



THE BEREA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

Learning from Paul’s Method in Colossians

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Passing comments by different authors in my reading for the introduction to a class I’m teaching on Colossians suggested three ideas useful in our response to the syncretism in contemporary culture (for a summary of Colossae’s syncretism, see Arnold 2002, 373–374).

First, we should engage in reconnaissance to be more aware of the arguments and methods that are being used in the spiritual war we fight (cf. 2 Cor 10.3). P. T. O’Brien observes that, after commencing the letter with teaching that reinforces the foundation of their faith, Paul begins in Colossians 2 to “expressly point to the dangers facing the congregation. He is aware of the methods of the false teachers and issues a strong warning to the Colossians to be on their guard lest they be carried off as spoil” (O’Brien 1992, 149). In other words, Paul not only knew there was a false philosophy, he knew what its views were. Wise apologists will learn from his example.¹

Second, to equip believers with confidence as they mature, some of our teaching should be preemptive. As is incumbent on students of Colossians, in his overview, Luke Timothy Johnson gives attention to the challenge posed by what is commonly called “the Colossian heresy” (how well formed it was is unclear). He notes that, “the crisis in Colossae was one of confidence or assurance (4:12): is what they have been given in Christ enough for perfection, or do they require more for maturity? It is exacerbated, however, by troublemakers” (Johnson 2010, 349). Aware of what his readers faced, Paul declared his aim to proclaim Christ, warn everyone, and teach everyone with wisdom (Col 1.28–29). His completion of that aim included a response to the components of the human philosophy that was eroding their confidence (2.8, 16–23).

Again, we are wise to imitate him. But we should not overstate what he did, for, as David Garland observes,

There is no reason to believe . . . that [the opponents] have already swept the Colossians from their theological moorings in Christ. Paul’s concern is that they might undermine the Christians’ confidence in their hope. He is therefore writing to curb the insidious influence of a false “philosophy” and to confirm the Colossians’ faith (2:4–5).... Paul’s response is therefore a warning shot across the bow, but, more importantly, it is a booster shot designed to inject greater assurance (Garland 1998, 28).

A challenge in teaching (and I include sermons here), especially in church settings, is to strike

¹ The number of ideologies we face, not to mention the details to master within each, makes this a task that is beyond daunting for any single individual. It’s a work to be undertaken as a body; one with interest in a particular study area should pursue it and make it accessible to others. As others do the same with other topics, we can work together to equip the body for this good work.

the correct balance between reactive and proactive instruction. While there are certainly times when it is necessary to address a felt need or respond to a dangerous teaching, we must remember that consistent nutrition is as necessary to “present everyone mature in Christ” (Col 1.28) as curative medicine. Our reconnaissance efforts should lead us to identify the threats; then, where appropriate, and in correct measures, we should devote some time to helping our hearers become aware of and begin to prepare to respond.

Third—and this is most important, not least—we should redouble our efforts to lead our hearers to engage with the biblical text in a way that deepens faith and bolsters confidence. The authors touch on this idea in different ways. O’Brien notes that “the hymnic paragraph [Col 1.15–20] is not a christological digression or excursus but is clearly central to the context in which it stands” (O’Brien 1992, 152). In other words, the christological teaching was what the Colossians most needed to know. Johnson observes that “Paul reminds them that maturity will come not by taking on esoteric lore and rituals but by increasing in awareness (*epignōsis*) of the gift already given by God in Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 1:12), ‘to recognize the grace of God in truth’ (1:6; cf. 1:9, 10; 2:2; 3:10)” (Johnson 2010, 352). And Garland warns that,

When Christians do not understand their faith, they are likely to water down the gospel and accommodate it to cultural expectations. They will cast out any offending articles of faith or append specious new ones more in accord with the fashion of the age.... When Christians have little confidence in their faith, they will be overly tentative in their claims and easily shaken by the challenges (Garland 1998, 32).

In short, God’s people cannot “be ready to give an answer” (1 Pet 3.15) unless they know what the answer is; and they will not know if their teachers do not teach the word extensively and with depth.

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (Rom 10.14, 17).

Works Cited

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