

Colossians

- An Exhortation for Unity in Love

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

“Above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful”
(Colossians 3:14-15)

According to Smith’s Bible Dictionary, Colosse was “... a city in the upper part of the basin of the Maender, on one of its affluents, named the Lycus. Hierapolis and Laodicea were in it’s immediate neighbourhood (Col 2:1, 4:13,15,16; see Rev 1:11, 3:14)”. The inhabitants of that place, being but pagan idolaters, indulged in many practices which are abominable in the sight of God, as we learn from Paul’s inspired description of the believers in their unenlightened state: “fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness which is idolatry ... in the which ye also walked sometime, when ye lived in them” (3:7). And in speaking of their position before the Most High God whilst indulging in this kind of behaviour, he described them as “you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works” (1:21).

But it was to such alienated and wicked men, who were yet dead in their sins (2:13) that the seed of the “word of the truth of the Gospel” was sown by Epaphras (Col 1:7), the founding member of the Ecclesia (4:2). If he were a native of the area, Epaphras would probably have received the word himself from the preaching of Paul in Phrygia (Acts 16:6, 18:23), and brought it back to his hometown for the benefit of those who had ears to hear. Alternatively, he may have been a disciple himself preaching the Word in that area, and upon seeing the response, settled there to strengthen and edify the new ecclesia. But be that as it may, once sown, the seed found good ground in the hearts of those who heard and understood it (Mat 13:23), where it readily germinated and flourished. Whole households were convinced of the Truth - husbands, wives and their children (3:18-21), with masters and their servants (3:22-4:1). The seed quickly took root in them, for the Apostle described how it: “bringeth forth fruit ... since the day ye heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth” (Col 1:6, cp Luke 8:15). So it was, that the Ecclesia at Colosse was comprised of a cross-section of society embracing young and old, male and female, bondslaves and freemen yet all united in a common zeal and enthusiasm for the Truth of the Gospel - all “one in Christ Jesus” (cp Gal 3:28).

THE ECCLESIA IN PHILEMON’S HOUSE?

There is evidence to suggest that these brethren and sisters were those referred to by Paul to Philemon as “the ecclesia in thy house” (Philemon 1:2). The epistle to Philemon was also addressed to a disciple called Archippus (Phil 1:2), who was a member of Colosse Ecclesia (Col 4:17) - but in addition to this, the epistle to Philemon deals with the return of Onesimus, a runaway slave - who also became a member of the Colossians (Col 4:9). And it is significant that in the latter part of Colossians, Paul was inspired to give specific guidance to both slaves and their masters, and how they ought to behave towards one another. Thus it would appear, that the Epistle to Philemon was written to exhort Onesimus’ master to receive him back - now as a brother - and Colossians follows on from this, providing further guidance when the runaway slave had been reconciled to Philemon, and moreover had been accepted into the Ecclesia, which met in his house.

FAITH AND LOVE

The pre-eminent characteristics of the saints at Colosse which gave rise to so much joy for the Apostle, were faith and love: “We give thanks to God and the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints” (1:4). These 2 unifying principles of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22) are those qualities which bind the many members into a single, united body. Having received the word of Truth, the believers “all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect (complete) man” (Eph 4:13). And “speaking the Truth in Love”, this “complete man” may “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love” (Eph 4:15,16 RSV).

As we show in another article, it is faith in the revealed Truth of God, that draws men from a variety of backgrounds and circumstances to be gathered together in a common hope. But it is when the individual members have love towards each other, that these believers become tightly bound together, as a single conglomerate whole Body. So it is, that the apostle exhorted the Colossians: “above all these things put on charity (love), which is the bond of perfectness” (Col 3:14), or as the

RSV has it, “love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony”. Love is the common “bond” (“a joint tie, i.e. ligament, uniting principle” - Strong) which harmonises everything, uniting all members, as ligaments holding the body together, in a mutual appreciation of things Divine. Thus it is, that the first Chapter of Colossians is devoted to the theme of what we might call, “the united body of Christ” - how the believers have been “delivered ... from the power of darkness, and ... translated into the kingdom of his dear son” in prospect (Col 1:14, cp Rom 4:17), to become united as a single body, in which ultimately, the fullness of God might dwell (Eph 3:19).

THE COMPLETENESS OF THE UNITED BODY OF CHRIST

But Chapter 2 continues on this theme, emphasizing the completeness of this united body: “in him (that is, Christ) dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power” (v 9). The fullness, or completeness of God dwells in Christ, who is “the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person” (Heb 1:3) and we, being baptized into him (v 12) ought also to be complete in him. Nothing else needs to be added, for any deficiency (and there are many) in the constituent members thereof are forgiven, because of the perfection of their Master with whom they are at one, being “knit together in love” (v 2), in a mutual acceptance of the Gospel of Truth.

But there were those who sought to impose the ordinances of the Law to the Gospel. These Judaisers comprised the Apostasy in Paul’s day, and sought to add to the Gospel, by imposing a burden which neither they, nor previous generations could not bear (Acts 15:10). Thus it was, that as the apostle exhorted the Galatians, the believers were to “stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Gal 5:1).

THE TRADITIONS OF THE JUDAISERS

Speaking of the doctrines of the Judaisers, the Apostle warned: “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ” (2:8). The fact that what they taught was a “vain deceit”, and “the tradition of men” demonstrated the point that what was being added to the Gospel was not even the Mosaic Law, rather a corrupt system of man’s making, which passed for it. The Lord Jesus spoke similar words, citing the prophecy of Isaiah: “Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men, for laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men ... full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition” (Mark 7:6-9). So it was, that these men added to the word of God in two ways, firstly they laid aside and rejected the precepts of the Law, substituting their own traditions in it’s place, then secondly, they sought to add that pseudo-Law to the Gospel of Christ. How much like the Churches of our day this is - to deny fundamental truths of Scripture, and put in their place the vanities of human philosophy.

But Paul’s inspired argument demonstrates that because the Body is Complete in Christ, there is no need for any further addition, whether it be the actual Mosaic Law, or anything else. Being baptized into Christ, the believers are redeemed from the curse which the Law brought, for the Lord has provided a way of forgiveness in, “blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross” (2:14). Thus, the exhortation to the Colossians, equally applicable to our circumstance, was: “as ye have therefore received Christ Jesus our Lord, so walk ye in him: rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught ...” (Col 2:7). We must hold fast to the ways of Truth we have been taught, and let no man beguile us into detracting from, or adding to the revealed Gospel message by the vain philosophies of man.

FAITH MUST BE MANIFESTED IN WORKS

But vital though the maintenance of pure doctrine is, to merely acknowledge the principles of the Truth is not in itself good enough. Faith, unless it be manifested in works “is dead, being alone” (Jas 2:17). The Way of Life is comprised, not simply of doctrines to be believed, but also principles to be practised in daily life - principles which are enshrined in those doctrines - and this is the theme of the latter part of the Epistle. When we come to a knowledge of the Truth, that

knowledge should so influence our outlook in life, that our whole desire is to do what our Lord requires. That desire finds expression, initially in submitting to Baptism, in enacting our commitment to following the example of our Lord, in crucifying the flesh with the affections and lusts thereof (Gal 5:24). In Baptism, we wholly devote ourselves to the Lord as a “living sacrifice” (Rom 12:1), offered upon the foundation of what has already been accomplished in the Christ-altar (Heb 13:10,15) for us. But Baptism is just the beginning. For having risen up from the watery grave, all our inclinations must be heavenward, (cp Eccl 4:21) to the things of God. Thus, the Apostle exhorts: “If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God” (3:1). And again, “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you ...” (Col 3:5 RSV).

And whilst this seeking of heavenly things is vital for our individual salvation, it is also essential for the spiritual well being of the whole Body. Unless the various members are joined both in their affections and in their implementation of the principles of Scripture in everyday life, they cannot be truly united. And perhaps the greatest test of whether the individual members are truly at one in this regard, is seen not so much in our behaviour and conduct before the unbelievers (important though that be), but in our relations with each other. This is the main thrust of what the Paul teaches in Chapter 3 - to be truly united in fellowship, the believers must not manifest earthly behaviour towards each other, but rather mirror the character of the one they have embraced in baptism: “But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; and have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him” (3:8-10).

And how much does today’s generation need the wise counsel of the inspired Apostle! Oh that brethren would heed his exhortation today - “forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye” (Col 3:13). One often wonders how many ecclesial difficulties and differences might have been healed simply by a little more forbearance, and a little more forgiveness. The common tendency, in disputes of any kind, is to find fault with the one (or ones) with whom we are at disagreement - and in the case of quarrels between brethren, most commonly over petty matters of minor significance, the natural tendency is to speak of those faults to others, invoking them to “take sides”, if not in the actual debate, in agreeing with our denigration of the other party. Thus are sown the seeds of discord (Prov 6:19), which fester and grow in men’s hearts, inevitably resulting in divisions and strifes (Jas 4:1), which tear apart the joyful unity previously experienced.

Personal differences of this kind are in an entirely different category to those affronts to the truth caused by the introduction of foreign doctrines and practices being propagated by those who believe another Gospel (Gal 1:6-8). In these cases, the offence is not so much against us, as against the Lord God Himself, His Son, and the Word which they both spake. In this case, the Faith must be earnestly contended for (Jude 3) at all costs.

Any personal differences must take second place, if any place at all in this event, for the contention here is not for self acquittal, or the condemnation of others - but the preservation of the Way of Life. But in all other cases, the wise will exercise discretion, manifesting fervent love among themselves, “for love shall cover the multitude of sins” (1Pet 4:8). For the sake of the unity of the body, unless they are of a fundamentally important nature (where different procedures apply: see Mat 18:15-17) personal differences must be forgotten, however difficult that might be, for love and forgiveness to be exercised, even as Christ forgave us - and let us never forget that “in due time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom 5:6), for “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

We find then, that the Lord’s Epistle through Paul to the Colossians is both highly structured, and progressive. It begins with the believer’s acceptance of the Word, exhorting their separation from the “power of darkness”, in pledging allegiance to a Kingdom yet future. But then it speaks of the ideal unity of the body of Believers, having figuratively died together in Baptism, that they might also live together, striving together in unity and love, for the glorious Hope which they share. It warns them to be on their guard against the addition of the fables of men to the Gospel of Christ, yet exhorts them to allow their common zeal and love for the holy things of God to find the highest expression in their relationships one with another, as brethren of the One who gave his all for their sakes. But for the Body of believers walking as one man along the way of life, there is something yet remaining - the preaching of the Truth to others, that they also might be called out to journey with them to the coming Kingdom.

This is the final exhortation of Chapter 4, an appeal for the believers to pray for a “door of utterance”, that the Gospel might continue to be preached: “Continue in prayer … praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds: That I might make it manifest, as I ought to speak”. Maybe, this is an aspect of our preaching activities which can so easily be neglected. It is not simply the case that we must preach when the occasion happens to arise - we ought to be actively praying for a door of opportunity to be opened. We should pray for the circumstances in which others might hear the words of Truth being spoken - an activity in which all can be engaged. Though some may be severely hampered by physical infirmities, they are still able to pray. Let them, therefore pray for a door of utterance for others more physically active than they. Let them give encouragement and support to others in whatever small way they can, but let them also pray for the Father’s blessing, that the work of their fellow labourers might bear fruit - those who do this truly reflect the unity of fellowship.

But in these words of the Apostle, we see the spirit of one who wholly gave himself to the service of Christ, and the ministering to the Body. Despite being in times of immense hardship - “in bonds” for Christ’s sake, his central concern was not upon the restrictions placed upon himself, but rather that being imprisoned, the preaching of the Gospel might be hindered. Even in these straitened circumstances, he recognised that he “ought to speak” the word, whenever the occasion arose, and exhorted the Colossians to pray that such an opportunity may come, as it duly did. Though separated by distance, they were to be united in prayers and thoughts - the true spirit of unity in love.

This then, forms the main theme of Paul’s inspired Epistle to the Colossians, an appeal for separation from the world, and harmony amongst the Body, that being so united the believers might seek to draw others into the glorious hope they share. And for all others who also seek to heed this exhortation, there remains the same reward, “the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the Gose” (Col 1:5). Let us then, having received the seed of the Word, as did the Colossians, allow it to grow in us, to bring forth fruits pleasing to the Lord, that by His Grace, we might have a hope of a future inheritance in the coming Kingdom of God.

LESSONS FROM THE DELIVERANCE OF ISRAEL

When we come to reflect upon the varied methods through which the Spirit instructs us by The Word, one of the most important features to be recognised is the example of God’s past dealings with Israel. So the Apostle wrote: “Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples, and they are written for our admonition … wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1Cor 10:12). The modern tendency, when considering Israel’s rather turbulent past, is simply to give scathing criticism for their failures, and (less frequently), commendation for their times of obedience. Yet to do this really misses the point of why the Eternal Creator has preserved such a record of His dealings with them. It is not the Divine intention for us to stand as judges over those of bygone ages, but rather that we might learn from their examples and experiences - whether they be good or bad. Upon reflection of their failings, we are encouraged to “take heed”, lest we also “fall after the same example of unbelief” (Heb 4:6). And upon reflection of the longsuffering and mercy of the Almighty - extended to them even in their greatest failings, we can “have hope” that despite our personal weaknesses, if we but have faith - if we truly believe - that the same longsuffering might be extended to us also: “for whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (Rom 15:4). So it is, that rather than to simply provide lists of commandments, or “bullet points” defining principles, it has so pleased the Lord Almighty to instruct his people by presenting examples both of faithfulness and unfaithfulness for them to consider, and be instructed.

