

Regimes of Truth and the Rhetoric of Deceit: Colossians 2 in Postmodern Context

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Walter Wilson has recently made fruitful comparisons between the ancient literary genre of moral exhortation, or paraenesis, and the epistle to the Colossians. The argument is simple (though offered in great detail): like ancient philosophers, the author of Colossians is concerned with the education of rather recent converts to a new philosophy or moral perspective. Living in a “liminal period” in which “competing and contradictory claims of the old and the new versions of reality” lead to “lapses in belief, in social cohesion, and in individual responsibility,” the neophytes (or novices) require instruction that will internalize their new perspective and delegitimize their previous orientation in life.¹

Wilson employs language of “worldview” to describe these competing orientations or faith stances. By worldview, he refers to “a person’s *comprehensive* and pre-reflective understanding of reality, an *integrating* framework of fundamental considerations which gives context, direction, and meaning to life in light of one’s ultimate commitments.” As such, worldviews integrate “different provinces of knowledge and experience into a *symbolic totality*, a *symbolic universe*” that “serves as a *map* of fact and value for a person, *legitimizing* all roles, priorities, and institutions by situating them in the context of the *broadest horizon of reference* conceivable, bestowing meaning on *all domains* of life.”²

¹ Walter T. Wilson, *The Hope of Glory: Education and Exhortation in the Epistle to the Colossians* Supplements to Novum Testamentum, vol. 88 (Leiden, New York, Koln: Brill, 1997), p. 102.

² Ibid, p. 100. All italics in this and the following citations from Wilson are added.

The purpose of paraenetic instruction is to lead the neophyte to so internalize the teachings of the new worldview that its understanding of “the broader structures that order society and the powers and priorities that govern those structures are [recognized to be] inevitable or ‘*natural*.’”³ Further, once the validity of the “cosmic-social-anthropological order” of the new worldview “is simply assumed by the adherent, certain categories of belief and conduct appear as axiomatic insofar as they *conform* to that order, while variance with the postulated worldview is recognized automatically as *deviant* and *disruptive*.”⁴ Therefore, “Ideological construction in paraenetic texts is ... fundamentally antithetical in nature, as authors endeavor to *legitimate* one worldview while subverting others.”⁵

This worldview analysis of the epistle to the Colossians was immediately appealing to me. I have also been preoccupied with the nature of worldviews and the relevance of worldview analysis for reading biblical texts.⁶ But, read within a postmodern context, there are dimensions of such an analysis that are immediately problematic. I have italicized a number of words in the above quotes from Wilson that make the point. Worldviews are about *legitimacy* and therefore they are preoccupied with rooting out *deviance* in the name of *conformity* to that which is now taken to be *natural*. Moreover, worldviews are *comprehensive* and *integrating maps* that aspire to *symbolic totality* within the

³ Ibid, pp. 102-103.

⁴ Ibid, p. 104.

⁵ Ibid, p. 105.

⁶ My own worldview thinking has its earliest expression in my co-authored book (with J. Richard Middleton) *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984), and is further developed in *Who Turned Out the Lights: The Light of the Gospel in a Post-Enlightenment Culture* (Toronto: Institute for Christian Studies, 1989) and “Worldviews, Modernity and the Task of Christian College Education,” *Faculty Dialogue* 18 (Fall 1992).

broadest horizon of reference conceivable in order to bestow meaning *on all domains of life*. Postmodern discourse, however, is deeply suspicious of all such talk of totality. Over against the worldview preoccupation with determinate integrality, David Harvey notes that “fragmentation, indeterminacy and intense distrust of all universal or ‘totalizing’ discourse ... are the hallmark of postmodern thought.”⁷ And such systems of *symbolic totality* are subjected to a radical hermeneutic of suspicion precisely because they hide their constructed character behind reifications of that which is *natural* in order to *legitimate conformity* to their own *horizon of reference* that violently delegitimizes all systems taken to be *deviant*. Kenneth Gergen sums up the postmodern attitude well: “When convinced of the truth or right of a given worldview, a culture has only two significant options: totalitarian control of the opposition or annihilation of it.”⁸ If modernity, with its penchant for totality and its concomitant marginalization, totalitarian control and violence “has given us as much terror as we can take,”⁹ then what postmodern neophytes need is not a *map* that *naturalizes* the world in terms of our totality constructs, but a *paraenesis* that will “de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’ are in fact ‘cultural’; made by us not given to us.”¹⁰ The liminality of the postmodern condition should be seen as opportunity for play within a pluralistic world, not as a threatening period that calls for a deeper entrenchment of any given worldview.

