

HAVING TAKEN OFF THE
OLD MAN AND PUT ON THE NEW: AN
EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF COLOSSIANS 3:1-11

by

Kirk E. Miller

Box #1735

A PAPER

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The purpose of this paper is to show that Paul's central point in Col 3:1-11 is to urge the Colossian believers to live out the reality of who they are in Christ. This will be shown by, first, examining the contextual and theological background of the text, and second, examining the exegetical details of the passage in three sections: 1-4, 5-10a, and 10b-11.

Contextual Background

Having provided a standard Pauline greeting (1:1-2), a thanksgiving and prayer for the Colossian believers (1:3-14), and an elaboration on the supremacy of Christ (1:15-23), Paul shares his ministerial heart with the Colossian believers (1:24-25). His desire, and certainly a primary reason he writes the letter, is that they may not be deceived by any false philosophy (2:4-5, 8). In 2:6-15 Paul begins to urge his readers to guard themselves against false teaching that has seemingly crept into the church. This false teaching appears to be a somewhat systematized philosophy (2:4, 8), most likely a syncretism of Jewish and pagan-mysticism ideas, that depends on human traditions, practices, and experiences (2:8, 16-23) which are seen as essential for spiritual maturity (2:23; cf. 2:9-10). Consequently, Paul saw this philosophy as a direct affront to the sufficiency of Christ (2:5-15, 17, 19; cf. 1:15-23) and the believer's spiritual sufficiency in Him (2:9-15, 19-20; 3:1-11). But Christ is sufficient (2:8:15), with whom they have died (2:20-23) and been raised (3:1-4). In light of this reality, they ought to put off the practices belonging to the old self (3:5-9) and put on the practices that align with who they truly are in Christ (3:10-16).

Theological Background

Underlying Paul's entire instruction in Col 3:1-11 is his "already/not yet" framework regarding the believer's salvation. The "already/not yet" nature of salvation provides a temporal tension between who believers already are in Christ (indicative) and who they are to become in Christ (imperative).¹ As such, the imperatives are grounded in the "already" nature of salvation; they are the ethical implications of the indicatives ("already"). Yet their existence is obviously due to the "not yet" nature of salvation.

Verses 1-4

In 3:1-4 Paul makes a positive argument complementary to Paul's negative argument in 2:20-23—since the believer has died with Christ he is not to submit to legalistic regulations (2:20-23). Instead of being consumed with such earthly regulations, on the basis of the Colossian believers' union with Christ in His resurrection, they are to pursue after "upward things" and have an "above" mindset. Both of these parallel arguments (2:20-23 and 3:1-4) provide a theological basis (the sufficiency of the believer's position in Christ) for rejecting the false teaching (2:8, 16-19) and holding fast to Christ (2:6-7).

Similar to 2:20, Paul begins his argument in 3:1 with a first class conditional clause (protasis), an assumed truth that serves as the basis for his ensuing imperative

¹ Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1993), 629.

(apodosis).² As Paul argues elsewhere (Rom 6:4; 5, 8, 11; Eph 2:4-6; Col 2:12-13), through faith believers have been united with Christ—associated with Christ³—in His resurrection (indicative/“already”). As a result (imperative/“not yet”), believers are to pursue (ζητέω) after that which is above (τὰ ἄνω). τὰ ἄνω is locatively described as “where Christ is sitting at the right [hand] of God.”⁴

In verses 2-3, Paul presents a contrast, which is made quite clear by its chiasmic structure:

[A] τὰ ἄνω φρονεῖτε,
 [B] μὴ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς.
 [b] ἀπεθάνετε γὰρ
 [a] καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν κέκρυπται σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ ἐν τῷ θεῷ.

Whereas [A] and [B] provide contrasting commands,⁵ [b] and [a] provide the appropriate grounds for those commands (as introduced by the γὰρ and coordinating καὶ; 3:3). Due to Paul’s tendency to pair positive commands with positive realities (i.e., seek above things based on being raised with Christ [Col 3:1]; see also Rom 6:4, 11) and negative commands with negative realities (i.e., do not submit to regulations based on having died with Christ [Col 2:20]; see also Col 3:9; Rom 6:6-7, 11), [a] is best understood as the positive grounds for the positive command [A], and [b] is best understood as the negative grounds for the

² οὖν in 3:1 cataphorically refers to the protasis. It indicates conclusion by linking the grounds of the protasis with the appropriate inference in the apodosis.