Turning our attention more particularly to the first Chapter of Colossians, we find that this is the method employed by the Spirit through Paul, in describing the believer’s hope of a promised inheritance. The exhortation is given for the ecclesia to rejoice, “giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear son” (Col 1:13). Here, the comparison appears to be with the deliverance of the Children of Israel from another “power of darkness” - the strength of Egypt, which although being a centre of worldly wisdom and light, was in fact in the depth of Spiritual darkness (cp Mat 6:23). Under Moses, the people were brought out from under this “power”, as “a nation from the midst of another nation” (Deut 4:34), that they might

commence their journey to the promised Kingdom - to be “partakers of the inheritance” promised to their Fathers.

AN EXAMPLE OF SEPARATION

In being delivered from the power of Egypt through a typical baptism “unto Moses” (1Cor 10:2), Israel became a dramatic example of separation. The parting of the Red Sea, in forming their waters of baptism, through which they passed in faith (Heb 11:29), effected their severance from the faithless Egyptians who perished in their attempt to pass through the same waters. On the one side were the faithful, on their journey to the promised Kingdom, and on the other, the idolatry of Egypt, the death of the firstborn, and the destruction of those who sought the hurt of God’s People. The application of these “ensamples” to our circumstance is clear. Just as Israel were delivered through Divine visitation (Ex 3:16) as “a nation from the midst of another nation” (Deut 4:34), even so the Lord “did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for His Name (Acts 15:14). And just as through baptismal waters of the Red Sea, the power of Egyptian darkness perished to provide redemption for the faithful, even so obedient believers in Christ, can be redeemed from the power of Sin, through Baptism. The Lord Jesus, as the “captain of salvation” destroyed that which has the power of death (Heb 2:14) in himself, in his Sacrifice, that those who become “buried with him in baptism” (Col 2:12), might be freed from its hold. Being redeemed by his blood, his brethren become no longer servants to sin, but in passing through the waters, their “old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” (Rom 6:6, cp Gal 5:24). And “being made free from sin”, they become “the servants of righteousness” (Rom 6:15-23), leaving behind a world of evil, death and destruction, that they might journey towards the promised Kingdom.

But in contrast with the Israelites, who left behind the destruction of the Egyptian firstborn - even the son of Pharaoh himself (Ex 12:20), the Apostle describes to the Colossians how the “saints in light” have left the benighted world of iniquity behind to join themselves to Yahweh’s Firstborn, who He raised up from the dead. He is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature … he is the head of the body, the ecclesia: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence” (Col 1:15,18). The slaying of the Firstborn became the means of Israel’s redemption, as in their anguish and mourning, the Egyptians allowed them to leave. It was following the death of his Firstborn that even Pharaoh relented, and permitted them to depart from bondage into liberty. Even so, by the death of Yahweh’s Firstborn, even His Only Begotten Son, and by his perfect Passover offering (1Cor 5:7), our deliverance can be effected - the great contrast being that Yahweh’s Firstborn was raised from the dead victorious, “having spoiled principalities and powers” (Col 2:15) that other sons might follow, being partakers of his victory.

MANNA IN THE WILDERNESS

But although the people were delivered from Egypt, their troubles were not yet over, for in order to reach their promised inheritance they had to pass through “the wilderness, through a land of deserts and of pits, through a land of drought, and of the shadow of death, through a land that no man passed through, and where no man dwelt” (Jer 2:6). It was not the purpose of their Redeemer to place them in their land immediately - they had to travel towards it in faith, and so learn to trust, and believe in Him. Even so, the life of a believer, as he journeys along the “narrow way” to the Kingdom is not always easy. He is not automatically “saved”, despite the claims of some, but has a journey to endure - maybe longer for some than others, according to the Wisdom of the Almighty. He travels through a spiritual wilderness, having to face many trials, for “many are the afflictions of the righteous” (Ps 24:19), to teach them faith and obedience.

In the case of the Mosaic “ecclesia in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38), it became necessary for provision to be made to meet their physical needs - nourishment in the desert, to provide for the temporal needs of the situation. But also, a continual blessing to give hope and assurance that their Redeemer would remain with them along the treacherous journey which lay ahead until they reached their promised haven. The provision of Manna fulfilled both requirements. The words of the Lord came to Moses: “Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day …” (Ex 16:4). And when the people had gathered their “certain rate”, they found it to be wholly sufficient for their needs - a token declaring the power of Israel’s God “… in the morning ye shall be filled with bread: and ye shall know that I am Yahweh your God” (Ex 16:12). So it was, that Israel were taught of their God through the miraculous provisions he made for their welfare - originating “from heaven” for them.

And in the case of the ecclesia in the modern day “wilderness”, a similar need of spiritual sustenance and nourishment remains, a need amply satisfied with the “bread of God” which “cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world” (Jno 6:33). This spiritual bread is the Lord Jesus himself, in whom all our hopes and expectations rest, and whose words sustain and strengthen the weary traveller: “I am that bread of life … the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life (v 48,63). And in speaking of that Word of Life, particularly the hope it contains for those who partake of it, the Apostle taught the Colossians of: “the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the Word of the truth of the Gospel” (Col 1:5). So just as the “ecclesia in the wilderness” had physical nourishment which was said to be rained “from heaven for you”, so the believers hope is said to be in heaven, (that is, in the Lord Jesus who is in heaven), yet it came to them after his ascension through the Word preached by his Apostles. And just as the manna “filled” the people, enabling them to “know” the power of their God, so it is, that upon partaking of the “word of the truth”, we find it to be sufficient for all our needs. We become “filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding … increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col 1:9,10). There is then, a powerful exhortation for us in the example of Israel - just as they gathered in the Manna daily, that they might be “filled” and satisfied by it, so the believer ought to gather in daily the wisdom of the Word, that being so filled we might be strengthened further in our knowledge and appreciation of the Great Provider. Those who neglect this vital duty can only become spiritually weak and malnourished, and the probability of their reaching the Land of Promise will be no greater than a starving Israelite who couldn’t make time to collect and eat the Manna.

MANNA WHICH WAS “LAID UP”

But the Spirit through Paul informed the Colossians that their hope was “laid up for you in heaven”. This is most instructive, as there were two types of Manna which were said to be “laid up”. We remember that although the manna was to be collected daily, on the 6th day, double was to be collected. The people were thus commanded, “Tomorrow is the Rest of the Holy Sabbath unto Yahweh … that which remaineth over, lay up for you to be kept until the morning. And they laid it up till the morning, as Moses bade; and it did not stink, neither was there any worm therein” (Ex 16:23-24). This Manna did not corrupt on the Sabbath. Thus, it speaks of incorruptibility on the 7th day, and points forward to the 7th millennial “day” of rest, when the saints shall “put on incorruption”, that they might inherit the Kingdom of God. This is the glorious hope which we have “laid up” for us - the hope of eternal life in God’s kingdom.

But we read also of another sort of manna which was “laid up”. “Moses said unto Aaron, take a pot, and put an omer full of Manna therein, and lay it up before Yahweh, to be kept for your generations” (Ex 16:23). This Manna never corrupted, and was laid up before Yahweh, in the Ark, in the Holy Place of the Tabernacle. Thus, it speaks of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, after being raised incorruptible, has entered into the Most Holy, even Heaven itself, “now to appear in the presence of God for us (Heb 9:35). This is the hope we have which is “laid up … in Heaven” - The Lord Jesus Christ who appears in the Divine Presence. As we read in Colossians 3:3-4: “For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory”. Our “life”, that is, the prospect of Eternal life, is hid with the Lord in Heaven. But when He returns, we shall be partakers of this hidden life, as it is written, “to him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden Manna …” (Rev 2:17).

ENTRY INTO THE PROMISED INHERITANCE

The inspired writer to the Hebrews, in drawing upon Israel’s example of rebelliousness in the wilderness gave the exhortation: “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the Living God … for some, when they had heard did provoke: howbeit not all that came out of Egypt by Moses” (Heb 3:16). The record of Numbers 14 recounts the faithlessness on the part of the majority to continue their warfare against the powers of sin in order to take possession of their inheritance. Yet, “not all” that came out of Egypt had an evil heart of unbelief, for two men, Joshua and Caleb (significantly a Jew and a Gentile!) did believe, and had the courage to obey the voice of their God. Out of the whole generation over 20 years of age, (Num 14:29) who left Egypt, only these two individuals remained steadfast to the end, and were permitted to enter the land - for all others, it was decreed, “in this wilderness they shall be consumed, and there they shall die” (Num 14:35). Truly it was, that many were called out, yet few were chosen.

Returning to Colossians chapter 1, we find that there the Apostle speaks of the response of the faithful in terms which are highly reminiscent of this faithful pair. He speaks of “the word of the

truth of the Gospel; which is come unto you, as it is in all the world; and bringeth forth fruit, as it doth also in you, since the day ye heard of it" (Col 1:5,6). So we find that the token of faith brought forth by the faithful, is the bringing forth of fruit in response to the word coming to them. And in Numbers 14, we find this to be the case of the two faithful spies.

Of the twelve who were sent by Moses at God's command to spy out the land (Num 13:2), ten "brought up an evil report of the land which they had searched unto the children of Israel, saying, The land, through which we have gone to search it, is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof; and all the people that we saw in it are men of a great stature" (Num 13:32). But the two remaining (who we may suppose were Joshua and Caleb), in contrast to this brought forth fruit: "they came unto the brook of Eshcol, and cut down from thence a branch with one cluster of grapes, and they bare it between two upon a staff; and they brought of the pomegranates, and of the figs ... and they went and came to Moses and Aaron, and to all the congregation of Israel, and brought back word unto them, and unto all the congregation, and shewed them the fruit of the land" (v23,26, cp Deut 1:25). So it was that, just as Epaphras brought forth the word of hope to the Colossians, even so, Joshua and Caleb "brought back word" to Israel, of the prosperity of the land - blessed by the Lord in preparation for their entry. And just as those with ears to hear at Colosse brought forth fruit; even so these men, in demonstrating what Israel's response should have been, brought forth the fruit of the land as a token of their belief, and as an example of what was laid up in store for them. Interestingly in this regard, the fruit brought back was the "firststripe grapes" (Num 13:20), even as the Lord Jesus, being a living example of what the Kingdom will bring is the "firstborn", or as the Apostle wrote to the Corinthians: "Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming" (1Cor 15:23).

Israel then, in receiving this "word" of hope and prosperity, ought to have themselves "brought forth fruit" to the Glory of God - yet they did not, but rather fell, providing us an example of unbelief. But Joshua and Caleb were both men of faith. The fruitfulness of the land they saw gave them a very real vision of the inheritance which would truly be theirs if they would "believe" that it was so. So it was, that forty years later, when "the children of disobedience" (cp Col 3:6) had perished in the wilderness, Caleb approached Joshua that he might receive his inheritance, "Moses sware on that day, saying, Surely the land whereon thy feet have trodden shall be thine inheritance, and thy children's for ever, because thou hast wholly followed Yahweh my God ... Now therefore, give me this mountain, whereof Yahweh spake in that day how the Anakims were there, and that the cities were great and fenced: if so be Yahweh will be with me, then I shall be able to drive them out, as Yahweh said. And Joshua blessed him, and gave unto Caleb the son of Jephunneh Hebron for an inheritance" (Josh 14:9,12-13).

In conclusion then, we find that in focussing upon our redemption and separation from "the power of darkness" to become "partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light" (Col 1:12,13), this first Chapter of Colossians draws our attention back to God's dealings with his people of old. We must therefore look to Israel as our example. In separating ourselves from the Egyptian darkness of the world around us, we must ensure that our severance from the World be as distinct as that of Israel, having passed through the baptismal waters of the Red Sea. And receiving daily the spiritual nourishment of our Redeemer's providing, we can walk towards our inheritance with the faith of Caleb, knowing that if Yahweh be with us, if we wage war on the things of the flesh, the inheritance will be ours. The victory has already been won by the greater Joshua - the inheritance is guaranteed. The question remains therefore, will we follow the example of the "children of disobedience" whose carcasses fell in the wilderness, or will we be like the minority who believed? The choice is entirely ours.

Moses made reference to both wisdom and understanding. The Book of Proverbs proclaims that the "fear of Yahweh is the firstfruits of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7); and Job adds his witness by stating: "Behold the fear of Yahweh, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding" (Job 28:28). Hence, adds Proverbs: "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom, and with all thy getting, get understanding" (Prov. 4:7).