⁷ *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 9

⁸ *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), p. 252.

⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 81.

¹⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 2.

The issue here isn't whether Wilson's analysis of Colossians as a paraenetic text is fruitful for understanding this ancient epistle in its historical context. The problem comes when we attempt to appropriate this text as our own in a postmodern context. Colossians may well be a worldview text par excellence, but worldviews do not fare well in a postmodern climate. What are we to do with a text that speaks so glowingly of "mystery" (1.26, 1.27, 2.2, 4.3) in a culture preoccupied with de-mystification?¹¹ And what are we to make of a text that claims to be rooted in nothing less than a Christ "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and understanding" (2.3) and who is encountered in a "word of truth" (1.6) that imparts assured understanding and knowledge of the very divine will (cf. 1.6, 1.9-10, 2.2-3, 3.10, 3.16)? Can this word of truth, as articulated in this letter, together with its comprehensive truth claims (just look at the hymn of 1.15-20!), be believable - indeed, liveable? - in a postmodern cultural context?¹²

Michel Foucault both heightens our problem and sharpens it. Remember that Colossians is preoccupied with "truth". Here is Foucault's take on truth:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanism and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.¹³

¹¹ See A. C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 82.

¹² I have offered further description of the postmodern cultural context, with specific reference to education, in "Education in Precarious Times: Postmodernity and a Christian World View," in *The Crumbling Walls of Certainty: Towards a Christian Critique of Postmodernity and Education*, edited by Ian Lambert and Suzanne Mitchell (Sydney: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 1997).

¹³ *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 131.

This quote wonderfully sums up a postmodern anti-realist, constructivist epistemology. Truth is not found, nor does it “come” to us from any place beyond our worldly realities. Truth is made, it is produced, and such production (like all production) requires the imposition of power, of constraint. Once such a constructed vision of things is taken to be true it becomes a regime, a structure of political control that will determine what kind of discourse might function as true, how one will establish and sanction truth within such a discourse, which techniques will be authorized as legitimate paths to truth, and how the truth-tellers within the regime will be regarded. Upon first reading, this may sound like how religious institutions construct and guard their versions of truth. But I confess that this description of regimes of truth makes me first think of the modern university, refereed journals, and academic guilds - maybe that is because such so-called secular regimes of truth are in fact more religious than they at first appear.¹⁴ That notwithstanding, if Foucault’s devaluation of truth to the power grabs of various regimes is at all on target, then religious faith in general, and any appropriation of the faith on offer in Colossians in particular, is in deep trouble.

Consider Colossians 2.8-23. Paul is warning the Colossian converts to be careful lest they be taken captive by “philosophy” and “empty deceit.”¹⁵ That he continues to make claims in this passage similar to claims made throughout the

¹⁴ For a penchant critique of the veneration of secularity over the modern academy see Langdon Gilkey, *Religion and the Scientific Future* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970, reprinted Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press/Rose, 1981) and *Society and the Sacred* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), esp. chs. 6, 7, 8. I have discussed Gilkey’s contribution at greater length in *Langdon Gilkey: Theologian for A Culture in Decline* (Lanham, New York, London: University Press of America, 1991), esp. chs 2, 3, 6.

¹⁵ While questions of authorship tend to be moot in a postmodern context and the identity of the author of Colossians is not directly relevant to the issues before us in this article, I will refer to the author as “Paul” - not so much out of convenience, but because I remain unconvinced by the arguments for pseudonymity.

book that are deemed incredulous from a postmodern perspective is clear enough. Consistent with the cosmic claims made in the Christ hymn of 1.15-20 (in which “all things in heaven and on earth were created ... through him and for him,” and Christ is “before all things, and in him all things hold together”), Paul claims in 2.9 that in Christ the fullness of deity dwells bodily. Here is an affirmation of universal presence manifest in the embodied particularity of one historical person. The totalizing tone continues when Christ is confessed to be the “head of every ruler and authority” (2.10) precisely because he has disarmed and made public example of such rulers and authorities (2.15).

