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CREED AND THEOLOGY: REFLECTIONS ON COLOSSIANS

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Contemporary scholarship has stressed both unity and diversity in the documents of the NT. The source of the unity has been located in a common commitment to the apostolic tradition of the words and deeds of Jesus to which the several church centers were heirs.[1] Whatever differences Paul may have had with the Jerusalem apostles or the leadership of the Jerusalem Church, he insists that the message he preached was identical with the gospel proclaimed by those who had been authorized by Jesus to bear witness to him at the time of his resurrection (1 Cor 15:1-4, 11). Allowing for the particular expression characteristic of Paul or of any one of the Jerusalem apostles, there can be recognized in the early preaching a common core of redemptive truth on which all agreed. On the basis of 1 Cor 15:3-4 it can be said that this core was creedal in character and represented an irreducible minimum to which all the churches gave assent. It furnished the substance of preaching and teaching and was celebrated in confession of faith and hymns when the church gathered for worship.

If the source of the unity of the NT can be traced to the single factor of apostolic tradition, the rich diversity in theological expression and conception evident in the several documents reflects other factors. These include the individuality of the several writers, the specific situations addressed and the search for a more adequate mode of expression to convey the significance of Jesus Christ and redemption, as well as the presence of opponents and of distortions of the gospel that had to be exposed and countered. Without attempting to explore the dynamics of diversity within the documents of the NT, we can confidently affirm the fact of diversity.[2]

The presence of diversity is a sufficient indicator that within the NT there is no groping for a theological synthesis. It seems probable that the first serious attempt to achieve a doctrinal synthesis for the Church came in the third century when the Alexandrian fathers formulated the gospel in the categories of Greek philosophical thought.[3] Their achievement was impressive. From that time forward, a Greek imprint can be traced in virtually all Christian theology. The adoption of Greek categories of thought to express the gospel in preference to the Semitic categories of thought that were normative for Jesus and the early Jerusalem Church had far-reaching theological ramifications. But the NT itself encouraged the seriousness with which the Alexandrian fathers sought to grapple with Christian reality in terms of the cultural context in which they stood. I un-

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[1]For a clear treatment of this theme see F. F. Bruce, *Tradition: Old and New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), esp. pp. 29-57.

[2]See esp. J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977).

[3]Cf. W. Walker, "Die Verwertung der Weisheits-Literatur bei den Christlichen Alexandrinen," *ZKG* 64 (1952-53) 1-33.

derstand this disposition toward contextualism in terms of the distinction between creed and theology.

In the context of this distinction, "creed" designates a formulation of the gospel, the irreducible core of the Christian proclamation. "Creed" denotes an affirmation of faith in a Person (Jesus) and an event (his redemptive action for mankind). It was the responsibility of creed to reflect the core of the apostolic tradition with fidelity. Theological expression, on the other hand, represents a cultural synthesis of belief. "Theology" in this context denotes the expression of the creed. The NT embodies theology only in terms of the creed, but it provides abundant evidence of sensitivity to the specific culture to which the creed is addressed. This cultural awareness is evident, for example, in the letters of Paul, where the spectrum of theological expression in the several letters to the churches frequently indicates an indebtedness to categories of thought that were not derived from the Scriptures or the traditions of Judaism in which Paul was nurtured. In the interests of effective communication there was little alternative to the adoption of modes of thought that were endemic to the people addressed when presenting the creed and its implications for a Christian stance in the world. Paul's statement in Romans is formulated differently than his statement in First Corinthians or in Colossians. The distinction between creed and theology, between the irreducible core of the apostolic proclamation and the expression of that core, is one way of taking into account both the unity and the diversity in conception and formulation in the several documents of the NT. The usefulness of this distinction as a conceptual tool for understanding the Pauline letters may be tested in terms of the distinctive statement preserved in Colossians. I am prepared to defend the following theses.

1. *When Paul theologizes, he does so from a given creedal structure. Theological expression may change according to the culture addressed, but the creed remains constant and unchanging.*

Paul had never visited the Lycus valley (Col. 2:1). The churches there owed their foundation to the evangelistic and pastoral ministry of Epaphras, whose labors Paul regarded as an extension of his own ministry (Col 1:7-8; 4:13). The gospel was apparently brought to Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis during the period of Paul's Ephesian ministry. One of the results of the apostle's extended stay in the metropolis of Asia, according to Luke, was that "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10). It may be presumed that Epaphras came to faith when he was in Ephesus but that he had returned to the Lycus valley to proclaim his faith and to plant churches in each of the three centers of the region. At the time Paul penned the letter to the Colossians, Epaphras was again with Paul and had been imprisoned (Col 4:12-13; Phlm 23). The occasion of the letter was Epaphras' report concerning a crisis in the Lycus valley precipitated by the presence of teachers who claimed visionary transcendence but who distorted the gospel.