(HP Mansfield, The Christadelphian Expositor

JESUS CHRIST - “THE FIRSTBORN OF EVERY CREATURE”

It is one of the unfortunate features of our age, that certain passages of Scripture are examined most frequently against a background of controversy. It is inevitable that the Christadelphian will find him/herself in conversation with those of other persuasions, who believe the standard church fables, such as the immortality of the Soul, the existence of the personal Devil, the Trinity, and the Pre-existence of Christ. And in order to give a semblance of support for their notions, these people (many of them sincere in their own convictions, we have no doubt), take hold of certain “stock” passages which, to them, give evidence for what they say, presenting them to us to “prove” their point. Take for instance, the Thief on the Cross, used to “prove” the immortality of the Soul, the Temptations of Christ, to “prove” the existence of a personal Devil, etc. And likewise, we form our own “stock” answers to rebuff the claims, to demonstrate that in so using those Scriptures, our acquaintances are in fact, wresting them to their own destruction (2Pet 3:16). Now this is all well and good when speaking to such, for we can form standard arguments to refute their theories, that we might enlighten them to the Truth. But the problem arises, when we become so accustomed to our own “stock” answers, that we begin to always look upon those passages in that light. For instance, instead of arguing about the punctuation of the Lord’s response to the Repentant Thief, how often do we stand back to behold this man’s words - which comprises one of the most condensed statements of Faith in all of Scripture? How often do we reflect upon the Scripture uses of the term “devil”, to understand why the Spirit chose to speak in this way - and what we are being taught by it?

Another case in point is the latter part of the 1st Chapter to the Colossians, one of the most frequently cited passages for Trinitarians, speaking of the Lord Jesus: “who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: for by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: and he is before all things, and by him all things consist” (Col 1:15-17). Here, it is contended, is proof to show that the Lord Jesus is God, that he is the Creator of all things; and that therefore, he existed before the Creation of the world. But in response, we need not just to be able to regurgitate standard replies, to rebuff this theory, but to also to appreciate the real beauty of what these verses are actually designed to teach us.

THE STATUS OF “FIRSTBORN”

To begin with, it is easy to prove that these verses are not speaking literally. Jesus is said to be the “firstborn of every creature”. Taken literally, being the “firstborn” - who gave birth to him? By citing this passage, and presenting a literal interpretation, the Trinitarian must concede that the pre-existent Jesus was “born first”, before all creatures, which suggests he must have had a pre-existent mother! Again, is he literally the firstborn of “every creature”? Of the beasts of the field, the fishes in the sea, and the fowl of the air - is he their firstborn? To affirm such would be nonsense - how absurd it would be to place the Lord Jesus as being both the firstborn of the animal creation - and their Creator! But away with such absurdities, What do the Scriptures teach?

It is true that the Word shows how the Lord Jesus, being both Son of God, and Son of Mankind, was literally born through Mary, but that is not the birth being alluded to here. This birth, is something which elevated the Lord to the status of Firstborn, which his natural birth did not - he is the “only begotten Son” (Jno 3:16) of God, not the first begotten. But there was another “birth” which our Lord experienced - an emergence from the “womb of the morning” (Ps 110:3), or the grave - life from the dead. The Spirit of Christ in David thus wrote: “my substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them” (Ps 139:15,16). And again, in speaking of the promises made to the fathers, the Apostle Paul taught “God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second psalm Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee” (Acts 13:33). So it was, that on the day of resurrection the Lord Almighty is said to have “begotten” His Son - that is, raised him up out of the bowels of the earth, to be “the Firstborn from the dead” (Col 1:18).

The Lord Jesus then, was not naturally born as a “firstborn”, but was made such by virtue of his being the first to emerge from the grave to be given Immortality. It is a position of His Father’s

appointing, rather than a biological statement of fact. Thus it was prophesied: “He shall cry unto me, Thou art my father, my God, and the rock of my salvation. Also I will make him my firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth” (Ps 89:27).

The Lord Jesus, the Apostle informs us, is “the firstborn of every creature”. The fact of him being the firstborn is suggestive that other sons are to follow - and the fact of him being the firstborn of every creature, suggests that the Exalted Lord is the head of a New Creation. Not a new planet earth, with new oceans, and new marine, animal and bird life, but a new creation of Christ’s brethren, being “born of the Spirit” (Jno 3:5,6), to be “the children of God, being the children of the resurrection” (Luke 20:36). In the days of the Apostles, the Gospel “was preached unto every creature which is under heaven” (Col 1:23), that is, to those who had ears to hear, under the existing constitution of things. And those “creatures”, who hearkened to the word thus preached, were thereby introduced into a new state of affairs, the opportunity to separate themselves from the mortal, sinful sons of Adam, to become members of a new, ultimately, Immortal Family, with Christ at the Head.

Adam was the “firstborn” of the Human Race, through whose offence, all mankind inherit a dying, sinful, condemned nature. But the Lord Jesus overcame that nature, destroying Sin in death, that he might become a new Adam, “the Last Adam” through resurrection to glory: “so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening Spirit ... The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from Heaven” (1Cor 15:45,47). This being so, those who join themselves to the family of the “last Adam”, through a typical burial (Rom 6:4) and rebirth (Jno 3:3,5) in Baptism become New Creatures (Gal 6:15), as it is written, “if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new” (2Cor 5:17). They become “renewed in knowledge” (Col 3:10), having been begotten “by the word” that they “should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures” (Jas 1:18).

In Psalm 89, we read that in being made Yahweh’s first Immortal Son, the Lord Jesus was elevated to be “higher than the kings of the earth”, an aspect of the Lord’s present status which is examined elsewhere in this issue. This same point is made by the Apostle to the Ephesians, speaking of how Yahweh “raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come” (Eph 1:21). There are then, principalities, powers, and a dominion in the Age to Come, over which the Lord Jesus will be placed - and this is what is being referred to in Colossians, “by him were all things created ... Whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him: and for him” (Col 1:16).

Those who take this passage as literally referring to a pre-existent Christ creating the dominions, principalities and powers of the present Creation really do present themselves with immense difficulties. Did the Lord Jesus “Create” the dominion and principality of Rome, which crucified him? True it is, that “the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will” (Dan 4:17), but nowhere in Scripture do we read of a pre-existent Christ, let alone one who created the power which executed him. No, the Creation of which the Apostle speaks, is the New Creation of which the Lord Jesus himself is the Firstborn. He is to be the future King over that Creation, and it will be he who appoints thrones, authorities and powers, for his brethren to reign with him. And such is the certainty of these events taking place, that “God who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were” (Rom 4:17), spoke these words through Paul in the present tense. So it was that John saw the immortal saints in his Apocalyptic visions rendering praise to their Lord “Thou are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created” (Rev 4:11).

THE BLOOD OF CHRIST - THE BASIS FOR RECONCILIATION AND UNITY

“You, that were sometimes alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death” (Colossians 1:21,22)

In our introductory article, we saw how the first Chapter of Colossians introduces us to the theme of the Body of Christ - how the individual believers ought to be united as a single conglomerate whole by a mutual faith and love in things divine. But this latter part of the chapter also describes how that the real basis for peace and fellowship is peace with the Lord Almighty first - the unity of believers follows after, as a natural consequence of this. Speaking of the Lord Jesus, the Apostle describes how the Father has “made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself” (Col 1:20). Yet it is one of the bitter perversities of the human mind, that the subject of the Atonement - the very means used by the Father to make peace - is used by many today as a source of disunity and strife. Ever since the days of Robert Roberts - yea, before this, even the times of the Apostles (1Jno 4:2,3), there have been those who have sought to bring in new theories to explain the Atoning work of our Lord - and with them, new controversies, and new divisions.

But why is there so much strife over such a vital, elementary first principle of our Faith? The blood of Christ is the very means of our redemption - it is, in Scriptural terms, the whole basis of peace, not disharmony, as the chapter under consideration describes. But it is a Truth that: “the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: nether can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1Cor 2:14). The provision of the only Begotten Son of the Most High God, as well as being the supreme expression of Divine Love and Mercy is also the supreme expression of Divine Wisdom (1Cor 1:24), something which is naturally at enmity with the Carnal Mind; and therefore hard for the natural man to accept. The wisdom of God in providing the Lord Jesus is too simple for the wise of this world - it is foolishness in their sight (1Cor 1:18), hence they perceive a need to devise new theories - which in turn create new divisions. But true wisdom is to disregard the theories of men; and behold the simplicity of the Truth as revealed in Scripture, for only then can the unifying power of the Sacrifice of Christ be permitted to exercise its full influence over us.

RECONCILIATION - FOR BOTH JEW AND GENTILE

The Blood of Christ then, is the basis of reconciliation between man and God - and that in more than one sense. The Lord Jesus died “for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament” (Heb 9:15), that those Israelites who had become separated from Yahweh by their iniquities (Is 59:2) might find peace with Him once more. But the efficacy of the Lord’s sacrifice is not limited to Jews only, for as the Yahweh spake concerning him: “It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the desolations of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the ends of the earth” (Is 49:6). And as Paul spake unto the Gentiles at Colosse: “you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled” (Col 1:21). So it is, that in the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Gentiles find reconciliation - together: “he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us ... to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby” (Eph 2:14-16).

Note the great emphasis being placed upon unity in these words: - “in one body by the cross”, the Lord has made of twain “one new man”. The key idea then, is that just as it was by one offering, made in one body that provides salvation for all of mankind - “unto the ends of the earth”, even so the offering up of that body provides a basis for the families of both Jews and Gentiles to be unified as “one new man”. So it is the logical outworking of a recognition of our Lord’s work of reconciliation - unity amongst the Body of believers, for in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

In fact, the unifying power of the sacrifice of our Lord is taught at our weekly remembrance of what he did for us; in the emblems which we partake: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread” (1Cor 10:16,17). Much nonsense has been written elsewhere on this verse, claiming that the Bread, rather than representing the Lord’s body which was sacrificed for us - “the body of his flesh” (Col

1:22), it represents the body of believers. But the Scriptures are clear that both emblems speak of our Lord's death - Jesus took the bread and "when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me" (1Cor 11:25). No, the lesson drawn by the Apostle, is that just as there is one bread (i.e., the believers do not have a separate loaf each), even so those who partake of it ought to be one - one body, composed both of Jews and Gentiles.

ONE BODY - MANY MEMBERS

But this comparison between the believers and a "body" goes further than this. Just as in a human frame, there are many parts with varying functions and capabilities which join together to form a complete whole, so is the Body of Christ, "for as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many are one body in Christ, and every one members of another" (Rom 12:5). And again: "as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ ... For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?" (1Cor 12:12-17). Even so, in the Ecclesia, there are many different tasks which need accomplishment - some prominent, others less so. But let not those who take a less prominent part in Ecclesial activities assume that they are somehow less involved than others - let them not feel that they are not truly part of the body.

In our day, much emphasis is placed upon Speaking as being of paramount importance, to guide, teach and edify the Body. And maybe there is an element of truth in this. But why is it assumed that this is the main, if not only duty of the Ecclesia? The call of the Gospel is not a call simply to become eloquent speakers from the platform, but to develop the various attributes of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22) in our lives - to seek first God's Kingdom and Righteousness (Mat 6:33). Not all members are speakers, even as not all members of the body are the ear, or the eye, or the mouth. Each have been given several abilities to be used in the Masters service, and all work together in a variety of ways, to ensure the general well being of the whole. And this applies also to those amongst us, who we may, quite wrongly have a low opinion of: "those members of the body which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: that there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another" (1Cor 12:23-25). Let us therefore, not judge one another according to the several abilities which God hath given, for it is He who has granted all that we have, whether they be possessions or talents. As the Apostle exhorted the Corinthians, that they ought "not to think of men above that which is written, that no one of you be puffed up for one against another. For who maketh thee to differ from another? And what hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" (1Cor 4:7). Rather let "the whole body" be "fitly joined together and compacted (knit together) by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, making increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love" (Eph 4:15).

THE REVELATION OF A MYSTERY

Although it had long been testified that Gentiles would have a place in Yahweh's Plan of salvation (cp Gal 3:8), the extent to which this would be so, and the means whereby this would be brought about was hidden in a mystery to be revealed by the preaching of the Apostles. So the spirit through Paul describes it to the Colossians as "the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: to whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col 1:26,27). And again, to the Ephesians, the apostle spoke of the mystery "which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel" (Eph 2:5,6).

That Gentiles could have a hope of salvation through the promises of God to Israel was not previously unknown to "ages and generations". This can be seen by the manner in which Gentiles were permitted to depart from Egypt with the children of Israel (Ex 12:38), and by the entry of

certain Gentile men and women of faith, such as Ruth, Rahab, Caleb, Uriah, the Rechabites etc into the congregation. It was recognised therefore, that under certain conditions Gentiles could embrace Israel's Hope, and become part of the congregation, in some cases, gaining prominent positions in the running and protection of the nation. But what was not revealed was the manner in which there would be a general invitation for Gentiles to become "fellowheirs" without becoming circumcised as Jews. Previously, for a Gentile to partake of Israel's hope, they had to become proselytes (cp Mat 23:15, Acts 2:10; 6:5; 13:43), that is, to be circumcised, and be brought under the scope of the various commandments of the Mosaic Law. But what was hidden to previous ages, was the manner in which there would be salvation to Gentiles outside of the Law (cp Rom 3:30), through the "law of faith". And one aspect of this mystery was the temporary cutting off of the Jews themselves, that in the intervening period before their restoration, Gentiles could be grafted in.