³ The συν- in συνηγέρθητε along with the dative τῷ Χριστῷ indicates a dative of association.

⁴ “Right [hand] of God” is language that refers to Christ’s enthronement as King (see 2 Sam 7; Ps 110; 132:11; Acts 2:30, 33-36; 5:31; 13:33; Eph 1:20-22; 1 Pet 3:22).

⁵ φρονεῖτε serves as both the positive command in [A] and the implied

negative command [B].

Beginning with [B] on the basis of [b], τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς appears to be a vague reference to the various regulations proposed by the false philosophy (see the parallel language of 2:20) as well as various sinful practices (see the identical phrase τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς in 3:5). The Colossian believers have died⁶ to such a way of thinking⁷ [b] (indicative/“already”), and therefore such a mindset should be put to death [B] (imperative/“not yet”). In contrast, because the believer’s life has been hidden with Christ [b] (indicative/“already”), they are to set their mind upon “above things” (imperative/“not yet”; cf. 3:1). ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν κέκρυπται does not mean their life cannot be seen. Here κρύπτω refers to a security⁸ grounded in being united with Christ (σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ—dative of association). Due to this union, Christ can be called the believer’s life (3:4); and when Christ is revealed,⁹ they will be revealed with Him (σὺν αὐτῷ, dative of association) in glory (3:4).

(negated— μὴ) command in [B].

⁶ Death here is not a physical but a salvific reality. Believers are associated with Christ in His death. Those united to Him are counted as dying when Christ died.

⁷ A notable vocabulary shift occurs between verse 1 with ζητέω, which has the idea of seeking, striving towards, longing for, or desiring after (see Rom 2:7; 10:3, 20; 1 Cor 1:22; Gal 2:17), and verse 2 with φρονέω, which has more of the idea of dwelling upon, having a disposition toward, or having something as one’s mindset (Rom 8:5; 12:3; Gal 5:10; Phil 3:19) or a way of thinking (1 Cor 13:1) possibly even relating to one’s worldview.

⁸ Frederick William Danker et al., eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3rd ed.; Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 571. See also 1 Cl 56:10 and Job 5:21 (LXX) where κρύπτω has a similar meaning.

⁹ φανερώω is used here, as elsewhere (i.e., 1 Pet 1:7, 13; 1 John 2:28; 3:2), to

In summary, the Colossian believers are to put on (imperative/“not yet”) a mindset that accords with their present reality (indicative/“already”) as opposed to a past reality (“for you died,” 3:3). Paul urges the Colossian believers to live out the implications (imperative/“not yet”) of who they already are in Christ (indicative/“already”).

Verses 5-10a

On the basis of the believer having died with Christ (2:20; 3:2, 9), Paul urges the Colossian church to lay aside sinful practices that belong to their former order of existence (3:5-8). Not only are believers to abstain from dwelling on things pertaining to this “earthly” existence (3:1-4), referring now explicitly to sinful behaviors (3:5; cf. 3:8), they are also to eliminate them from their lives (3:5-9). Again, the indicative/“already” forms the basis for the imperative/“not yet.” Believers are to live out (imperative/“not yet”) the reality of who they are in Christ (indicative/“already”).

Verses 5-11 are best understood as forming a new paragraph (i.e., NA27, ESV). Paul is drawing an inference (οὖν) from his argument in 3:1-4. The Colossian believers are commanded to Νεκρώσατε . . . τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς (3:5). Paul is neither referring to physical murder nor to actual body parts that exist on the earth. τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς is used metaphorically to refer to sinful activities, dispositions, or attitudes (which are listed appositionally to τὰ μέλη) and Νεκρώσατε denotes causing them to cease. Having

refer to the second advent of Christ.

died with Christ (2:20; 3:2, 9), they are to live out that reality and “kill” sexual immorality, impurity, (sinful) passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which (ἥτις) is idolatry (3:5).¹⁰

As the adverb τότε indicates, the Colossian believer’s *formerly* lived¹¹ according to these sinful activities and dispositions (“already”; 3:7).¹² Because of these sinful activities and dispositions, God’s wrath (possessive genitive) comes on the sons characterized by disobedience (attributive genitive; 3:8);¹³ yet God’s wrath no longer abides on them (“already”). Based on this new salvific state (indicative/“already”), Paul commands

¹⁰ Understanding ἥτις as specifically referring to τὴν πλεονεξίαν, and not the entire list of sins as a whole, is preferable. First, to take a singular relative pronoun as having a singular antecedent is natural. Second, πλεονεξίαν, unlike the other sins listed, is set off by καὶ τὴν and is therefore distinguished from the other sins which lack the conjunction and article. Third, if Paul was referring to the list as a whole with ἥτις, he would have no need to shift back to the plural in verse 6 with the relative pronoun ᾧ but could continue in the singular to refer to the collective group of sins. Paul rightly refers to greediness as idolatry because greed produces sinful and displaced longings for something other than God (a form of idolatry).

