

TRINITY EVANGELICAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

SUPREMACY APPLIED TO DAILY LIFE:
EXEGESIS OF COLOSSIANS 3:1-11

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Paul's letter to Colossae encourages believers to continue in discipleship, but does so by attacking a dangerous philosophy and clarifies the supremacy of Christ's role in the universe. The letter consists of two major sections, doctrinal and functional, which can then be further divided. In the middle of the two major sections, Colossians 3:1-11 bridges the gap between doctrine and application by emphasizing two different spheres – above and below – and argues that the supremacy of Christ should influence daily living. In order to exegete this passage, this paper will explore the overall structure of Colossians, the imagery of hierarchy, and the relationship between doctrine and life.

The Rhetoric of Colossians

Many scholars believe that the purpose of Colossians was to respond to the Colossian heresy, but the purpose of the letter should not merely be limited to the so-called heresy. This caveat is for several reasons. First of all, doctrine is primarily limited to the first two chapters. After 2:3, for instance, knowledge is no longer an explicit motif.¹ Secondly, the letter never states the tenets of the Colossian thought, which leads some to believe that Paul is addressing a worldview rather than a heresy.² Thirdly, Paul is complimentary at the beginning of the letter, implying that the church had not yet fully embraced a heresy. In light of these factors, it is important to recognize that Colossians addresses more than doctrine; it also deals with discipleship.

The structure of the letter supports such a reading. The first two chapters are doctrinal, defending the supremacy of Christ, while the final two chapters speak to

¹ Dictionary of Biblical Imagery (159)

² deSilva

practical living. A question that arises, of course, is how these two major sections fit together as a whole.

Logically, we can look to the middle of the book, where it appears that Colossians 3:1-11 acts as a sort of bridge between the two sections. Colossians 3:1-4 finishes the doctrinal section, while 3:5 and following apply doctrine to everyday life. Upon examination, it becomes evident that Paul emphasizes supremacy – contrasting what is above from what is below – to connect doctrine to everyday life.

Background of Supremacy Motif

The supremacy of Christ is established early in the letter, by means of the beautiful hymn found in Colossians 1:15-23. Christ is not a lesser being in any sense, but perfectly equal with God. He created all things, whether in heaven or on earth, and is sovereign over all. In addition, Christ is separate from and above all of creation in regard to value, power, and authority. Through the use of beautiful language, Paul thus establishes the “complete supremacy” of Christ.³

Christ’s supremacy is crucial in the letter because it is contrasted against the Colossian philosophy. For instance, in 2:8-10, Paul argues that Christ and the “elements of the world” are opposed to one another. Contrary to the thought of Hellenists or Gnostics, Christ is far above creation and should not be confused with it. They belong to two entirely separate spheres.

At this point, it is important to recognize the cultural and religious context of Colossae. When Colossians was written, many believed in a cosmological imbalance related to earth, water, air, and fire. Hellenists believed they were “bound to this world

³ 159, Dict of Bibl Imagery

by the elements which prevented their ascent to heaven.”⁴ In order to be released from the futile world, Gnostics turned to ascetic practices, the worship of angels, or worshiped the elements as divinities.⁵ Through these methods, they believed that they could “escape through the lower spheres...to reach heaven above.”⁶ Or, as deSilva states, “human life below and access to the realms above lie under the authority of intermediate spiritual beings.”⁷ Recognizing this cultural background, Paul therefore emphasized the stark contrast between Christ above and the world below.

In Jewish thought, Rabbis considered it important to distinguish between the two spheres. A “large measure of parallelism” was used in their writing to emphasize the difference. Contrary to other philosophies, God is not emanating the world, nor is He a part of it, nor is He manipulated by natural elements. Rather, the God who created the world is separate from His creation. It is not surprising, then, why Paul would emphasize the separation between what is above and what is below.⁸

For Paul, God is above the world, and the world stands in “personal antithesis to Him.”⁹ This is a consistent message, not only in Colossians but throughout the entire New Testament. According to the New Testament concept of God, “the position of God as Creator and Lord of the world is unconditionally maintained.”¹⁰ In Colossians, this antithesis is stated strongly and repeated often.