THE MYSTERY OF ISRAEL'S BLINDNESS

This aspect of the Mystery was revealed by the Spirit through Paul to the Romans, who boasted themselves against the unfaithful Jews which had been rejected. "I would not, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in" (Rom 11:25). The brethren assumed that Israel had been permanently cut off, and that Gentiles were grafted into the olive tree in their place, and so vaunted themselves against the children of disobedience. But the revealed Mystery is that Israel were only cut off temporarily, that Gentiles might partake of the fatness of the Israelitish rootstock - the promises made to Abraham. Thus, the exhortation was given: "if some of the branches be broken off, and thou, being a wild olive tree, wert grafted in among them, and with them partakest of the root and fatness of the olive tree; boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee ... be not highminded, but fear; for if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee" (Rom 11:17-21).

We showed earlier how that both Jews and Gentiles of faith have been united as fellow-heirs, as one body in Christ. Here, a similar principle is illustrated, but rather than the analogy of one body, the figure of one plant, an olive tree is used. The plant is nourished and borne by the rootstock of God's promises to the patriarchs, and it was because of "unbelief" of the fulfilment of those promises in Christ that the unfaithful were cut off. But the promises themselves remain, and require the ultimate restoration of Israel for their fulfilment - Gentiles only have a hope in that through faith they embrace the Hope of Israel. They are grafted into a rootstock that requires the bringing in again of the Jews in order that the Kingdom might be restored to them, and in order that their King might commence his reign. Therefore, rather than to boast against the natural branches, Gentiles must recognise their proper place as adopted branches - "wild" branches, tamed by the Gospel message to become suitable material to bear the kind of fruits the master requires. This then is the true hope for both components of Christ's body, both Jew and Gentile. This is the revealed mystery, that Grace might be extended to the Gentiles, outside of the scope of the Mosaic Law, that being "grafted in", they might hope and long for the completion of the Olive Tree in the re-grafting in of the Jews. For truly, "if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead." (Rom 11:15).

"AS YE HAVE THEREFORE RECEIVED CHRIST, SO WALK YE IN HIM"

"As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: Rooted And built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught (Col 2:7)

The first chapter of Paul's inspired Epistle to the Colossians closes with the Apostle speaking of his "labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily" (1:29). So it is, that Paul, as with all faithful men, recognised that his product of his labours were not of his own might, but were according to the working of the Lord, which "effectually worketh also" in them that "believe" (1Thes 2:13). This is the true spirit of discipleship - to "strive" for the things of the Truth, yet entrust all things to the hand of the Father, that all things may be worked out according to His Will and Purpose.

But the Second Chapter describes one aspect of that for which Paul strove - unity amongst the believers: "I would that ye knew what conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicia, and for as

many as have not seen my face in the flesh; that their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love ..." (Col 2:1). Here, the Greek for "conflict" is the word from which "striving" in 1:29 is derived, emphasising the point that the striving for unity was a central part of the labours of the apostle - he was not simply concerned about the work of preaching, but also about ensuring that those who received his words were united in a common understanding of those things.

The term "conflict" is, perhaps an unusual term to use as an expression of concern for unity, for it is usually employed to describe a state of disunity, with two or more parties contending against each other, being engaged in conflict (cp 1Tim 6:12, 2Tim 4:7). Strong defines the Greek as "prop. a place of assembly (as if led) i.e. (by impl.) a contest (held there); fig. An effort or anxiety". The ideas contained within this word, therefore, involve a gathering together (uniting?) for the purpose of engaging in, or witnessing a contest, or conflict, being led to that place by one party or another. And this is the case with the Colossians - as we shall see in future studies, they were to contend against the Judaisers, who sought to "beguile" them "with enticing words" (Col 2:4), being led and encouraged in their conflict by the Apostle Paul. But in order to successfully resist these pervading philosophies, it was essential that the believers themselves be united upon the truths of the Gospel which they had been taught. So it was that the Apostle strove to exhort the believers to be united in battle.

But notice who it was that the Apostle strove for: "for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh". Not simply for those at Colosse, or Laodicea which was relatively close - but all the believers, even those who he had never met, or even seen. The example here is most striking; it is easy to care about those who we know well, those we are close to, but the example of the Apostle is to "love the brotherhood" (1Pet 2:17), the greater part of whom we will never have met. Our concerns and strivings ought to be not just for those around us, but for all the household of faith, that even if it be only in a small way, we might contribute to the unity and general well-being of the whole body.

BEING KNIT TOGETHER IN LOVE

The object for which the Apostle strove, was that the believers might be "knit together in love" (that is, bound together with "charity, which is the bond of perfectness" - 3:14), "unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words" (Col 2:2-4). Notice this - the loving unity of the brethren ought to be "unto ... "The full assurance", or "entire confidence" of "understanding", and an "acknowledgement" of the revealed mystery of God. In our day, there are many who exhort us to put aside differences in belief and doctrine, to simply be united in love. Love is the principal thing, they say - doctrine is secondary, and so long as we can show love, we can be united, tolerating each other's differing "views" on doctrinal issues. But such was not the teaching of Paul. His exhortation, being "moved" by the Spirit, was that the basis of unity is "the riches of understanding" - a correct understanding of the things of Truth. And this he said, lest the believers be beguiled "with enticing words", that is, that they might not be led astray by false teachers.

As we saw in our introductory study, and as we shall consider in more detail in the next issue, if the Lord Will, the primary problem facing the Colossians were the Judaisers, those men who sought to impose their mixture of the Mosaic Law and their traditions onto believers of the Gospel. These sought to "spoil" the brethren, "through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (Col 2:8), by seeking to bring them into bondage to the Law, which was but "a shadow of things to come" (v 17), and which our Lord "took out of the way" (v 14) by his death on the cross. But the Colossians were Gentiles, "to whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles" (1:27). The mystery, as we saw in our last study, was the manner in which Gentiles would be given a hope of salvation, subsequent to the cutting off of the Jewish olive branches - previously hidden and unknown, but now revealed by the apostolic preaching. So it was that Paul exhorted the believers to be "knit together" in a mutual understanding of these things; "to the acknowledgement of the mystery", now revealed, that being so united they might be able to stand against the inroads of the apostate Judaisers.

The principle being taught here, is that unity is the greatest defence for the household of faith. Our Lord taught that "every city or house divided against itself shall not stand" (Mat 12:25), and similarly, his Apostle exhorted: "if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another" (Gal 5:15). We truly live in "perilous times" (2Tim 3:1), and there is no

time for there to be “wars and fightings” (Jas 4:1) amongst the members of Christ’s Ecclesia. Rather than to contend against one another, the body ought to be one “in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). The various members thereof ought to “exhort one another daily, while it is called Today; lest any ... be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.” (Heb 3:13), rather than to devour one another through petty squabbles emanating from those who seek to exalt themselves above measure. To be united in a “full assurance” of the revealed things of Truth is just as needful in our day, as ever before that the faith may be earnestly contended for (Jude 3) in the face of false brethren who would seek to beguile us by the enticing words of the world’s philosophy.

THE TREASURES OF WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE

The great and precious truths concerning how Gentiles might also obtain Salvation in Christ Jesus are styled by the Apostle, “riches” (Col 1:27, 2:2), or “treasures of wisdom and knowledge”, “hid” in the mystery of the Gospel, yet now revealed by preaching. Yet though the mystery was made manifest by the ministry of the apostles, the depth of those riches still remain unfathomable to the natural man. Hence the apostle exclaimed, “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements, and his ways past finding out!” (Rom 11:33). Yet those riches can be found out to the extent to which they are revealed, and to the measure of spirituality of those who seek them. It is true that “the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God ... neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1Cor 2:14), but for those who have permitted the influence of The Word to transform their minds to become more in harmony with their Maker, who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern spiritual things, the riches of wisdom can be found by patient and diligent searching. So we read in the wise sayings of the Proverbs: “if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; then shalt thou understand the fear of Yahweh, and find the knowledge of God. For Yahweh giveth wisdom; out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding. He layeth up sound wisdom for the righteous: he is a buckler to them that walk uprightly” (Prov 2:3-7).

Notice here, how that wisdom, knowledge and understanding (cp Col 1:9) are said to be laid up (cp Col 1:5), not for anyone, but specifically for “the Righteous” - that is, for those who desire to forsake the ways of the flesh to seek after them. And notice also, that the means by which Yahweh is said to give wisdom, is by imparting “knowledge and understanding” “out of his mouth” - that is to say, by His Word which he has caused to be made known and heard. So it is, that to obtain the hidden riches of wisdom, we need to search the word diligently, for so doing we shall obtain the gems of knowledge and understanding which are so necessary to direct our steps into a walk which is well pleasing to our Heavenly Father.

But how much effort is required to obtain such treasure? What is required of us to give? The Lord Jesus speaks of this in parable form, saying: “the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field” (Mat 13:44). Here the principle is given, that although a man may, through much searching “find” the treasure of the Kingdom of Heaven, he cannot partake of any benefit from it - unless he first forsakes the things of this life. We must sell all that we have - that is to say, we must give everything in order to obtain and partake of the treasures of wisdom. Only by ridding ourselves of the worldly things of this life, can we obtain the gems of Eternal life, and even having found, and obtained the Gospel treasure, we must keep searching diligently to find and obtain further hidden treasures, to learn the ways of wisdom.

From the day that the Gospel was preached to the Colossians, it grew within them to “bring forth fruit” (Col 1:6) to the Glory of God. They had a fervent love both for it, and also for others of like precious faith (1:4,8), seeking to edify one another in their zeal for the things of the Spirit. But trying times lay ahead as we have seen, for “the mystery of iniquity” (2Thes 2:7), or the iniquitous influence of Apostasy had already begun in the days of the Apostle. Indeed, by the time of the giving of the Revelation to John, nearby Laodicea had already fallen into a nauseating condition of malaise (Rev 14:14-22), and other ecclesias were to follow. So it was that Paul exhorted the faithful at Colosse to continue in their zeal as they had begun: “As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving” (Col 2:6,7).

The exhortation is to be both “rooted and built up”. Here, two figures are used together to illustrate a common point; the figure both of a plant, and of a building; a dual comparison also used elsewhere by the Spirit through Paul, “ye are God’s husbandry, ye are God’s building” (1Cor 3:9). The believers remain “rooted” by remaining firmly grafted into the Israelitish rootstock (Rom 11:17), seeking to become securely anchored, obtaining their nourishment from the fertile soil of the word of God. Being well rooted, they are planted firmly, and well able to withstand the stormy trials which life brings, as the Proverb has it: “a man shall not be established by wickedness: but the root of the righteous shall not be moved” (Prov 12:3), but shall rather in being nourished by spiritual things, shall blossom and bring forth the fruit of the Spirit (Prov 12:12, Gal 5:22) in all it’s various facets. And if believers are well-rooted in the things of God in this life, they shall receive due blessing by the Husbandman in the Age to Come, for it is written, “blessed is the man that trusteth in Yahweh, and whose hope Yahweh is. For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green; and shall not be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit” (Jer 17:7,8, cp Ps 1:3, Rev 22:2).

In addition to being “rooted”, the believers are to be “built up”. Interestingly in the Greek, the phrase is in the present tense - “being built up”, emphasising the point that it is a continual work. “The foundation of the apostles and prophets” has already been laid, “Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord” (Eph 2:20-22), and it remains for each individual member (as “living stones” - 1Pet 2:5) to edify and build one another up in the way of Truth, until the final completion of the house at the coming of the Lord (cp Zech 4:7-9). The Scriptural appeal to believers is to be active in “building up yourselves on your most holy faith” (Jude 20), being bound together as a single edifice, strong and secure under Divine protection. And again, the means by which believers might be so edified, is by the Word of God. Hence Paul said to the elders of Ephesus on his departure from them: “now, brethren, I command to you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified.” (Acts 20:32). The Word of God then, is the basis of loving unity for believers; it is able to nourish those whose roots seek to sink deeply into it; it is able to build up those who seek to labour in the House of God, and it is able to strengthen us to withstand the philosophies of men, that we might grow more pleasing to our Heavenly Father. The exhortation remains therefore, that we, as the Colossians might be “rooted and grounded in love” (Eph 3:17), that being securely planted in the house of God (Ps 92:13), we might be renewed with life, and flourish in the glorious age to come.

“YE ARE COMPLETE IN HIM”

*“Ye are complete in him
which is the head of all principality and power”*

In our earlier studies, we demonstrated how one of the central themes running through this Epistle, is the principle of unity, and how the multitude of believers are united in Christ as a single conglomerate entity; “the body, the ecclesia” (1:18), with the Lord Jesus himself as the Head. And having established that principle, the Spirit through Paul then proceeds to draw certain lessons and conclusions based upon it; one of these being the fact that as the body is “complete” in Christ (as our opening citation indicates), there is no need for anything else in addition to Him, such as the observance of the Mosaic Law.