¹¹ Paul often uses περιπατέω (literally, “to walk”) to refer to living in a certain manner (Rom 13:13; Eph 4:1; Col 1:10; 1 Thes 2:12; 4:12; 2 Thes 3:6, 11; see a similar use in LXX 2 Kings 20:3 and Proverbs 8:20).

¹² ἐν οἷς and ἐν τούτοις (3:7) are datives of manner. The antecedent of both ᾧ (3:6) and οἷς (3:7) is best understood grammatically as τὰ μέλη (which conceptually includes its appositional list of sins) in 3:5. Although they could refer to τοὺς υἱοὺς (3:6), this understanding is not preferable in light of verse 8’s mention of τὰ πάντα, which appears to have the same reference as τούτοις, but is clearly referring to sinful practices, not the disobedient sons.

¹³ Whether the phrase ἐπὶ τοὺς υἱοὺς τῆς ἀπειθείας is original or not is unclear. It may have been inserted as an attempt to harmonize Col 3:6 with Eph 5:6. However, there exists “widespread testimony supporting” it and καὶ ὑμεῖς (“you also,” 3:7) may assume a prior mention of individuals (i.e., τοὺς υἱοὺς τῆς ἀπειθείας). See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2nd ed.; London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 557.

them (imperative/“not yet”) to strip off¹⁴ all of the following sinful behaviors (τὰ πάντα, cataphoric reference): anger, wrath, malignity, slander, and obscene speech (3:8).

μὴ ψεύδεσθε εἰς ἀλλήλους (3:9) is a further ethical imperative in continuation with 3:5-8. The following two adverbial participles—ἀπεκδυσάμενοι and ἐνδυσάμενοι (3:9-10)—both of which are constative aorists viewing the action as a past and complete whole, function to provide the grounds for that command.¹⁵ A radical change has occurred in the believer at conversion. He has stripped off¹⁶ τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον, referring not to a literal human being but the believer’s former mode of existence, along with the deeds that belong to that existence (i.e., lying; 3:9), and has taken on τὸν νέον [ἄνθρωπον], a drastically different, regenerative state (3:10; cf. Eph 4:22; Rom 6:6).¹⁷ Based on this reality (indicative/“already”), Paul commands the Colossian church not to lie to one another (imperative/“not yet”; 3:9).

¹⁴ ἀποτίθημι refers to taking off clothing (2 Macc 8:35; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 8.266; Acts 7:58). Here in Col 3:8 it does not denote the taking off of clothing but provides a great illustrative picture of ridding oneself of practices (cf. Rom 13:12; Eph 4:22; 1 Pet 2:1; Heb 12:1). Furthermore, the emphatic καὶ ὑμεῖς (“even you,” 3:8; see the NIV’s translation) along with the indirect middle (with a reflexive tone) emphasizes the believer’s personal involvement and responsibility.

¹⁵ The καὶ (3:10) coordinates the two clauses and indicates a parallel function.

¹⁶ Again Paul has chosen language (ἀπεκδύομαι and ἐνδύω) that connote the taking off and putting on of clothes (cf. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 6.330) to vividly illustrate the spiritual reality of which he speaks. (cf. Philo of Alexandria, *Works of Philo*, Names, 233).

¹⁷ The parallel with 3:9’s τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον indicates that ἄνθρωπον is implied after the substantive adjective, τὸν νέον. The old man is old in so far as it has been replaced by the new, and the new man is new in the sense that it replaces the old (note the similar *Old* and *New* Covenant language).