⁴ 231, Dict of Paul

⁵ deSilva, D. A. (2004). *An introduction to the New Testament : Contexts, methods and ministry formation* (691). Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

⁶ 230-231, Dict of Paul

⁷ deSilva, D. A. (2004). *An introduction to the New Testament : Contexts, methods and ministry formation* (694). Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

⁸ Kittel, 337, vol I

⁹ Kittel, 337, vol I

¹⁰ Kittel, 337, vol I

Supremacy Motif in Colossians 3

In Colossians 3, the distinction between above and below is clearly apparent. In verses 1 and 2, Paul instructs the Colossians to “seek the things that are above” and to “set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.”¹¹ The two are set in opposition to one another. In Paul’s view, someone who has been “raised with Christ” cannot seek both at the same time.

In locating the above things, Paul incorporates the imagery of Christ’s ascension through the use of a local conjunction – “where Christ is seated at the right hand of God” – and then mentions Christ exalted in glory. It is crucial to recognize that Christ’s ascension is not a carelessly mentioned, but is purposefully chosen because of the earlier discussion of Christ’s supremacy in 1:15-20 and 2:8-10. When Paul writes, ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ θεοῦ, he is denoting a “symbol of divine power,”¹² and it is this same power that created the world and its elements.¹³

It would be a mistake to overlook the power of ascension imagery in Colossians 3. Some theologians, such as Schleirmacher, may wish to avoid the ascension, considering it irrelevant or impractical, but that seems careless given its significance in the New Testament.¹⁴ Ascension is of central importance to the church because it serves as the “doctrinal basis for the church (Ephesians)” as well as “the focus of ethical aspiration (Col 3:1ff).”¹⁵ The fact that Jesus has ascended to God’s right hand reveals that Jesus “does not aim to be a mere Jewish Messiah, but the Lord of the world.”¹⁶

¹¹ ESV

¹² 37, Kittel, vol II

¹³ Isaiah 48:13

¹⁴ Anchor Bible Dictionary, p 473

¹⁵ Interpreter’s Dictionary, p. 246

¹⁶ Kittel, 39, vol II

Responding to the brewing heresy in Colossae, Paul's effort is to "delegitimize the philosophy as 'worldly', or coming from a subdivine realm, as opposed to Paul's gospel."¹⁷ His argument consists of a contrast between two levels – that which is supremely divine and that which is subdivine – in the effort to persuade his readers towards the better, true gospel.

Supremacy Motif as Motivation for the New Self

In Colossians 3:1-11, Paul incorporates Christ's supremacy as motivation for moral living. In other words, the exalted Christ is above the world, and this serves as the purpose for moral teaching. In this manner, abstract doctrine and practical living are interrelated. After all, if Christ is above all things, then it only makes sense to have that truth inform behavior.

In verse 2, the Colossians are instructed to set their minds on "things that are above," not on what is below, on earth. On one level is ἄνω, which has the meaning of "above another position."¹⁸ On another level, γῆς refers to "the seat of all earthly weakness and inferiority."¹⁹ With the two levels juxtaposed, the things above are clearly superior to the things below.

Verse 4 goes on to speak of the exalted Christ and of our participation in His glory. In verse 5, Paul speaks against the earthly parts of the body. μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς can be translated as "the parts [of your body] which are on the earth." Here the

¹⁷ deSilva, D. A. (2004). *An introduction to the New Testament : Contexts, methods and ministry formation* (693). Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

¹⁸ BDAG, 92

¹⁹ BDAG, 196

denigration of earthly parts is highlighted because it follows after verse 4. When earthly practices are listed in verses 5 through 8, the idea is that they are of a lesser sphere. As a result, sin loses its appeal when compared to the glory of Christ.