In this vain, the Apostle gave the warning: “beware, lest any man spoil you through philosophy, and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him ...” (Col 2:8-10). Here, the “rudiments” (or “principles” as the word is elsewhere rendered (Heb 5:12)) of the world” speak of the elementary principles of the Law upon which the then present order of things, or kosmos, was based. We read of these again in the Epistle to the Galatian ecclesia, speaking of Israelites under the Mosaic Schoolmaster: “even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world: but when the fulness of time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons ... Now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?” (Gal 4:3-9). The turning back to the precepts of the Law, was a return to bondage; a bondage from which the Lord Jesus had provided redemption. And this was the danger which Paul warned the Colossians against - the Judaisers were seeking to turn the believers away from the Redemption of Christ, so bringing them into bondage to precepts which could only bring condemnation.

But in speaking of the “philosophy” of the Judaisers to the Colossians, the Apostle also speaks of their “vain deceit” and “the tradition of men” which, as we saw in our introductory study, indicates how that they were not simply seeking to bring the believers back under the things commanded by Moses; but also their own teachings which they had mingled with it. The Lord speaks of this, rebuking the Pharisees and Scribes for “teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the command of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition ...” (Mark 7:8,9). The Pharisees effectively negated the precepts of the Law by their traditions which had become superimposed onto it. In rejecting the spiritual principles revealed to Moses, their righteousness stood in the keeping of their own traditions, hence the apostle’s condemnation of it as “empty deceit”. As he wrote to the Galatians; that which the Judaisers sought to bring Christ’s brethren into bondage to, were “weak and beggarly elements”. Not that any elements of the Law were “weak and beggarly”, for they perfectly achieved what the Divine Lawgiver intended. But that the elementary principles upon which the order of things established by the Pharisees and the like, had become “weak and beggarly”, weakened and impoverished, devoid of any spiritual value by the subtraction of the Lord’s Truth, and the addition of the philosophies of man.

And how much like today’s religious scene this is! Truly history has repeated itself in the decline of Christendom to the degenerate state of corruptness and spiritual whoredom (Rev 17:5) which it is in today. Like the Pharisees of old, the leaders of modern churches have “rejected the commandment of God” that they may keep their own traditions. And this to the extent that what is presented to the people is likewise void of spiritual nourishment; being simply the humanistic sophistries of human wisdom which lead the hearers back into the bondage of sin: “While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage. For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein and overcome, the latter end is worse than the beginning” (2Pet 2:19:20). So it is, that the principles of Paul’s warning apply to our generation just as they do to the Colossians, a warning which too few hearken to.

**“IN HIM DWELLETH ALL
THE FULLNESS OF THE GODHEAD BODILY”**

The very centre of the Mosaic order of things, and the core of National Worship to Israel, was the Tabernacle arrangement, and later the Temple of Solomon’s building. And the key idea found in both of these constructions, was to provide a symbolic means by which the Almighty Creator might dwell in the midst of His People: “let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them” (Ex 25:8), Not that Yahweh would personally descend from His Heavenly Throne and physically dwell in the Tabernacle, but that the glory of His Presence would be there in symbol, dwelling between the Cherubim (Is 37:16), a glory which the people could approach unto once yearly through the High Priest as their representative. But this arrangement of things was but a shadow; a Type of greater things to come. The Law in all it’s various facets was a “schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Gal 3:24), and so the fullness of all it’s precepts are displayed perfectly in him.

So it is, that being greater than the shadowy institution of old, God was in Christ (2Cor 5:19) by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and by the Attributes of His Glory which were seen in him. The Lord Jesus is “the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person” (Heb 1:3), he is “the Word” which John says “was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth” (Jno 1:14). As the Apostle wrote to the Colossians, “it pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell” (1:19), and again, “for in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (2:9).

This is the greatness of the Lord Jesus over the Tabernacle/Temple arrangement; there the glory was but a symbol - but in him it dwelt bodily, that is, physically and literally - and not partially, but in “fulness”. As a Son he perfectly manifested the Attributes of his Divine Father, being “God manifest in the flesh” (1Tim 3:16). His “body” being the antitypical temple (Jno 2:21), the Father-Spirit dwelt there, enabling him to perform the miraculous works he did. As the Son himself declared: “the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works. Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works’ sake” (Jno 14:10,11).

But the practical outworking of this teaching; is that if all the “fullness” of Divine Character dwells bodily in the Lord Jesus Christ, not only is it the case that the Law becomes greatly surpassed and

therefore must fade away (2Cor 3:7-11), but those who are “in” Christ by faith and baptism also become complete in him. This is the inspired reasoning of Paul: “in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and ye are complete in him.” In simple terms, if the Divine Attributes of Glory are seen in all their fullness, or completeness in Christ - then those who become joined to him ought also to manifest those attributes; and share that completeness. God is in Christ, and we are in him. As the Lord himself prayed to his Father; “that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (Jno 17:21). The believers then, are all “one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28), a single, complete, united “ecclesia, which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all” (Eph 1:23). “The Most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands” (Acts 7:48), but in the Body of His Ecclesia, in “fullness”. Hence the exhortation to develop the Divine qualities of the Spirit, and not be led away by the beguiling influences of man.

THE HANDWRITING OF ORDINANCES

The Apostle, in describing how the Lord Jesus has removed the burden of the law from off the believers, speaks of how he has “forgiven you all trespasses, blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross” (Col 2:13,14). This description of a “handwriting of ordinances” being against someone is highly reminiscent of a well known Old Testament Passage, which speaks literally of a hand (or a part of a hand) writing ordinances against a particular individual - a writing of condemnation which was not blotted out, but allowed to be fulfilled according to the Will and Purpose of the writer.

The 5th Chapter of Daniel records the idolatrous, drunken feast held by Belshazzar the king of Babylon, when the holy vessels taken from the House of Yahweh by Nebuchadnezzar were brought out, and used to praise “the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone. In the same hour came forth fingers of a man’s hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaster of the wall of the king’s palace: and the King saw the part of the hand that wrote. Then the king’s countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another” (Dan 5:5-6). Here then, was a hand writing ordinances against Belshazzar and his Kingdom. The words which were written were interpreted by Daniel: “this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. This is the interpretation of the things: MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom and finished it. TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting. PERES; Thy kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians” (5:25-28).

In contrast to the Body spoken of in Colossians, Belshazzar was not “complete”, being filled with the fulness of God; but being weighed in the balances of Divine Justice, he was “found wanting”. Too light to be of any real value. The idols he worshipped in defiance of Israel’s God were unable to be of any help to him, for Yahweh had decreed that his kingdom would end - that he would be condemned and would die by being overcome by another nation. And the handwriting of this ordinance was not to be blotted out; the condemnation would not be removed, but rather it was executed fully, and Belshazzar suffered the judgement which rightly fell to him.

And notice the physical effect that the handwriting had upon Belshazzar’s body: “the joints (margin: bindings, or knots) of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another”. What a contrast to the apostle’s depiction of Christ’s body, redeemed from a condemnatory handwriting of ordinances, speaking of “the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God” (Col 2:19). Whereas the joints and bindings of Belshazzar’s body became loosed (cp Is 45:1), the “joints and bands” of Christ’s body are tightly “knit together” - in love (2:2), being nourished by the Head, even the Lord Jesus himself.

But Belshazzar provides us with an example of what can happen to a body under the condemnation of a handwriting of ordinances. The exhortation of Paul to the Colossians was that being redeemed from the handwriting of the law, they ought not allow themselves to be brought back to it - and the pernicious influence of false teachers can only cause disunity in the body. To permit and allow wrong doctrine to be taught in the ecclesia will inevitably result in a body like Belshazzar’s - unloosed from the bonds of love, disunited, smiting itself. And this is what the Ecclesia at Colosse would have become like if it had been brought back under the handwriting of ordinances which the Lord Jesus had blotted out. And in contrast to Belshazzar, who was overcome by the power of another kingdom, the Apostle describes the victory of Christ over the powers of the Jewish nation

which sought to overcome him:- “having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in himself” (2:15).

“WORSHIPPING OF ANGELS”

In continuing the theme of separateness from the philosophies of the Judaisers, and the various feasts, holydays and food requirements of the law, the exhortation continues: “let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind” (2:18). This verse, particularly the reference to the “worshipping of angels” has been the cause of much difficulty for many commentators it appears, for a great variety of opinions are set forth. These include the idea that some, out of a supreme reverence for the Father felt that he could not be approached by mortal man - even through His Son, and so they began making supplications to angels instead. Others suggest that it was a warning against the “Gnostics”. Still others say that the Jews had incorporated angel-worship into their system of things. But the evidence for these suggestions is not convincing. There is no evidence that the Jews worshipped Angels in the time of the Apostles, and we would expect that if the practice was commonplace, then it would receive more attention in the Epistles. As for the ideas relating to the “Gnostics” and others; the context of the chapter is clearly relating to the Judaisers, as we have seen, and it would be strange to have a single verse, about another group in the midst of a warning about Judaisers. We believe the verse should be understood in the context in which it occurs.

The Greek word rendered “worshipping” interestingly, is not the usual word for “worship”. It is used on only 3 other occasions in Scripture (Acts 26:5, Jas 1:26,27), and on each of those occasions, it is rendered “religion”, speaking not of an act of supplication; but an entire religious system. For instance, Acts 26:5 records the words of Paul: “after the most straitest sect of **our religion** I lived a Pharisee”. So the “worshipping of angels”, we suggest rather related to the religion of, or given by Angels - the Law itself. The inspired writer of the Hebrews speaks of the Law in these terms: “if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompence of reward; how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him?” (Heb 2:2,3). The Law itself was given to Moses by Angelic hands (Acts 7:38,53), but the word of salvation came by God’s only begotten Son. And if those who neglected the angelic Law received punishment - what will be our end if we neglect that spoken by the Son of the Creator of the Universe?

So it was, that in seeking to bring the believers in Christ under the Mosaic Law, the Judaisers were unwittingly bringing them to something greatly inferior to Christ. It was the religion, or system of worship from Angels, whereas the Gospel is from the Son, in whom all the fulness of the Godhead dwells. In doing this, the Judaisers were “intruding into those things which he hath not seen”. And to this day, the Jews have not “seen” the glory of the Law which they appear to delight in; “their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same veil untaken away in the reading of the old testament, which veil is done away in Christ. But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart. Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away” (2Cor 3:14-16). This was the true position of the Judaisers - they were spiritually blind, unable to see the fulfilment of the Law in the Lord Jesus, but rather gloried in the observance of their own traditions, “vainly puffed up” by their “fleshly minds”.

But the religious world in which we sojourn is really no better. The nations are blinded by the god of this world (2Cor 4:4), that they also cannot see the shining brilliance of the Glory of Israel’s God in Christ. There is then, a dual blindness, or veiling - over both Israel and the nations, for all wander in darkness, unable to see the way of salvation in Christ. But this lamentable situation is soon to have an end, for at the appearance of the Lord Jesus upon the earth once more, “the veil shall be taken away” from Israel (2Cor 3:16), and “the veil that is spread over all nations” (Is 25:7) shall be removed. In that day, Israel shall become an exalted people in the earth, the “first dominion” of the Great Prince, and the nations shall come to bow before him, in recognition of his supremacy, and exalted status as the Son of the Most High God. In that day, the false systems of men’s religion shall be destroyed, and replaced by a glorious new law, which shall go forth from the Mountain of the House of Yahweh, requiring all nations to appear at the city of the great King to keep the feast of Tabernacles, and be taught Yahweh’s ways of Truth. Our wisdom then, is to heed the warning of the inspired Apostle, to remain separate from the blindness of the world’s philosophies, and seek to become united as a complete Body in Christ. It is that Body which shall be subject to glorification (Rev 1:13-16), when all the pretence of false worship shall fail, and be exposed for all it’s fleshly weakness. And it is the individual members of that Body which shall come to be partakers of divine nature, and so be filled physically with the Glory of God, and so truly become even as our Lord Jesus Christ.

“THE CIRCUMCISION MADE WITHOUT HANDS”

In our previous studies, we have seen how the inspired Apostle warned the Colossians of the Judaisers, who sought to add elements of the Mosaic Law (combined with their own traditions) to the requirements of the Gospel. And a key feature of their “philosophy”, was the insistence on Circumcision for salvation. They taught “except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1), and it is this requirement which is especially dealt with in the Epistle to the Colossians, where Paul expounds the true significance of circumcision, and how the spiritual points it taught might be manifested by the disciple. He speaks of the Lord Jesus as being “the head of all principality and power: in whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ” (Col 2:11). In some sense then, although the Gentile believers at Colosse were physically uncircumcised (2:13), the spirit of circumcision took place in their union with Christ, for in him they are deemed to be “circumcised” - but “without hands”.

In actual fact, the ordinance of Circumcision did not originate in the Law, irrespective of what claims the Judaisers had made. The Lord Jesus made this clear in his dialogue with the Jews: “Moses therefore gave unto you circumcision; (not because it is of Moses, but of the fathers); and ye on the Sabbath day circumcise a man” (Jno 7:22). The reason why Moses enjoined circumcision upon Israel then, was not because it formed part of the other ordinances which came by him, but because it was “of the fathers”. It was a practice which became incorporated into the Law, but in actual fact, had its origin with the Abraham (Acts 7:8), and was associated with the giving of the New covenant to him.

CIRCUMCISION - A TOKEN OF FAITH IN THE NEW COVENANT

Genesis chapter 17, verses 1-9 describes the giving of certain promises to Abraham, including the establishment of a covenant between him and his seed - particularly the pre-eminent seed, even the Lord Jesus Christ. It speaks ultimately of the future, when Abraham’s seed shall be given - with him: “all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God”. And as a token of that covenant, the practice of circumcision was commanded:

“This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed. He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant” (Gen 17:10-14).