Beyond the content of Paul’s attack on the opposing philosophy, we can also recognize all the tell-tale characteristics of a regime of truth in his rhetoric. After all, isn’t Paul engaging in a rather clear act of “constraint” here? Don’t be taken in by this other voice, this dissenting perspective! And doesn’t the passage seem to presuppose some clear “mechanisms” by which Paul distinguishes the truth from falsehood - namely, the final authority of the Christ story and his interpretation of that story? Does not his depiction of the “philosophy” as a “human tradition,” a “human way of thinking” that imposes “human commands and teachings” all assume a certain kind of discourse that has an exclusive claim on truth - namely apostolic discourse? And isn’t it a rather clear implication that while his opponent has a human tradition, Paul’s own apostolic tradition comes with divine sanction and authority? And doesn’t all of this suggest that Paul’s rhetoric is that of an inherently totalizing regime of truth designed to wipe out alterity, delegitimize difference and allow only for the univocal discourse of orthodoxy?

This would be one way of reading this text. And it is the way that is becoming common amongst postmodern biblical critics. For example, Elizabeth Castelli applies Foucault to Paul and discerns that just as modern technologies of

power are based on claims to self-evidence and truth, so also is Paul's discourse (and, by extension, the pseudonymous writings) intended to regulate power relations in the early Christian communities legitimized by claims to apostolic authority and truth.¹⁶

But what about the adherents of the philosophy under attack in this passage? Would a postmodern sensitivity to marginalization and the way in which totality thinking creates deviance lead us to ask different questions regarding the censored voice in this Pauline text?

To what extent have the echoes of other voices in these letters been drowned out simply by being labeled *the opponents*, the biblical scholar's equivalent of the term *other*? To what extent does the term *opponents* connote the normativity of Paul's own discourse? And to what extent does such Pauline commentary become an extension of Paul's own discourse, a testament to its cooptive power, and a repetition of its gesture of exclusion? A Foucauldian reading would attempt a different rendering of the multiple voices within the Pauline corpus. It would attempt to rearticulate competing interpretations of truth in terms other than those of norm and aberration.¹⁷

This seems to be a distinctively postmodern reading strategy. Unmask the power grab involved in the text, deconstruct the normativity of the author's voice and give back legitimate voice to that which has been silenced and marginalized. But this is, I suggest, a facile strategy. To tell us that the term *opponents* connotes the normativity of the writer's discourse isn't all that insightful or creative. *Of course* such language connotes normativity! So what? And we certainly shouldn't be duped into thinking that such a strategy is in the service of hermeneutical peace, respect for the other, and the abandonment of the rhetoric of deviance and

¹⁶ *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox, 1991). See also the summary of Castelli's position in The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 140.

¹⁷ *The Postmodern Bible*, p. 143. Similar sentiments are found in Stephen D. Moore's *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

opponents. What such “reading against the grain”¹⁸ of the text actually accomplishes is a new kind of violence with a new opponent who is deemed to have deviated from another assumed normative stance. The new deviant, the new opponent, is the power grabbing Paul (and the Pauline scriptures) imposing a totalizing vision upon the early Christian community. And the poststructuralist critic will employ all the same rhetorical techniques, assuming the ethical normativity of her own postmodern stance, against Paul as he did against his opponents. If deconstruction is fascinated with the marginal, the repressed and the borderline - with the way in which “deviant modes of thought” are excluded”¹⁹ - then I am not sure that we have made any progress simply by now judging Paul’s thought to be deviant, requiring exclusion from our biblical scholarship and Christian lives. Such readings, I contend, perpetuate the violence.

