard of your faith" is actually the verb ἀκούω followed by the accusative case, suggesting a hearing with comprehension. It seems strange in this type of context since the qualitative hearing (genitive case) would seem appropriate.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Moule, 49. Other Pauline texts employ the same construction or a slight modification of it (Eph 1:15; 1 Tim 3:13; 2 Tim 3:15; possibly Rom 3:25). While the object is implied in the locative of sphere, the environment is more pronounced.

¹¹ The prepositions are, respectively, διὰ, ἐπί, and ἐν.

nature of faith. Both Paul and John correctly identified different aspects of the relationship to God.

The second evidence of the Colossian Christians' growth was the presence of love. Typically, Paul employed the term *agapē* for Christian love, as he did here. Of significance, however, is the fact that he used the article with the noun, pointing to a specific expression of love. It is "the love you have for all the saints." The employment of the articular noun ("the love") and the qualifying phrase ("you have for all the saints") reveals two truths about the nature of the church's concern. First, it was sacrificial. The term *agapē* reminded them of the sacrificial love of Christ for them. Second, within the Christian community it was indiscriminate. The love was directed to all the saints. Appropriately, Paul used the preposition "unto" (*eis*) for love's dynamic. Love has little value if it is held only among the saints. It must be expressed to others. Both the nature of love as a relational quality and the necessity of "giving it" call for this construction in contrast to the one used for faith.¹²

Perhaps Paul praised them for this basic characteristic of love, which is in line with the words of Jesus in this regard. Jesus indicated that love is the moral basis for unity in the Christian community (John 17:20–26). Such love fulfills two divine objectives: It represents Jesus to the world, especially in his physical absence, and it perfects the body of Christ. By commending the church for its love, therefore, Paul acknowledged a genuine and mature Christianity.

The Basis for the Colossians' Growth (1:5–8)

After expressing thanksgiving for the Colossian Christians' maturity in Christ, Paul presented the reason for their growth. It was their hope.¹³ Hope provided the basis for Christian growth since the most basic elements of faith toward God and love toward others grow out of hope. In reality, without hope there is no reason for faith or love, and everything is directed to ourselves and our world. Paul modified the concept of hope in two ways.

1:5a–b The first statement about Christian hope was that it is a present reality. It was preserved for them in heaven. In Scripture the term "hope" may be used subjectively, as an attitude of heart, or objectively, as the reality for which hope is expressed. Paul used the subjective meaning in Rom 5:1–11; 8:24, where he stressed the attitude of trust necessary to

¹² The construction here is εἰς πάντα. The preposition εἰς shows direction. It contrasts with the construction ἐν Χριστῷ used with faith. Faith is in the sphere of Christ; love works out toward all.

¹³ The construction is διὰ in the accusative case. Conceivably, the modifying phrase could go in several directions: it could modify "we give thanks," "love," or both "faith and love." It cannot easily modify "we give thanks" because it is too far removed in context, and the triad of faith, hope, and love generally occur together as modifiers. Again it does not naturally go with love alone because the modifying relative clause ἣν ἔχετε κ.τ.λ. seems to conclude the modifying of ἀγάπη, and the balanced structure of πίστις plus modifier and ἀγάπη plus modifier call for a third idea rather than a second modifier. It seems best to understand that hope goes with both faith and love.

provide Christian security in the world. Subjectively hope is an attitude or feeling of anticipation that things will work out as desired. On the other hand, Paul used “hope” often in an objective sense. In that case, it meant that reality to which subjective hope aspires. Without doubt Paul used the objective sense here. This is evident because of the modifying participle indicating the location of the hope (“in heaven”), the modifying clause “that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel,” and the parallels in other New Testament writings (Gal 5:5; 1 Pet 1:3). Paul believed that the hope offered in Christ inspires assurance and, as a result, produces spiritual fruit. The basis of believing Christ (faith) and serving others (love) is that this world is not the end. There is an afterlife where the deeds done here will be evaluated and rewarded. Christians have an understanding of the rewards and blessings of heaven.