In these words, we find a number of important details which are interesting to note. Firstly, circumcision was enjoined upon certain Gentiles as well as Jews - those who had been “bought with money of any stranger”, and had by this means become part of Abraham’s household. So we have in Type, the manner in which Gentiles could become joined to the household of faith, being “bought” by the shed blood of Christ; as the Apostle wrote immediately after his discourse on Circumcision: “he that is called, being free, is Christ’s servant. Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men” (see 1Cor 7:18-23). And as we saw earlier, in Christ, all members of the household become, in a sense circumcised, but “without hands”, for “he is a Jew which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God” (Rom 2:29).

But another point which is not immediately apparent in the Genesis record, is that circumcision was given as a token of Abraham’s faith in the Covenant made with him: “faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness ... not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision. And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also ...” (Rom 4:9-11). Circumcision then, was a “sign”, which spoke

of the faith of Abraham in Yahweh's covenant with him, made when he was yet "uncircumcised". This was the significance of circumcision under the Law - it should have reminded Abraham's natural seed of the principles of the New Covenant, and the promises which Abraham had faith in. It was given as a token of faith, and in essence, taught the Jew that righteousness was not by the observance of Law, but by sharing the faith which Abraham had - of which it was a "sign". And in this way, it would have led them to the Lord Jesus Christ, to whom the promises relate, and through whom they are to be accomplished.

Circumcision then, was a physical sign which distinguished Israel from the nations around them, to be a people chosen by God. Literally speaking, it was the cutting off of the flesh, and so carries the spiritual signification of cutting off the fleshly lusts of the heart. As we cited earlier, "circumcision is that of the heart" (Rom 2:29). It spoke of the faith which ought to have been manifested in Abraham's seed, and so speaks of righteousness and purity - whereas "uncircumcision" in Scripture speaks of the way of the flesh, or defilement and is a term of reference to some of the ungodly Gentile nations, most notably the Philistines (Jud 15:18, 1Sam14:6, 17:26,36 etc). So Israel, although literally circumcised, were exhorted by Moses to "Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked" (Deut 10:16). Yet although the people went through various phases of national faithfulness, the cutting off of the flesh can be very painful; and not at all pleasing to the natural man. Thus, the foreskin of their hearts remained. They failed to heed the word of the Living God, for the barrier of the flesh obstructed their spiritual hearing, as Jeremiah lamented: "behold, their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot hearken: behold, the word of Yahweh is unto them a reproach; they have no delight in it" (Jer 6:10). He, as Moses exhorted the people: "Circumcise yourselves to Yahweh, and take away the foreskins of your heart, ye men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem: lest my fury come forth like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings" (Jer 4:4), but they failed to hearken, and so the promised destruction duly came.

The matter does not end there for Israel, however, for the New Covenant, of which the "sign" of Circumcision testified, is yet to be accomplished through the Lord Jesus Christ, as the "Deliverer" who shall "come out of Sion ... and shall turn away ungodliness out of Jacob. So Moses spoke of this time - the time of Israel's future regathering, and subsequent glorification in the land: "Yahweh thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love Yahweh thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live" (Deut 31:6). This verse leaves us in no doubt what it is to be Circumcised; it is to remove the fleshly covering of our hearts which proves to be a barrier to things Divine. It is to become Spiritually renewed, that we might love Yahweh, Israel's God, with all our hearts and soul, that we might become heirs of everlasting life, according to the promise of the Abrahamic Covenant. And in that day, all who dwell in Jerusalem - and all who pass through there on their annual pilgrimage to give homage to the King of Kings, shall be spiritually circumcised, for thus saith the Lord to Zion; "put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city: for henceforth there shall no more come unto thee the circumcised and the unclean" (Is 52:1) We then, are "circumcised with the circumcision made without hands" (Col 2:11), if we have faith in Abraham's Greater Seed. As the Apostle taught the Philippians, "we are the circumcision which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" (Phil 3:3). Literal circumcision was but the literal removal of a small part of the body. But circumcision in Christ is far greater, for it is "the putting of the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ" (Col 2:11, cp Rom 6:6). Let us therefore rejoice in the faith of Abraham's God, that we also might find life in Him.

IF YE THEN BE RISEN WITH CHRIST

In our previous considerations of Colossians chapter 2, we saw how the believers, by becoming united to Christ, join themselves to a "body" which is "complete", having need of no other addition, whether it be from the Law, or the traditions of men. But in addition to this, believers who have become Christ's by passing through the watery grave of baptism, have become "circumcised" "in him" (Col 2:10). That is to say, their sins and iniquities - the works of the flesh have been effectively "cut off", in that representative grave - left behind, forsaken, as they commence a journey through a new life, wholly devoted to the things of God. The old man, "the body of the sins of the flesh" becomes crucified, put to death, and buried in baptism, as by the indwelling of the Spirit Word, a new man is formed, "which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him". And this is the theme of Chapter 3 - the manner in which, having laid aside the filthy garments of the flesh, believers ought to be clothed with righteousness, seeking the things which pertain to eternity. Having died, and risen up out of the baptismal waters, believers ought to seek things which are

above, where their Lord is: “If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth” (Col 3:1,2).

“IF YE THEN BE RISEN WITH CHRIST”

Notice the contrast here with verse 20 of Chapter 2: “Wherefore, if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world (i.e. elementary principles of the kosmos that then was) why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances ...”. By becoming aligned with the death of Christ in Baptism, the Colossians had become free from the ordinances of the Mosaic Law - and the traditions which men had added to it. Yet through the Judaistic philosophising of the apostates, they were being seduced back to that which they had forsaken. They were turning back to unearth that which they had previously buried in the grave, and the Apostle exposed the vanity of such. So following the denunciation of the “philosophy and vain deceit” (2:8), of those who would lead the believers back to the ministration of death, Chapter 3 returns to the principles involved with baptism - and the responsibilities of being risen with Christ. The believer must not dwell so much upon what has been left behind - but more importantly, what lies ahead, and the obligations which go with newness of life in Christ.

“If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God” (3:1). Lifting up their heads to gaze upon the things of eternity, those who are resurrected from their baptismal death, must fix their attention upon the Divine Presence - and the One who appears there “for us” (Heb 9:24).

Rather than to manifest the grovelling spirit of the natural man which, as that of the beasts of the field declines to earthly things, the spirit of the renewed man “goeth upward” (Eccl 3:21), focalising upon the place of favour and blessing - the Father’s right hand, where our Lord is positioned. And in this, we have the example of our Lord before us, who always kept the things pertaining to His Father’s Kingdom and Righteousness to the forefront of his mind, always seeking the will of His Father dwelling in the Heaven above: “I have set Yahweh always before me: because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved ... My flesh also shall rest in hope. For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore”. (Ps 16:8-11). In these words, the Spirit of Christ speaks prophetically of the meditations of our Lord Jesus, faced with the agony of Crucifixion. Elsewhere it is testified that he, “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2). And this Psalm enlightens us as to what that “joy” was which was set before the Lord. “I have set Yahweh always before me”, and positioned at His Right hand, the future seat of power upon which he would set, the Lord saw joy and pleasures: “in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore”. So it was, that by continual meditation and reflection upon such a joyous vision of Glory - even His Father’s Glory, our Lord was strengthened to overcome, enduring the shame of crucifixion that he might ultimately obtain that place of joy himself.

And even so it is with us. For the death of Christ was not the death of one individual - but that of all who are aligned with it in Baptism: “if one died for all, then were all dead” (2Cor 5:14). In our baptisms, we died with Christ. But for us, as with our Lord, crucifying the flesh is not a single event at the time of our immersion; but a daily struggle as we seek to “die daily” (1Cor 15:31). Thus the exhortation was given to the Colossians, that in seeking heavenly things - the “pleasures” at the Father’s right hand - they must crucify earthly things: “mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence and covetousness which is idolatry” (Col 3:5). As we died in Christ therefore, we must put to death earthly things, and do as he did, focus instead on the Joyous Vision of the Divine Presence, and all that it speaks of. For if we are dead with him, then are we also risen with him (Rom 6:5), and our life is bound up in him: “for ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God”. There is no earthly thing which appears in the presence of the Father - only things of the Spirit. And as our lives are “with Christ in God”, who is the fountain-head of all life, then we ought to have no earthly thing dwelling in us. Only things of the Spirit - and how hard that is to maintain!

A CHANGE OF GARMENTS

In speaking of these principles, the Spirit through Paul adopted the language of clothing. A soiled, defiled garment is removed, that another robe of righteousness might be put on: “but now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth ... Put on

therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering ..." (Col 3:8,12). So it is, that the varying attributes to be forsaken or adopted according to their nature, are likened to a garment being put off, or put on, as the case may be. The language here, finds it's counterpart in a vision shown to Zechariah, relating to Joshua the High Priest, and his change of raiment, typical of the change of our Lord's nature:

"And he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of Yahweh, and Satan standing at his right hand to resist him. And Yahweh said unto Satan, Yahweh rebuke thee, O Satan, even Yahweh that hath chosen Jerusalem rebuke thee: is not this a brand plucked out of the fire? Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and stood before the angel. And he answered and spake unto those that stood before him saying, Take away the filthy garments from him. And unto him, he said, Behold I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment. And I said, Let them set a fair mitre upon his head. So they set a fair mitre upon his head, and clothed him with garments. And the angel of Yahweh stood by" (Zech 3:3:1-5)

In this vision, we have depicted a change of garments taking place - immediately following a contention between one styled "Satan", and the other styled "Joshua the high priest". It is a vision over which so many expositors are caused to stumble - and no wonder, for the commentaries are written by those of the Apostasy; believing in devils, demons and hobgoblins - fire and brimstone for the damned, and eternal bliss beyond the skies for the blessed. It is not surprising therefore, that they cannot behold the things pertaining to Divine Mercy, things which relate to the sacrifice of Christ. These things remain hidden to them, for they cannot permit the spirit word to permeate beyond the barrier of the flesh.

But all becomes clear when we recognise that the events thus transacted prophetically speak of our Lord Jesus - the antitypical Joshua, whom the apostle styles the "great high priest", and his victory over the greatest adversary of all. For just as one styled "Satan", is depicted as resisting Joshua clothed in defiled garments, even so there was a contest between "the devil" or diabolos, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who wore our defiled nature in order to overcome it: "forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb 2:14). And just as the Satan was ultimately defeated by being given a Divine Rebuke, even so it was in the case of our Lord Jesus, for in him, the diabolos, or "the law of sin" was condemned and destroyed: "God, sending his own Son, in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom 8:3). Notice that point - God condemned Sin in the flesh of his Son. To wear the defiled garments of our nature was essential for such to take place, for sin could not be condemned in the Son, unless it existed there. And so, the diabolos, or devil, was given a resounding rebuke in the sacrifice of Christ, for it's serpentine head, or Carnal Mind was crushed in victory as the Son of God trod it underfoot.

What then of the change of raiment? Following his emergence from Joseph's tomb, the Lord Jesus received a change of nature, that he might no longer have to contend against the devil within. The garments pertaining to his mortal existence were left behind, to be discovered by Simon Peter at his entrance into the Lord's grave (Jno 20:4-7). The Lord had been "clothed upon" (2 Cor 5:4) with immortality, having no need for the former things relating to his past existence, and so was beheld by Daniel, again in vision, as one "whose garment was white as snow" (Dan 7:9), free from any sign of defilement. And having overcome, just as Joshua was seen to be greater than the angels (he was crowned, not the Angel, thereby speaking of his typical status over them) even so our Lord, in his elevated status following his resurrection, was crowned with glory, so that now "we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour", "being made so much better than the angels" (Heb 2:9; 1:4), that he might lead many sons into victory.

THE HIGH PRIEST - A REPRESENTATIVE

In all these things, it is vital for us to note that the things which were done to the high priest were not for his benefit alone - but for the people whom he represented. By the very nature of that office, the High Priest appeared in the Divine Presence on behalf of, and as a representative of the people. And this being so, the things which he experienced in that office, represent the experiences of the People also. In short, if they wish to enter the Divine presence - if they wish to be represented in him, they must be as him. And so it is, that we must never lose sight of the practical exhortation which cries out loudly in every facet of the Atoning work of our Lord.

And it is these practical examples which are highlighted by the Apostle to the Colossians. A little reflection will confirm this. We have died with Christ in baptism. We have risen with Christ in

emerging from the baptismal grave. But Christ has arisen to be given garments white as snow - no longer tainted by "iniquity" (Zech 3:4), or the sinfulness of the nature he overcame. This, we cannot do, for the devil within is a hereditary problem - an inherent power bringing us into enmity with God - it will remain with us until we also receive a changed to Immortality, when "this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality (1Cor 15:53). How then can we stand justified in the Divine Presence?