Perhaps there is a more creative way forward. Rather than myopically applying a hermeneutic of trust to the marginal voice of the “philosophy” under attack in Colossians 2 and a hermeneutic of suspicion to the orthodoxy by which this philosophy is judged, what happens if we apply a Foucauldian critique to both the author of Colossians 2 and to the philosophy itself? Now, of course, the first part of this proposal was easier to execute. We actually do have the text of Colossians 2 to deconstruct. We do not have a text of the philosophy under question. Indeed, we don’t even know what that philosophy was. While there have been various interpretive reconstructions ranging from middle Platonism, to a syncretism of Jewish and Hellenistic mysticisms, to straight up synagogue Judaism, to a synthesis of Judaism with Phrydian-Lyidian folk belief and magic,

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 275. The phrase is used here as a description of ideological criticism, a close postmodern cousin to poststructuralist readings.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 121.

even Clinton Arnold (who argues the last option with the tenacity of a dog with a bone) admits that “precision and clarity is really an impossible task.”²⁰ All that we have is Paul’s attack upon that philosophy. But what happens if we apply Foucault’s description of regimes of truth to the philosophy as we find it here depicted, just as we have applied it to Paul’s rhetoric? The results are amazingly similar.

Like all regimes - all military structures of power - this philosophy is preoccupied with captivity. Hence Paul warns the Colossians to not be taken captive by any deceitful and oppressive regime of truth that parades itself as something other than a mere human tradition. As a regime of truth, the philosophy depends upon deceit for its power. It has to hide the fact that it is a mere human construction, a human tradition. Therefore it “imposes multiple forms of constraint” - do not handle, do not taste, don’t even touch! This philosophy not only “induces regular effects of power,” it is preoccupied with powers, rulers and authorities and employs such power precisely for the purposes of exclusion. The status of those who are “charge with saying what counts as true” is such that they function in the life of the community as self-appointed umpires whose central role seems to be that of condemnation, that of ruling people out! And this philosophy, this regime of truth, has clear “techniques and procedures which are accorded value in the acquisition of truth,” and these are the procedures of ascetic self-abasement (for the creation of docile bodies),²¹ fasting, ecstatic visions. And the point of all of this is to come to

²⁰ *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface Between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), p. 228.

²¹ The rendering of bodies as docile and therefore manipulable is another Foucauldian theme. See Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979). See also Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament*, pp. 108-112 and Elizabeth Castelli, “Interpretations of Power in 1 Corinthians,” *Semeia* 54 (1991): 197-202.

a sharing in the worship of angels, a transcendence beyond the situatedness of material reality, in order to somehow enter into a heavenly realm that relegates all of temporal, bodily existence as mere shadow or appearance compared to the essential reality of a disembodied higher realm.

Upon this reading of the philosophy at Colossae, Paul has good Foucauldian grounds for dismissing this particular regime of truth. But now we have a problem. It would appear that we are faced with two competing, mutually exclusive regimes of truth - Paul's and the one he here dismisses. If this is the case, and if the ethical force of Foucault's critique of such regimes at all rings true to us, then it would seem that a hermeneutic of trust - to say nothing of retrieval! - is impossible for us. But perhaps we can formulate another way of putting the question. Is Paul's gospel a regime of truth in ideological combat with another regime of truth or is there a marked difference between a Foucauldian regime of truth and the "kingdom of the beloved Son" (1.13) proclaimed in this letter?

A parallel question concerned Richard Middleton and I in the second half of our book *Truth is Stranger Than it used to be*; is the biblical metanarrative inherently totalizing, violent and oppressive or are there counter-ideological, antitotalizing dimensions of this grand story that militate against, delegitimize and subvert any ideological, violent, totalizing uses of this narrative. Note that we are not contesting the fact that the biblical metanarrative - and the Pauline epistles! - have been used in totalizing and oppressive ways. The weight of Christian history is too great to attempt any such cover-up.²² What we are asking is whether we might discern counter-ideological tendencies in the biblical tradition that undermine such oppressive readings and praxis.

²² And I suggest that it is the oppressive weight of such a tradition that most postmodern critics are really struggling against and that they then project that tradition back upon the biblical texts.