Paul's commitment to an unchanging creedal structure is evident in his response to the Colossians. In the thanksgiving section of the letter (Col 1:3-23) he refers to "the word of truth, the gospel" (1:5). The reference is clearly to the core of the apostolic tradition that Epaphras had received from Paul and had proclaimed to his townsmen. It is this that I have labeled "creed." Paul traces the source of his readers' faith in Christ Jesus, their love for one another, and their

Christian hope to their experience of "the grace of God" expressed through the gospel (1:6). In these opening lines Paul appeals to the creed as foundational, and he underscores its unchanging character by repeated emphasis on its normative quality. He specifies that the gospel preached by Epaphras and received by the Colossians is identical with that proclaimed "in the whole world" (1:6). This insistence on what may be designated the "catholic" quality of the creed is sustained when the apostle urges the Colossians not to shift from the foundation truths of the gospel, which have been preached not only in the Lycus valley but "to every creature under heaven" (1:23). These allusions to the universal outreach of the gospel serve to establish a sharp contrast between the unchanging quality of the apostolic faith expressed in the creed and the strictly local appeal of the distortions of the gospel taught by teachers who had infiltrated the churches of the valley. They affirm the normative character of the creed, whether one is at Colossae or elsewhere in the Mediterranean world.

Paul categorizes the substance of the creed as deliverance from the domain of darkness, transfer to the realm where Christ is sovereign, and the reception of redemption in terms of the forgiveness of sins (1:13-14; cf. 1:21-22). The achievement of Christ is then elaborated in terms of a confession that celebrates the dignity of the Son in the spheres of creation and redemption (1:15-20).[4] The theological expression is liturgical in character, but it is clearly appropriate to the situation at Colossae. The reference to the angelic powers ("thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities" [1:16; cf. 2:15, 18]) and to the "fulness of God" dwelling in Christ (1:19; cf. 2:9) were relevant to concerns aroused by the false teachers who had disturbed the Church. Here Paul, perhaps in dependence on an earlier liturgical formulation, theologizes—but the "theology" flows from the creedal structure affirmed in 1:13-14.

2. *Teaching current within the Church is validated on the basis of the creed. Alien elements and false teaching are exposed by juxtaposition with the core of the apostolic tradition.*

Paul vigorously opposed any distortion of the gospel (Col 2:1-23). Commitment to the creed was incompatible with a sympathetic reception of the tenets of false teaching. In the letter to the Colossians this stance is affirmed in the contrast developed between God, whose redemptive good will is the ultimate source of the creed, and men, whose teaching reflects the spirit of the world and the dominion of the hostile principalities and powers (cf. 2:4, 8, 18-19). In the thanksgiving section of the letter Paul directs attention to God the Father, "who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light" (1:12). In the body of the letter, where he addresses the false teaching directly, he admonishes his readers, "Let no one disqualify you . . . " (2:18). The sharp contrast between God who qualifies and man who is prepared to disqualify, together with the sternness of Paul's admonition, underscores the seriousness of a type of teaching that, unchecked, could only obscure the character of salvation and reduce Chris-

[4]The bibliography on this passage is extensive; see esp. E. Bammel, "Versuch zu Col 1:15-20," *ZNW* 52 (1961) 88-95; K.-G. Eckart, "Exegetische Beobachtungen zu Kol. 1:9-20," *Theologia Viatorum* 7 (1959-60) 87-106; H. J. Gabathuler, *Jesus Christ, Haupt der Kirche—Haupt der Welt: Der Christus-hymnus Colosser 1:15-20 in der theologischen Forschung der letzten 130 Jahre* (Zürich: Zwingli, 1965); C. Maurer, "Die Begrundung der Herrschaft Christi über die Mächte nach Kolosser 1, 15-20," *Wort und Dienst NF* 4 (1955) 79-93; J. M. Robinson, "A Formal Analysis of Colossians 1:15-20," *JBL* 76 (1957) 270-287.

tian existence to an unwholesome asceticism.