The answer lies in the merciful kindness of the Almighty, extended to us in His Son. If we seek to do as he did; if we resolve to "put off the old man", and "put on" a new set of attributes, even as Paul exhorted the Colossians, the garments of Christ's righteousness may cover us also. We are baptised into him (Rom 6:4). We have risen with him (Col 3:1). We are thus part of his "body" (Col 1:18,24). Our life is "hid with Christ" (Col 3:3). But he is clothed with garments "white as snow" - and therefore so are we. We are partakers of His righteousness by faith (Rev 7:14, Rom 4:1-8), for as the Father beholds the people's representative at His Right Hand, He beholds no spot, or wrinkle, nor any unclean thing, but purity and righteousness. Even so, though our sins were as scarlet before him, they have become white as snow (Is 1:18), covered over with the purity of the Lord Jesus. This then, presents a most powerful exhortation to all minds sensitive to Divine Things. Being thus cleansed, we must not allow our garments to be defiled. We must not clothe ourselves with the works of the flesh - for this is the Promise of Christ Himself: "He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. He that hath an hear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the ecclesiastas" (Rev 3:5).

BEING A NEW CREATURE IN CHRIST

As we have seen in our previous studies, this Epistle to the Colossians is highly exhortational in nature, dealing with the practical implications of being part of the Divine Family. It speaks plainly of the separation expected of believers consequent to their deliverance "from the power of darkness" (Col 1:13), as they become the constituent parts of the united body of Christ. It speaks of the very Character of that body as being "complete", and "knit together in love", having no need for men's speculative philosophies to be added, and no scope for the allowance of petty divisions so often extant among men. And Chapter 3 brings these principles of identification with the One body to an even more personal level; for here the Spirit describes the manner of life incumbent upon those who have been buried through Baptism into the Death of Christ - and therefore are risen with him (3:1). Being constituent members of His Body, the risen believer must manifest the attributes with which the New Creation is to be filled, for he is indeed, "a new creature" (2Cor 5:17), part of the Creation concerning which our Lord is himself "the firstborn" (1:15).

The attributes of the Old man, when compared with those of the New man appear as mere "filthy rags" (Is 64:6), which must be "put off", in order that the new garments of righteousness might be "put on". This, we saw in the last study, that the believer must "put off the old man with his deeds", and "put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him" (Col 3:10). The two identities cannot be merged. A person cannot truly be a new creation if he retains vestiges of the old - he must remove utterly the former ways of the flesh, which as fig leaves are but transient and fading in any case; and put on the raiment provided by the Slain Lamb, that he might appear acceptably in the Divine Presence. In the coming day of rejoicing when the saints shall partake of the marriage supper of the Lamb, only those found suitably attired shall be permitted to remain: "Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment?" Will be the enquiry put to such a one who has not "put on" Christ. To which there will be no answer: "and he was speechless". Then shall the King say to his angelic servants "bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mat 22:11-13). To be arrayed with the approved attributes - to be clothed with the righteousness of Christ, is then a prerequisite to inheriting the Kingdom, not the act of baptism only.

In baptism into Christ, "the old man is crucified with him" (Rom 6:6), being put to death that the germ of the Spirit - the implanted Word - might bring forth a new creation in him, and from him - a spiritual rebirth. Nicodemus, a teacher in Israel - yet also a man of the night - failed to perceive the principles of this rebirth, saying "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb?" (Jno 3:4). Indeed, how can a man become a new babe when he is old? Only by crucifying that old man in the baptismal waters and by allowing a new identity to spring forth in him - mirroring the image of Christ, his Creator. By seeking to manifest the Attributes of the One to whom he has become joined in the watery grave.

THE IMAGE OF HIM THAT CREATED HIM

In speaking of the formation of this New Creature, the Apostle speaks of him being “renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him”. So it is a mental image being referred to - an image which requires a renewing of knowledge for it to be created. In our day, in an effort to distinguish the implantation of the Spirit Word from the method of learning thrust upon us by the serpent's academies (colleges, universities and so called centres of 'further education') brethren speak with disdain of “Head Knowledge”. It is not “Head Knowledge” that counts, they say, but the application of the Gospel Message in daily life. So much is true - but only partly so, for one can only apply the principles of the Truth by firstly knowing the Truth - and that not merely a passing acquaintance of the first principles, but by diligent work in studying: “Study to show thyself approved of God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed ...” (2Tim 2:15) is the apostolic command - and why study if it is not to become more proficient in the matter being scrutinised? Only by the application of the mind to the Word can a believer increase in knowledge and understanding (cp Col 1:9), for it is only by a renewal (or renovation as the Greek signifies), through knowledge, that the natural mind of the flesh can begin to operate more in harmony with its Maker - and reflect more of His mental, and moral image.

The Lord Jesus Christ is “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15), “being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person” (Heb 1:3), and therefore those who are born after him, as members of the New Creation, by the development of their mental faculties must seek to mirror that image also. Indeed, such was the original purpose of God with man: “let us make man in our image, after our likeness” was the Elohistic proclamation (Gen 1:26), and though Adam failed to achieve this, nevertheless through Christ, the Creator's purpose might yet be accomplished. That is, to populate all the globe with a multitude (Is 45:18) of sons who manifest the likeness of His glory (Ps 72:19).

THE ATTRIBUTES OF THE DIVINE IMAGE

This is the real essence of God Manifestation. So often, this vital doctrine of Truth is presented as an intellectual matter - a subject for the academics to ponder and expound. But the essence of the subject is not only fundamentally simple - it is essential for salvation. God Manifestation is the mirroring of the Divine Image by the believer (2Cor 3:18). It is seeking to be like God, by manifesting the qualities he requires - which are attributes He Himself possesses. And so it is, that in putting on the 'new man' - renewed in knowledge after the Divine Image - the believer must array himself with qualities of Divine goodness, that he might be approved in the coming day of rejoicing. The Attributes required of the believer are enumerated by the Spirit thus:

“Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering, forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful ...” (Col 3:12-15).

From even a casual glance at these attributes, one thing becomes apparent - they are all to do with the believers' behaviour towards others. To be kind, humble, meek, longsuffering, showing forbearance and forgiveness - all these are qualities to be shown to others in our dealings with them, rather than things to do with our own selves, and our behaviour in private. So it is, that they are qualities conducive to the harmonious operation of Christ's body, that each member who observes them will work in harmony with the other, causing the whole to be united as one. So often it is, that ecclesial problems or disputes between brethren can be directly traced to the failure of one, or both parties to manifest the characteristics spoken of here, instead permitting the old man of the flesh to influence their actions.

The first quality mentioned, is the putting on of “*bowels of mercies*”. In Scripture, the bowels speak of the innermost feelings, from which should come provisions of good to the brethren. So Israel, in the coming day of deep distress, are depicted by the prophet as crying out to the Almighty: “look down from heaven, and behold from the habitation of thy holiness and of thy glory: where is thy zeal and thy strength, *the sounding of thy bowels* and of thy mercies toward me? Are they restrained?” (Is 63:15). The restraining of one's bowels in the spiritual sense therefore, speaks of the withholding of blessings and mercies. So, the Apostle similarly speaks: “whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up *his bowels of compassion* from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?” (1Jno 3:17). The Father is the giver of every good and perfect gift (Jas 1:17) - if we

then are to be his sons; we ought not withhold the gifts he has given to us from our brethren. To truly manifest the love of God, is not to love in words only, but in deed and in truth; to provide when the Father has blessed, to give to our brethren in need - whatever form that need may take. The putting on of "bowels of mercies" with "kindness" is one of the Divine Qualities to be developed, if we would become part of the immortal family of Christ.

But if we have an abundance of this world's goods, and our brother has great need; there is a very real danger that we can begin to consider ourselves greater than him. So often, we find that brethren who are successful in worldly enterprises are held in high esteem for their social position, or worldly goods which they possess. Not so, however for the true disciple, for "humbleness of mind", and "meekness" are attributes required of them. "... all of you, be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility" is the Apostolic counsel, "for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble" (1Pet 5:5). Possession of this world's goods has no bearing on a man's standing before the Most High, for in His estimation, "a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he posseseth" (Luke 12:15).

The Spirit of meekness is, perhaps one of the most difficult qualities to exhibit in an age where humility and forbearance is mistaken for weakness. In a world where self-expression and "human rights" are constantly advocated by all around us, where every individual has a 'right' to freedom of speech, to voice his opinion; the maintenance of a quiet disposition of meekness is becoming increasingly difficult. Yet this is one of the aspects of the Fruit of the Spirit which must develop from the Word sown in our hearts: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" (Gal 5:22), all qualities so often lightly esteemed by this world of iniquity.

Again, to forbear and forgive one another, is against the ways of the natural man. The old man of the flesh wants rather to have his cause vindicated - he will forgive when the other party recognises their fault, and that he was right! He will show forbearance if others can see that he is so doing, that his restraint might be well-known and he receive praise of men. But such are not the ways of the Spirit. The man of God will be eager to exercise "love which covereth all sins" (Prov 10:12) showing all longsuffering and forgiveness to his brethren who trespass against him; being ever mindful that he himself is a sinner, in need of forgiveness. The true man of the Spirit will not seek his own good, but that of others. And this is the essence of the qualities enumerated by the Apostle to the Colossians. The spirit of consideration for One's brethren, forbearance in their failures and seeking to image the love of Christ: "even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye" (Col 3:13).

But again in this epistle, the point is emphasised that the foundation of all these sentiments is the Word itself; not a mere humanitarian outlook to fellow-creatures. "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Col 3:16). Let us then, seek to 'teach' and 'admonish' - and be taught and admonished. For this is the way of Christ - this is the outcome of the indwelling of His word in the believer's heart. And if brethren seek to follow the principles of that word, there ought to be no strife; rather the unity of brethren singing with grace to the glory of the Father who loved them, and gave his Son for them.

RELATIONSHIPS

We have commented in an earlier article of this series how that within this Epistle, the Spirit draws out and develops a steady, logical, progressive train of thought. So it is, that Chapter 1 speaks of the deliverance of the believers from the "power of darkness", to become members of the united Body of Christ. Chapter 2 then elaborates on the pre-eminent attributes of that body; how it is "complete in him" (2:10), using that fact as evidence against the Judaisers who sought to add to the Gospel of Christ - showing that they were seeking to add to that which was already complete. And chapter 2 also emphasises that if we are truly part of the Body of Christ, then transgressions are not imputed to us, for we are by association with him "circumcised with the circumcision made without hands", that is, the "putting off of the body of the sins of the flesh" through baptism.

Chapter 3 then builds further upon this foundation, bringing those principles to a more personal level. If sins are not imputed to Christ's brethren, their being baptised his death; it logically follows that being dead to sin, they ought not continue in sinful works. Thus chapter 3 describes the mode of behaviour required of the individual component parts of the Body; the set of attributes which need to be removed and discarded as a filthy garment, and the type of attributes with which true brethren must

be arrayed. So much we have considered in our previous studies. But a further feature of chapter 3 on this personal level, is the way it speaks of relationships, particularly those within a family household.

We saw how the attributes of mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, long-suffering, forbearance, forgiveness and love, which the Apostle exhorts the believer to develop (v 12-14) are all to do with our approach to others. The way in which we interact with fellow-believers, and their many weaknesses, for the mutual edification of the body as a whole. But verses 18 onwards bring into the discourse practical areas where those attributes might be applied. That is, within the family environment; for as members of a believing family learn to interact in a Christ-like spirit with each other, they will so develop that they might also behave righteously towards members of the Greater Family to which they belong; even the family of Christ. Whether they be wives, husbands, children or even servants and their masters, all are members of that greater family, and so all need to develop within their immediate circle of associates for the collective good of the body as a whole, and to the glory of the Head of the household, even the Lord Jesus himself.

RELATIONSHIPS - HUSBANDS AND WIVES

So the exhortation is given, first to wives and their husbands: “?Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them” (Col 3:18). It is a Divine principle established from Eden, that the man, not the woman must be the head of a godly household. So the proclamation was directed to Eve: “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee” (Gen 3:16). But what is the reason for this arrangement? The Apostle draws out 2 basic principles, which give ample explanation for the husband's position of “rule”. Firstly, the very order and purpose of Eve's formation from Adam's body itself establishes a pre-eminence: “for Adam was first formed, then Eve ...”. But secondly, Eve was deceived by the Serpent, not Adam: “And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression”? - these are reasons, according to Paul as the inspired apostle, why the woman should “learn in silence with all subjection” (1Tim 2:11-14). Adam was the first formed, designed to reflect the Creator's Image, whereas the Woman, being the deceived, was the first to rebel. Not that women in general are more rebellious, or any way inferior to men - in many cases the reverse is true. But rather in the Divine Scheme of things, a man and his wife are called upon to enact a wonderful parable reflective of the relationship between Christ and his bride, the ecclesia.

THE DIVINE PARABLE OF MARRIAGE

In the parable, it is the Ecclesial Bride who is the transgressor - enticed by “the god of this world” to rebel against her maker; the constituent members thereof requiring forgiveness. She is made up of individuals from all walks of life, from a tremendous diversity of backgrounds - yet even in their natural state, with all one thing in common; their sinfulness in the sight of God. These individuals become united as one body, having found forgiveness through the sacrificial love of Christ towards his bride. Christ is the Lord who, through his sufferings, gave rise to her formation, as being distinct from the general morass of humanity. So it is, that in the Parable of marriage, the bride - as identified with Eve the first transgressor, represents the Ecclesia; and the Husband therefore typifies Christ to whom the ecclesia must be subservient.