We discern two such anti-totalizing dimensions or trajectories in the biblical metanarrative. The first of these dimensions consists in a radical sensitivity to suffering which pervades the biblical narrative from exodus (or perhaps even from Genesis 6) to the cross. The second consists in the rooting of the story in God's overarching creational intent which delegitimizes any narrow, partisan use of the story. And these two dimensions, we argued are intrinsic to the biblical metanarrative.²³

From God's decision to make covenant with a creature that had nothing but violence in its heart (Gen. 6), to the story of God knowing the Israelite's pain in Egyptian bondage and the divine commitment to set his people free, to the abrasive tradition of the psalms of lament and the weeping prophets, an "embrace of pain" has characterized the biblical story from the beginning.²⁴ This biblical trajectory is kept alive in the pre- and post-exilic prophets who tell a story not only of a liberating God who hears the cries of a suffering people, but a suffering God pained by the brokenness and infidelity of precisely those people.²⁵ The biblical embrace of pain refuses to cover-up or deny suffering. To use a postmodern metaphor, this biblical trajectory does not make false claims to "presence," but instead highlights "absence" - the absence of God, the absence of justice and shalom. Biblical texts in this trajectory critique the unjust status quo that legitimates itself on the basis of a false presence (notably that of the temple and monarchy), in the name of a God of justice and liberation. And therefore,

²³ *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995, and London: SPCK, 1995), esp. ch. 5.

²⁴ "Embrace of pain" is the way that Walter Brueggemann describes this trajectory of biblical faith. See his programmatic article "A Shape for Old Testament Theology II: Embrace of Pain," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47, 3 (July, 1995): 395-415.

²⁵ Foundational to our analysis is Terence Fretheim's *The Suffering of God Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

this trajectory of pain and suffering serves to delegitimize any ideological use of the biblical story that will cause violence within any kind of exclusionary us/them polarities.²⁶

This leads to the second anti-totalizing dimension of the biblical story. If the biblical story is one that refuses to legitimate violent us/them polarities, then why does it tell us a story of an elect people, chosen out of the rest of humanity as the particular object of God's redemptive concern? Why elect Israel? The answer that rings through the biblical witness is that Israel is chosen to be a light to the nations, the agent of God's reconciliation of all creation and all peoples. This is a wonderful paradox. It is precisely the creation-wide intent of Israel's God that functions as a counter-ideological, anti-totalizing dimension of the biblical story. If this drama has the redemption of all of creation as its focus (notice that the covenant with Noah is with all the earth in Genesis 9), then any violent, ideological, self-justifying ownership of the story - either by nationalistic Jews or sectarian and self-righteous Christians - is, by definition, a perversion of the story, a dramatic dead-end to the plot, that has missed the creationally redemptive point.

To summarize these counter-ideological dimensions of the biblical metanarrative we need to see, first, that a story rooted in and radically attentive to suffering is a story of liberation from violently imposed regimes of truth, not a story that legitimates newly imposed slavery. Second, a story with nothing less than the redemption of all of creation as its focus subverts any narrow, partisan, self-justifying co-option of its message.

²⁶ That such a statement suggests tension within the biblical witness between traditions of exclusion and embrace is simply noted here. Further explication of the meaning of this for inner-biblical interpretation will have to be left for another time.

The question that remains, however, is whether Paul's interpretation of the story in the context of the letter to the Colossians and the conflict with the so-called Colossian philosophy, remains faithful to these counter-ideological trajectories or imposes an exclusionary ideology upon the narrative. It seems to me that both of these counter-ideological dimensions are clearly evident in this epistle.

First, notice that the cross is at the very heart of our text. Commenting on Colossians 2.14-15, Andrew Lincoln notes that,

The powers of evil are defeated not by some overwhelming display of divine power but by the weakness of Christ's death. By all ordinary standards of judgment Christ's crucifixion looks like a victory for the violence of evil powers over God's purposes in this one who was the divine image. He was indicted, stripped, and nailed to the cross in the public humiliation of his death. Yet Colossians can reverse this language because, seen in the light of his resurrection, the death of the victim who has absorbed the destructive forces of the powers, becomes precisely the point at which their domination is decisively brought to an end. Their claims, their accusations, their oppressive and divisive influence have all been subverted by a very different power, the power of the victim on the cross.²⁷

Is there a life and death struggle between two worldviews here? Yes. Does Paul's gospel make large, universalizing, even *total* claims? Yes. Is there a power struggle going on here? Indeed! From the author's point of view this is *the* power struggle of the cosmos! But note how the struggle is won. Not by might versus might. Not by regime overtaking regime, but by sacrificial love absorbing the violence and fury of the powers. N. T. Wright puts it this way: "The cross was not the defeat of *Christ* at the hands of the *powers*: it was the defeat of the powers at the hands - yes, the bleeding hands - of Christ."²⁸ And Miroslav Volf,

²⁷ Andrew Lincoln, *Colossians* New Interpreter's Bible, vol. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon, forthcoming).