The only source for reconstructing the tenets of the false teachers is the letter to the Colossians, and it is imperative to interpret its statements with care. Certain aspects of the spiritual program urged upon the Colossians may be readily identified. From Phrygian Judaism came the insistence on circumcision (2:11), legal ordinances (cf. 2:14), food and drink regulations, and observance of the festival calendar (2:16).[5] The rigorous asceticism, which was encouraged with the slogans "do not handle," "do not taste," "do not touch" (2:21), may or may not be Jewish in origin. The designation of the teaching as "philosophy" (2:8), and the use of such catchwords as "knowledge," "wisdom," and "mystery," suggest a syncretistic religious outlook.[6] The evidence of the letter indicates that the false teachers were offering the Christians of the Lycus valley a spiritual program based on an ascetic piety and supported by slogans. The key to a more precise understanding of this program lies in the interpretation of Paul's reference to humility, the worship of angels, and visions in Col 2:18.[7]

It is commonly assumed that the Colossians were being urged to venerate angels. This interpretation is reflected in the translation of Col 2:18 adopted for the *RSV*: "Let no one disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, taking his stand on visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind." On this reading of the text[8] angels were not merely heavenly beings but "principalities and powers, lords of the planetary spheres, sharing in the plenitude of the divine essence," who must be placated by regular legal observance and a rigorous asceticism.[9] This perception purportedly came from heavenly visions that the proponents of this distorted teaching had experienced. The source of the alien elements in their teaching was an advanced type of syncretism that obscured the deity and dignity of Christ.

This reading of the text, however, is almost certainly wrong. The full statement of the Colossian letter itself fails to support the interpretation that angels

[5]On Phrygian Judaism see W. M. Ramsay, "The Jews of the Graeco-Asiatic Cities," *Expositor*, 6th series 5 (1902) 92-109, esp. pp. 95-105, "The Jews of the Lycus Valley Cities"; F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 165-167.

[6]See further C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge: University Press, 1958) 30-34, 90-110; W. Foerster, "Die Irrlehrer des Kolosserbriefes," in *Studia Biblica et Semitica, Festschrift fur Th. Vriezen* (Wageningen, 1966) 71-80; E. Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 2-3, 94-131; and the series of essays published in *Conflict at Colossae*, ed. F. O. Francis and W. A. Meeks (Missoula, 1973).

[7]On this difficult passage see esp. F. O. Francis, "Humility and Angelic Worship in Col. 2:18," *ST* 16 (1962) 109-134; A. Fridrichsen, "Col 2:18," *ZNW* 21 (1922) 135-137; S. Lyonnet, "L'Epître aux Colossiens (Col 2, 18) et les mystères d' Apollon Clarien," *Bib* 43 (1962) 417-435.

[8]A similar reading is reflected in other contemporary translations; cf., e. g., *NEB*: "You are not to be disqualified by the decision of people who go in for self-mortification and angel-worship, and try to enter into some vision of their own"; *Living Bible*: "Don't let anyone declare you lost when you refuse to worship angels, as they say you must. They have seen a vision, they say, and know you should."

[9]The statement is that of F. F. Bruce, *Commentary*, p. 167, but a similar position is taken by E. Lohse, *Commentary*, p. 3, who speaks of the "cultic adoration" of "strong angelic powers." For an earlier attempt to reconstruct the heresy see A. L. Willians, "The Cult of Angels at Colossae," *JTS* 10 (1909) 413-438.

were being worshipped, having usurped the honors that are appropriate to God or Christ alone. If this were the case, Paul's polemic against the practice would have been direct and volatile, as in the letter to the Galatians. But in point of fact he writes, "Although I am absent in body, I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ" (Col 2:5). The cultic veneration of angels is incompatible with a firm faith in Christ. In Colossians Paul is clearly responding to a distortion of the gospel that was syncretistic in nature, but it is not the error that has commonly been envisioned.