In an age of 'women's liberation,' 'equal rights' and other human devices of usurpation, such wonderful principles are hidden from the general populace which always seeks to destroy principles instituted by Divine arrangement. Even so it was in the days of the Apostle, for speaking of the principles of marriage he said “this is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the ecclesia” (Eph 5:32). “The husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the ecclesia: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the ecclesia is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the ecclesia, and gave himself for it”? (Eph 5:24-25).

SARAH AND ABRAHAM

Arguably the greatest illustration of such sisterly submissiveness in Scripture, is seen in the example of Sarah before her husband. Indeed, it is her example that the Spirit speaks of as being instructive for all generations of the kind of attributes with which sisters should adorn themselves: “... In the old time the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands: Even as Sara obeyed Abraham, calling him lord: whose daughters ye are, as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement”? (1Pet 3:6). And the point here comes home with added force when we realise that in actual fact Sarah did not literally say Abraham was her lord; she spoke it

in her heart: “?Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?” (Gen 18:12). This laugh of disbelief at the Angel’s promise was, nevertheless a powerful example of one who spontaneously and naturally feel within herself that her husband was her lord.

But whilst wives ought to be submissive to the Scripture, and therefore to their husbands as Scripture commands, husbands also have responsibilities, one of which is to display love, not bitterness to their wives: “Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them”. The relationship is two-way; the husband has his role to play in the parable; one of great responsibility; of seeking to mirror the love of the Lord Jesus to his Bride, for whom he laid down his life.

THE LAW AND BITTERNESS

One way that husbands could inflict bitterness upon their wives under the Mosaic dispensation, was by observing the provision of Numbers 10; the Trial of Jealousy. This was a procedure to be followed when the husband felt bitterness towards his wife because of suspected infidelity: “If any man’s wife go aside, and commit a trespass against him, and a man lie with her carnally, and it be hid from the eyes of her husband, and be kept close, and she be defiled, and there be no witness against her, neither she be taken with the manner; and the spirit of jealousy come upon him, and he be jealous of his wife, and she be not defiled ...” (Num 5:12-14), in these conditions the husband could instigate certain proceedings. These involved the offering of certain sacrificial animals; but also the unusual procedure of requiring the woman to drink dust taken from the tabernacle floor, and mixed with water. This was styled “the bitter water that causeth the curse”; for if the woman was guilty of adultery, a physical affliction would result, causing the woman to become barren and cursed:

“the priest shall take an handful of the offering, even the memorial thereof, and burn it upon the altar, and afterward shall cause the woman to drink the water. And when he hath made her to drink the water, then it shall come to pass, that, if she be defiled, and have done trespass against her husband, that the water that causeth the curse shall enter into her, and become bitter, and her belly shall swell, and her thigh shall rot: and the woman shall be a curse among her people. And if the woman be not defiled, but be clean; then she shall be free, and shall conceive seed” (Num 5:27-28).

When the procedure was actually implemented, these curses were written down in a scroll by the priest; and blotted out by him: “the priest shall write these curses in a book, and he shall blot them out with the bitter water” (v 23). But what is the meaning of these principles? There seemed to be no limit to the number of times a man could subject his wife to such; a naturally jealous man could cause much grief, by constantly bringing his innocent wife in such a way. There are several principles to be observed:

THE CURSE OF THE GUILTY

Firstly, the eating, or rather drinking of dust was imposed upon a woman suspected of unfaithfulness. This rather reminds us of the curse of the Serpent - just note the similarity of the terms used: “Yahweh Elohim said unto the serpent, because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly thou shalt go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life” (Gen 3:14). So it was that the guilty woman - who in the first instance, took the role of the serpent in enticing the man to partake of the proscribed fruit - bears a punishment not dissimilar to the Serpent. Her belly was affected, she was cursed, and she would also eat dust. For the innocent woman however, there was no curse. It was blotted out by the High Priest. She had remained loyal and true to her husband, and because of her faithfulness, the priest’s handwriting of the curse was blotted out. And this is directly alluded to by Paul to the Colossians, speaking of how through faithfulness to Christ, his bride is freed from the curse: “you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross” (Col 2:14).

There is, however, a most significant difference. Under the law, it was the innocent woman who had the curse blotted out. But under the law of Christ, it is the guilty, who are therefore in need of forgiveness. And through faith in him, our trespasses are forgiven; and righteousness is imputed to us for his sake. And being thus considered righteous before the Father, the curse is removed -

blotted out. This then is the exhortation for husbands in the parable of marriage: They enact Christ before their bride. They ought not therefore inflict bitterness upon them as under the law, but rather manifest the spirit of longsuffering and forgiveness. They must “love” their wives, even as Christ loved his ecclesia, and must therefore show forbearance in all things - not exalting themselves over their wives - but rather recognising that being part of the greater Bride they themselves are transgressors, and in need of having the handwriting of ordinances which is against them blotted out by mercy.

CHILDREN AND SERVANTS

Also within the family relationships described by the Apostle, are children and servants, both of whom are exhorted to “obey in all things” (3:20) their parents/masters. The obedience of children brings great blessing, as witnessed in the example of the Rechabites. To these the word of Yahweh came through Jeremiah, “Thus saith Yahweh of Hosts, the Elohim of Israel; Because ye have obeyed the commandment of Jonadab your father, and kept all his precepts, and done according unto all that he hath commanded you: therefore thus saith Yahweh of Hosts, the Elohim of Israel; Jonadab the son of Rechab shall not want a man to stand before me for ever” (Jer 35:18,19). So was given the promise of everlasting life in the Divine Presence in the Age to Come.

The Apostle likewise exhorted the young at Ephesus, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth” (Eph 6:1-3). Rebellion is loathsome in the eyes of the Most High, and children must learn obedience, that they might also show obedience to their greater Father when they are born again through Baptism. It is “right” for them to be such, and length of days is the reward which will come to them also.

With regard to Servants, we have already suggested in the first part of this series (January 2000), that the Ecclesia at Colosse was actually the ecclesia which met in Philemon's house (Phil 2). If this is so, then there is particular poignancy to the words here, for Onesimus of whom Paul wrote to Philemon would himself be one of the servants being exhorted to obedience. Previously he had been rebellious, being “unprofitable”? (v 11), running away from his master (v 15), and therefore his responsibilities. But having been received back “not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved”? (v 16), he would be motivated to render conscientious service as unto Christ.

Even so, the Apostle exhorted the Colossians: “Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God: And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men” (Col 3:22,23). And whether we be servants or freemen, the principles here are applicable to us also, for we are all servants of Christ: “he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant. Ye are bought with a price ...” (1Cor 7:22), even the blood of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. So it is, that being members of the Bride of Christ, we must show the spirit of submission to him, as our Lord. And as the servants of Christ, we must render unto him due service as he requires - And if we serve him thus, with all diligence with humility and conscientiousness, he will surely reward us with length of days, having blotted out our sins through his shed blood.

COMMUNICATIONS OF FELLOWSHIP

In our considerations over the last year or so, we have examined in some detail but a few of the many wonderful themes, Old Testament allusions, and practical teachings of this Epistle. But as our title implies, each of our studies has sought to focus upon the central message of the Epistle – that the hearers thereof might become united in love, as a single conglomerate Body with the Lord Jesus Himself as the Head. And we saw that this love is no mere shallow sentiment such as that which exists in the world, rather the inevitable effect upon believers of a mutual understanding and appreciation of the Divine Wisdom revealed in the Word.

Here then, is the central exhortation, as expressed in the words of Paul's prayer for the believers: “that their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ” (Col 1:2). Being united together in a “full assurance of understanding”, true brethren in Christ experience a joyous fellowship which greatly surpasses any friendship the world can offer. For the unity of the believers ought to mirror in measure, that perfect unity subsisting between the Father and Son. Thus the Lord prayed: “keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are ... neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall

believe on me through their word; that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us ... and the glory which thou hast given me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one" (Jno 17:11,21,22).

Being risen with Christ in the baptismal waters of a typical grave (Col 3:1), this is a powerful influence which irresistibly draws brethren together, irrespective of their personal differences. By contrast to the morass of humanity who seek only their own, whose only desire is to satisfy the grovelling instincts of the flesh, Christ's brethren have no regard for the temporal advantages of this life. Rather, being One with him, and in him, they seek to set their affections "on things above, not on things on the earth", (Col 3:2), for 'above' is where their Master is, and is therefore where their hope of life is hid (3:3). They are elements of a New Creation (cp 2 Cor 5:17), formed in the image and likeness of their maker (Col 3:10) - the constituent parts of a "new man" (Col 3:10), formed by the living influence of the Word upon the tables of their heart. And as a new man – complete in Christ, having no need of further addition by way of the traditions of men and the Judaising influence of those who would have them believe in "another gospel" - they stand whole, with mutual regard one for the other, "forgiving one another, and forgiving one another" (Col 3:13), even as Christ forgave them.

THE UNITY OF BELIEVERS – EXPRESSED IN WORDS

So it is that the central theme of this Epistle is that of the Unity of believers in Christ. And this theme continues through to our concluding section, from verse 2 of Chapter 4, to verse 18. Here, whereas the previous chapters spoke of matters of behaviour, and attitude; this section deals with words. For not only must the Spirit of Christ be seen in all our actions; our conversation also must be reflective of the One who always spoke his Father's Word. And this is seen in 3 ways – words of Prayer (4:2-3), Proclamation (4:3-6) and Care for fellow believers (4:7-18).

That which ought to come first and foremost in the utterances of the Saints, is the offering of Prayer to the Father: "Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving; withal praying also for us, that God would upon unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds" (4:2,3). The saints at Colosse were to pray –but not simply a 'shopping list' of repeated requests, rather a watchful, thoughtful petition that the Father would be with the Apostle's preaching, opening a door of opportunity for him that the work might continue.

And in this, we are given a significant insight into the mind of the Apostle. Bound in prison, in threat of his life, in dire circumstances; his overriding concern was not for himself, and for the severe discomfort he was enduring. It was for the fact that whilst he was in chains, he was unable to preach the Gospel to the dying sinners around him. That "they mystery of Christ" was not being "made manifest" by him, as he had been Divinely Commissioned to do. Thus, the primary – and indeed only – thing he besought the brethren to pray for, was that he might have such opportunity presented to him, even in such dire circumstances when preaching the Word may well be farthest from the minds of many hirelings who place present advantage over future gain.

The Apostle besought the brethren to pray for "a door of utterance". Indeed, he had been granted such a "door" several times previous to this. At Ephesus (1Cor 16:8,9 and Troas (2Cor 2:12), so he informed the Corinthians, "a door was opened unto me of the Lord". Here, a 'door' being an entrance or means of passing from one arena to another, the expression is used to denote the manner in which words might have opportunity to pass from Paul to the hearts of the hearers. Being alone, as when he was imprisoned at Rome, there was no-one to hear – the door was either closed, or was not even present at all. So, the 'doors of his lips' (cp Ps 141:3) were not permitted to allow the Gospel message to pass through them. But when it so fitted the Purpose of the Deity, opportunity was given; a 'door' was opened that Paul, and the message he bore, could enter beyond it, that the words of Life might not be bound.

And that the prayers of the brethren were indeed heard is evident from Paul's Epistle to the Philippians, for there he speaks of how his deliverance into Caesar's palace was beneficial for "the furtherance of the Gospel" (Phil 1:12,13). And again, he refers to those who had received the word, upon the opening of the door of opportunity for it's utterance: "all the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar's household" (Phil 4:22). So it was, even within the sufferings of imprisonment, the Gospel was preached – and received.

THE CARE OF THE SAINTS

One of the striking features of our Community, is the mutual interest which brethren and sisters have in one another's affairs. Whether it be reading ecclesial Intelligence, or via the "Christadelphian Grapevine", it is one of our communal tendencies, to want to know; and to seek after the wellbeing of those of like precious faith. And whilst the men of the flesh abuse this Scriptural, just disposition of mutual concern, debasing it into merely a desire to hear snippets of gossip and scandal; the true man of the Spirit will always seek after his brethren's well-being. The case of Paul is testimony to this: "All my state shall Tychicus declare unto you, who is a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord: Whom I have sent unto you for the same purpose, that he might know your estate, and comfort your hearts; With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They shall make known unto you all things which are done here" (Col 3:7-9). Here is found the expression of true carefulness in fellowship. Not a cold state of detachment from others, but a warm and living relationship – a desire to know one another's affairs, to help, encourage and pray for one another.

And in keeping with this spirit, the final words expressed in this epistle, are Salutatory greetings from brethren to those to whom Paul was writing. Aristarchus, Marcus, Jesus which was called Justus, Epaphras, Luke, Demas, and Paul himself sent their fraternal greetings to their brethren in a far off country – a token of their fraternal love, and sense of unity as a Divine Family, organised under Christ as Head. In some cases, they may have been those of like precious faith whom they had never met or seen, yet the bonds of true fellowship is not bounded by familiarity or geographical location. And this is the central, and powerful exhortation which runs through all we have meditated on in this series – that brethren of the Lord Jesus must strive to be united in fraternal love.