Paul then describes this new salvific state of the believer (τὸν νέον [ἄνθρωπον]) with an adjectival clause introduced by the attributive participle τὸν ἀνακαινούμενον (3:10). This participle is a divine passive and progressive present indicating a process of renewal.¹⁸ The new man is new (“already”) but is also being renewed (“not yet”). The renewing is in reference to one’s understanding (εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν), a renewal of the way in which one thinks (3:10; cf. Rom 12:2; see also “consider yourselves” in Rom 6:11). The progressive present functions theologically to bridge the tension between the indicative/“already” and the imperative/“not yet” existent throughout 2:20-3:17. This process of renewal progressively brings the realities of “having put off the old man” (3:9) and “having put on the new [man]” (3:10) into the practical sphere with real ethical results.¹⁹

Verses 10b-11

In 3:10b-11 Paul’s instructions pick up corporate²⁰ and “new creation” undertones. First, Paul describes the process of renewal (3:10) as corresponding to (κατ’) its

¹⁸ Prior to this, Paul has just used two aorist participles ἀπεκδυσάμενοι and ἐνδυσάμενοι which, as seen by the context, indicate definitive, complete actions. The introduction of a present tense, therefore, indicates a distinct nuance. As such, this present is most likely being used progressively.

¹⁹ Paul’s argument throughout 2:20-3:17 assumes that someone who has truly died and been raised with Christ will inevitably put off and put on various practices. This assumption is true because of this effectual process of renewal. If this process wasn’t certain, Paul’s argument would fall to shambles (i.e., one could continue to live as if nothing had happened although a drastic change had indeed occurred).

²⁰ Although to say that Paul’s instructions up until this point strictly addressed individuals is probably misguided and creating a false dichotomy in Paul’s thought between

(αὐτόν—antecedent: τὸν νέον [ἄνθρωπον]) Creator’s (τοῦ κτίσαντος—substantive participle, attributive genitive) likeness (εἰκόνα). As in Eph 2:15, Christ is Creator of this corporate new humanity which is found in Him.²¹ Furthermore, both εἰκών and κτίζω allude to a creation theme.²² And finally, Paul states that this new humanity is where (ὅπου) there is neither Greek or Jew (uncircumcised or circumcised, cf. Eph 2:11), Barbarian or Scythian, slave or free. But rather (ἀλλὰ—contrast), compared to these ethnic, national, and social divisions, Christ is all; He is everything, so much so that these divisions are nothing. Social, ethnic, and national identities are revaltivated by one’s identification with Christ (3:11; cf. Gal 3:28; Eph 2:11-22).

Here Paul is referring to God’s work of restoring humanity, recreating a new humanity which is according to His original intent—to properly bear the image of God—a purpose which was distorted at the fall. Whereas the first Adam—the first one who bore this image—failed, this new humanity is being renewed according to the image of the second Adam. Christ is the second Adam, the federal head of this new humnanity. All who are in Christ have been transfered from the old order of existence characterized by the first Adam,

the individual Christian and Christians corporately.

²¹ That believers would be renewed into the likeness of Christ (cf. Rom 8:29), who is the head of this new humanity (Eph 1:22-23; Col 1:18), is an expected effect of being united to Him.

²² The LXX of Gen 1:27, 1 Cl 33.4, and the Epistle of Barnabas 5:5 and 6:12 refer to Adam and Eve as being created in the image (εἰκών) of God. And κτίζω has obvious allusions to the creation theme as well.

into the new sphere of the second Adam. They have put off the old man (corporate sense) and put on the new man—the new humanity found in Christ.

What may appear to have been an odd shift from seemingly individualistic moral issues (3:1-10a) to corporate language (3:10b-11) is actually quite appropriate. In 3:8-9 Paul focuses on interpersonal-relational sins, namely, angry dispositions that manifest themselves in abuses of the tongue.²³ Therefore, in 3:10b-11, Paul's central message remains the same: the Colossian church (corporately) is to live out the reality (imperative/"not yet") of who they already are (corporately) as the new humanity in Christ (indicative/"already").

Conclusion

Paul's central purpose in Col 3:1-11 is to exhort the church of Colossae to live out the implications of who they already are in Christ. In 3:1-4 Paul urged them to take on a mindset that accords with their present spiritual reality. In 3:5-10a Paul encouraged them to put off various sinful behaviors and dispositions due to having already put off the old man and put on the new. And finally, implied in Paul's admonition in 3:10b-11 is his call for them to live in light of who they already are (corporately) as the new humanity in Christ.

²³ Even βλασφημία can be used to refer to slander against other humans (i.e., Jd 9; Rev 2:9; Josephus, *Antiquities*. 3.307; Mk 7:22; Eph 4:31), which is most likely what it means in 3:8, given the nature of the surrounding sins that are listed."

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