²⁸ N. T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 19.

responding to Nietzsche's contention that the cross is evidence of Jesus's inability to enmity, says that rather, the cross bespeaks "the kind of enmity toward all enmity which rejects all enmity's services. Instead of aping the enemy's act of violence and rejection, Christ, the victim who refuses to be defined by the perpetrator, forgives and makes space in himself for the enemy."²⁹ Herein is the radical distinction between regimes of truth and the kingdom of the beloved Son.

But there is a second counter-ideological dimension to the gospel - its creational scope. And here we see that Paul understands fully the creation wide scope of redemption. The hymn of 1.15-20 is foundational to the critique of the deceitful philosophy in chapter 2. What is wrong with this philosophy? Its dualistic devaluation of the body and imposition of strict ascetic regulations in order to transcend to a heavenly realm of spirit misses the creational point of redemption. And its idolatrous submission to the various power structures of the universe fails to recognize that even the thrones, dominions, rules and powers are created in, through and for Christ. And the hymn culminates precisely by bringing together these two counter-ideological dimensions of the biblical metanarrative. "And through him God was pleased to reconcile *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven [creational scope], making peace through the *blood of his cross* [embrace of pain]." Here is a vision of radical, creation-wide inclusiveness of the kingdom in contrast to the dismissive exclusiveness of the regime. All things are to be reconciled - *even* the thrones, dominions, rulers and authorities that put Christ on the cross and continue to wreck havoc over human life.

²⁹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), p. 126.

While the Colossian regime is characterized by exclusion and disqualification, this gospel engenders embrace and forgiveness in which there is no longer Gentile or Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free (3.11). All ethnic, religious, social and economic barriers are broken down. The universal claim that “Christ is all and in all” is not in the service of violent marginalization, but redemptive inclusion.

It is precisely the universality of a worldview’s claim - its appeal to the broadest horizon of reference conceivable - that makes it applicable to all domains of life. Consequently, a worldview (*Weltanschauung*) is only as good as the praxis or way of life (*Lebenswelt*) that it engenders. That is why, in the paraenetic discourse of this epistle, Paul’s critique of the Colossian philosophy is less concerned with matters of theory and doctrine and more concerned with praxis. Rather than debating the ontological nature of the “powers,” Paul addresses the tyrannical hold that these forces have over the life of the community. How does he know that this philosophy is deceitful (2.8), a mere human tradition (2.8, 18, 22), a sham of wisdom (2.23) and does not hold fast to the head who is Christ (2.19)? Because this philosophy imposes an ascetic regime of exclusion that is inconsistent with everything we know about Christ, the story of redemption and a biblical understanding of creation. But this means that the proof of the truth of the gospel that Paul proclaims is not in the power of his rhetoric against the competition, but in the “fruit” that such truth bears in the life of the community (1.6, 10). Therefore the apologetic of Colossians 2 is incomplete without the moral exhortation of Colossians 3. The “philosophy” will always be a plausible alternative (2.4) so long as the truth of the gospel is not manifest in the life of the community.

What was true of an ancient community of Christian believers struggling with a powerful and appealing philosophy is also true for Christians in a

postmodern context. Arguments that deconstruct the regimes of truth at work in the late modern culture of global capitalism are indispensable. So also is a deeper understanding of the counter-ideological force of the biblical tradition. But such arguments are no guarantee that the biblical metanarrative will not be co-opted for ideological purposes, nor do arguments prove the truth of the gospel. Only the non-ideological, embracing, forgiving and shalom-filled life of a dynamic Christian community formed by the story of Jesus will prove the gospel to be true and render the alternatives fundamentally implausible.