1:5c The second statement about hope is that it comes from the proclamation of the gospel. The actual expression of the gospel is “the word of the truth of the gospel,” which the NIV translates “the word of the truth, the gospel.”¹⁴ Although some translate the phrase “the word of the true gospel,” which is possible in Greek, there is no evidence that Paul would call a non-Christian message a “false gospel.”¹⁵ It is not a gospel at all, real or counterfeit. His statement stresses the truth and should be read “the truth, which is the gospel which came to you.” Paul, therefore, emphasized the fact that the gospel message they heard was, in fact, sufficient as a word of truth. They should have had no need to seek some new teaching. The preachers of the gospel had given them the word of truth.

This latter fact deserves amplification. The gospel is dynamic. Even though the message comes through the instrumentality of human messengers, Paul saw the gospel as “in motion,” moving from place to place and incorporating gospel preachers into it. It was not the property of those who preached it. The gospel belonged to God and was his way of saving the world.¹⁶

1:6 Three statements trace the movement of the gospel from God to the Colossians through Ephraim.¹⁷ First, the general nature of the gospel’s advance is given in v. 6. This simple statement

¹⁴ This follows A. T. Robertson’s explanation, among others, that the genitive construction should be read “the truth which is the Gospel.” It understands the second genitive construction “of the gospel” as appositional. Many agree with this analysis. A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 498. Moule seems to have preferred the word “of the true gospel” (115).

¹⁵ In Galatians Paul argued regarding the true gospel, but according to Gal 1:7, he did not consider the heretical message a gospel. Rather it is “not another” (οὐκ ἕστιν ἄλλο). He seemingly refused to call another message by the term “gospel.”

¹⁶ The word “came” is παρόντος, itself somewhat unusual in this regard. It “came alongside them” as part of its movement.

¹⁷ These are noted in the text by the recurrence of καθώς modifying the concept three times (twice in v. 6 and once for vv. 7–8).

expresses a major concept about the nature of the spread of the message. “In all the world, the gospel continues to bear fruit and increase.”¹⁸ The actual terms used, when pressed to their original ideas, suggest reproductive capability (“bearing fruit”) and maturing capability (“increasing”). Together the terms teach that the gospel is productive; it accomplishes the work God intends. Significantly, the same terms occur in v. 10 in Paul’s prayer for the Colossian Christians and their growth in the knowledge of God’s will.

In using the word “gospel” in this fashion, Paul focused on the person and work of Christ. Although he had a major concern about spreading the message of the good news of the cross, the life communicated through the message captured his imagination here. The advance of the gospel is in reality the advance of the work of God in changing the lives of those who hear and believe the proclamation.¹⁹

Second, the meaning of the term “gospel” receives further explanation from the second modifying clause: The gospel came to Colossae (v. 6). When it did, they knew the grace of God in truth. From Paul’s perspective, grace was the introduction to the gospel as well as its most basic element. The gospel of God’s grace relieved people of their sins and brought them into a right relationship with God.²⁰

1:7–8 Third, Paul devoted significant space to a discussion of Epaphras who had taken the gospel to the Colossians (1:7–8). Epaphras worked closely with Paul and was most likely the founder of the Colossian church. At this time, he informed Paul of the members’ deep love prompted and promoted by the Spirit (1:8). Thus, the gospel message advances through the world calling persons to Christ, communicating the message of grace, and being entrusted to the servants of Christ like Epaphras who proclaim it.

The church at Colossae was healthy in many respects. It had a living faith, an indiscriminate love for all Christians, and a solid hope of life eternal through the gospel. These virtues are solid ground for genuine thanksgiving.³

¹⁸ The Greek construction is graphic. The verbs are presented in periphrastic form which “marks more clearly the durative force,” H. E. Dana and J. R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 231. Moule commented that there is probably no significance to the middle voice as over against the passive. Moule, 50–51.

¹⁹ See the discussion of this in Phil 1.

²⁰ The reference to truth reminds of the “truth which is the gospel” of v. 5.

³ Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 32, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), 194–199.