Also incorporating the supremacy motif, verses 9-11 contrast sinful humanity and Christ as creator. Paul tells the Colossians to “put off the old self,” which is inferior. Grammatically, τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον is in the first attributive position, which emphasizes on παλαιὸν. In terms of hierarchy, the old self, which is of the earth, is of lesser quality. The new self, on the other hand, is better because it is being renewed “after the image of its creator.” This is significant because believers are not simply told to stop earthly practices; they are provided with a much better option – namely Christ, the Creator.

Supremacy as Foundation for Living

Given Paul’s long description of Christ’s supremacy in chapter 1, along with its repetition in chapters 2 and 3, it seems that Christ’s supremacy provides the basis for moral codes. This is not to say that the entire book of Colossians should be seen as singularly focused on this motif because Paul uses other motifs as well. However, it does seem that the supremacy of Christ is in mind in certain sections of the letter.

After Paul establishes a link between Christ’s supremacy and moral living in 3:1-11, he goes on to talk about hierarchy within the home and workplace in 3:18 through 4:1. Without stretching the motif beyond reason, it seems that the “above and below” motif is also applied to personal relationships in at least two dimensions.

First, stratum in personal relationships only makes sense if there exists a deeper spiritual reality. In other words, the supremacy of Christ provides the spiritual justification for all obedience, submission, and servitude. Apart from Christ, those acts have little meaning. Their significance, however, is found when done “for the Lord and not for men.”²⁰ As a result, the reward for such obedience is not earthly, but a better than earthly “inheritance.”

Second, all earthly authority, no matter how dominant, is all under the authority of Christ. In the household codes, the purpose of authority is not suppression, and the purpose of submission is not to please men. Instead, they are acts of pleasing, fearing, and serving the Lord. This is most clear when Paul addresses the masters, explaining that “you also have a Master in heaven.”²¹ Whatever power we think exists on earth, there is a greater source of power above. Earthly power is a reminder of the greater supremacy that belongs to Christ.

Again, not every passage in Colossians should be read in light of the supremacy motif. However, it does play an important role in several sections, and it seems quite possible that Paul had Christ’s supremacy in mind when writing the household codes – if not explicitly, then at least implicitly.

Conclusion

Looking at the entire epistle of Colossians, it is clear that Paul accomplishes more than discuss doctrine. Establishing correct belief summarizes the first half of the book, but the second half deals with practical life. There are other additional reasons, including

²⁰ Colossians 3:22-23

²¹ Colossians 4:1

a lack of tenets, that imply that Paul is not solely addressing a heresy. It seems preferable to view Colossians as a book of discipleship that rejects worldly philosophy and clarifies the supremacy of Christ.

Seeing Colossians in this light, structure becomes important when interpreting Colossians 3:1-11. It appears that 3:1-4 completes the doctrinal section, while verses 5-11 begin the application section. Because 3:1-11 serves as a bridge between the two, the passage is important because it shows how Christ's supremacy (established in the first two chapters) can directly relate to everyday life (discussed in the final two chapters).

The supremacy motif likely had historical basis. It was contrary to Gnostic superstition and the belief that forms of manipulation, such as asceticism or intermediary spirits, could release the soul from earth. It was also common for Rabbis to distinguish between what is above and what is below, and in Jewish thought, the separation of the Creator from His creation is very important. Given the historical context, Paul probably chose his images for a particular rhetorical purpose.

Finally, Colossians 3:1-11 exemplifies how Christ's supremacy can be applied to a person's life on earth. Being raised with the exalted Christ obligates a person to change their behavior – choosing what is above rather than what is below. There is no middle ground. A person must choose between the old self and the new self. There are two different spheres within to live, and one is far superior to the other.

It can also be argued that Christ's supremacy influenced the household codes in chapter 3, at least indirectly. Stratum within the home or work place only has meaning because Christ is legitimately supreme over all. Because Christ is supreme, that truth can inform “whatever you do,” knowing that we are ultimately serving not men, but the Lord.

Whether elements, angels, or masters, it becomes clear that the purpose of moral living is not intended to manipulate intermediaries in the cosmos, but to live a new life with Christ, who is supreme and far better than anything else.