It is preferable to understand the term "humility" in 2:18 from the larger context offered by 2:16-23. "Humility" is a technical term for fasting with the intention of inducing visions and visionary ascent into the heavenly realm.[10] In Jewish documents roughly contemporaneous with Colossians Abraham, Isaac, Moses and Ezra all journey to heaven after having fasted.[11] Asceticism and visionary ascent are relatively common motifs in the literature of both Judaism and Hellenism. Moreover, in several of the sources the seer describes what he sees, and the focus is frequently on the worship that the angels offer to God. In the Ascension of Isaiah, for example, the seer, in the course of his ascent toward the throne of God, sees the angelic hosts in each of the seven heavens praising and glorifying God. He himself participates in this angelic worship in the fifth, sixth and seventh heavens.[12] The expression "worship of angels" in Col 2:18 signifies not the veneration of angelic creatures by men but the worship directed toward God by the angels. By rigorous asceticism and extended fasting, the false teachers contended, men could experience visionary ascent and witness the angelic service into which even they might enter. This vision of the heavenly liturgy and its attendant glory Paul labels "a shadow of what is to come" (2:17). The goal of the spiritual program urged by the false teachers was thus visionary ascent into heaven and the enjoyment of the worship of God offered by the angels.[13] It was based on a false ascetic piety and encouraged an attitude of pride in privileged status. It obscured the actual character of salvation in the sense that the alien teaching stressed that the deepest spiritual experiences belonged only to the few who had been favored with esoteric instruction. It shifted the focus of attention from Jesus Christ, the source of all wisdom and knowledge (2:2-3, 17-19), to the promoters of visionary transcendence (2:4, 8, 18).

Paul's response to this program is already anticipated in his opening words to the Colossians. In contrast to the prohibitions that characterized the instruction of the false teachers (2:21-23), Paul celebrates the joy that belongs to the Christian life even in adversity (1:11). In contrast to submission to ascetic practices in order to qualify for visions, the apostle urges thanksgiving to the heavenly

[10]The argument here follows F. O. Francis, "Humility," where full documentation is provided. See also Francis, "Visionary Discipline and Scriptural Tradition at Colossae," *LTQ* 2 (1967) 71-81.

[11]*Apoc. Abr.* chaps. 9, 12; *T. Isaac* (ed. W. E. Barnes, 1892) 140-151; *3 Enoch* (ed. H. Odeberg, 1928) 44 f., 50; *Apoc. Ezra* 1:2-7.

[12]*Ascension of Isaiah* 7:13-9:33.

[13]The translation of the *NIV* allows for this interpretation: "Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions."

Father, "who has qualified us to participate in the inheritance of the holy ones (i.e., the angels) in light" (1:12). In contrast to rigid self-denial as a means of attaining perfection during one's lifetime, Paul exults in the God who has already "translated us to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (1:13). In this manner Paul indicates that all Christians already experience what the false teachers had argued was available only through a life of rigorous self-denial. Christians do not have to struggle to enter their inheritance; God has graciously provided that entrance through his Son.

The program of the false teachers is addressed more directly in the body of the letter (2:1-23). Paul cautions the Colossians not to be deluded with beguiling speech (2:4) but to affirm the fundamental truths of the creed and to explore their implications for a Christian lifestyle (2:5-7). In grounding his appeal on the creed, Paul makes use of the language of tradition; "as you received Christ Jesus the Lord" is equivalent to "as you received the apostolic tradition concerning Christ Jesus the Lord." The reference is to the gospel delivered by Epaphras ("even as you were taught," 2:7). The creedal core provides the touchstone for evaluating the truth or the falsity of what is being taught. Paul traces the foreign elements in the teaching of the asceticists in the Lycus valley to their eagerness to embrace human tradition in preference to the apostolic tradition (2:8, 19, 21-23). By refusing to submit to the headship of Christ acknowledged in the creed (2:8, 19) the false teachers failed to recognize that the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily in Christ and that every Christian has come to fulness of life in him (2:9-10). Consequently they sought for fulness elsewhere, in an experience-oriented mystical piety. By contrast, Paul's theological exposition of the character of Christian experience in 2:9-15 flows from the creed. The larger context of 2:4-23 demonstrates that theology comes to expression as response to alien elements in the culture, which are exposed by juxtaposition with the creed.

3. *Orthopraxy (correct practice) issues from creedal commitment.*

A preliminary investigation of all the paraenetic sections of the letters suggests that they are creedally informed. In the letter to the Colossians this is certainly the case. The paraenetic section of the letter extends from 3:5 to 4:6. It exhibits a common Pauline pattern in which the "imperative" of the exhortation builds on the "indicative" of Paul's declaratory statements concerning the status of the Christians.[14] Having died with Christ to any claim that might be advanced by the elemental spirits of the universe (the "indicative": 2:20; 3:3), Christians are to put to death (the "imperative": 3:5) whatever continues to suggest that the principle of their lives is drawn from a fallen world and not from Christ. Conversely the imperative, "do not lie to one another" (3:9), is based on the indicative, "seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator" (3:9-10).

The degree to which the paraenesis is creedally informed is evident from two observations. First, in constructing the transition from the previous section, where Paul addressed the threat of the false teaching (2:4-19), to the hortatory segment of the letter, the apostle addresses his readers in terms of their ex-

[14]For an exposition of this Pauline pattern see H. N. Ridderbos, *Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 253-258, with bibliography.

perience of death and resurrection with Christ (2:20-3:4). He writes:

> If *with Christ you died* to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations . . . according to human precepts and doctrines? (2:20-22)
>
> If then *you have been raised with Christ*, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. . . . For *you have died*, and your life is hid *with Christ* in God (3:1-3).

The references to identification with Christ in his death and resurrection constitute an appeal to the creed.[15] The searching questions concerning compliance with the instructions of the false teachers in 2:20 ff. assume creedal commitment on the part of the Church. Similarly the pointed exhortations that follow in 3:5 ff. flow naturally from the creed embraced by the Colossians.

Secondly, specific elements of the paraenetic section draw their support directly from the creed. This is particularly clear in the summons to display a godly disposition toward one another, "forbearing one another, and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other," where the exhortation is followed immediately by the statement, "as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (3:12-13). The appeal to divine forgiveness as the ground for extending forgiveness draws its force from the fact that the forgiveness of sins was a basic component of the gospel proclaimed by Epaphras. It was an integral element in the creed. In fact, in Paul's initial summary of the creed in 1:13-14 "the forgiveness of sins" appears in the final, emphatic position, where the phrase qualifies the broader term "redemption." When Paul addresses the Church paraenetically, his appeal is creedally informed.

It seems probable, finally, that Paul refers to the creed when he encourages his readers to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (3:16). "The word of Christ" is precisely "the word of truth" that came to the community, where it steadily gained ground (1:5-6). It signifies the gospel, the irreducible core of the apostolic proclamation. Paul finds in the creed the basis for instruction, admonition and celebration as the Church gathers for worship. The admonition to allow the word of Christ to dwell richly among the believers is a summons to reflection on the achievement of Christ announced in the gospel. The fruit of reflection is to be instruction and admonition—that is to say, theology and mutual encouragement to conduct that authenticates creedal commitment. The creed is foundational for both faith and practice.

The distinction between creed and theology may suggest a paradigm for doing theology at the present time. It calls for a commitment to an unchanging creed and an openness to a changing theology. The tenor of the gospel—the creed—remains constant and recognizable, but the formulation of the gospel will be sensitive to the concerns of contemporary culture. The distinction between creed and theology calls for cultural analysis and allows for a sociology of change. As culture and subcultures change, the formulation of theological expression will also change in the interest of effective communication.

Two dangers inherent in a sociology of change, however, must be recognized. First, cultural change can never be an invitation to rewrite the substance of the

[15]This theme receives a full treatment in R. C. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Chirst: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1967).

creed. It is only the expression of the creed that is subject to modification. It is continually necessary to attempt a more adequate expression of the apostolic faith. But theology may not add or subtract from the core of the apostolic tradition now embodied in the Scriptures. The creed is inviolable.

The second danger is that of transferring reverence for the creed to the theological expression adopted for any given period in the experience of the Church. The absolutizing of a particular expression of Christian faith is tantamount to treating a theological formulation as though it were the creed.[16] To lose sight of the distinction between creed and theology hinders the Church from creative interaction with the cultural currents of its own day. If Paul is to provide a model for the doing of theology, each generation of the Church must discover for itself the most effective vehicle for the expression of the gospel. In this search the task of theology is to maintain the integrity of the creed at the same time that it seeks to be responsible to culture. Theology may change according to the culture addressed, but the tenor of the gospel—the creed—remains constant.

[16]A former student of mine, Paul Leggett, has argued in an unpublished paper that Protestantism in the seventeenth century spoke in philosophical and scholastic terms that appear foreign to the twentieth century. Consequently contemporary theology cannot be couched in the terminology of the Puritans, even though we agree with the substance of the Westminster confession of faith. Men of the stature of Abraham Kuyper and B. B. Warfield presented seventeenth-century thought with such intellectual force that it appeared viable for the late nineteenth century. Yet precisely that aspect of their thought, in contradistinction from more creative elements, failed to provide the theological foundation for the Church of the twentieth century.