

Journeys Toward Colossae: A Biblical Model for Preaching

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Those who preach from Paul's epistle to the Colossians encounter a powerful and challenging vision of God's plan of redemption for those who are in Christ, one that serves as a rich source of theological themes and images for faithful living. The question I want to address here concerns not so much the letter's theological vision *per se*, but rather the *form* that this vision takes in the text, the way that it is imparted to the reader, and what preachers might learn from this for their own proclamation. As we will see, answering this question means tending to issues of both the text's narrative and discursive dimensions, its way of telling a story and its way of calling upon the readers to make that story their own.

Form, Interpretation, and Communication

Preachers, like all those with a practical interest in communication, have long recognized the importance of form in crafting an effective message. Decisions as to the structure, logic, and style of a sermon are often just as pressing as those concerning subject matter: what to preach and how to preach it go hand-in-hand as major concerns throughout the process of preparation and delivery. Indeed, one might even say that there is a "theology" inherent to each homiletical form, insofar as the form helps shape the communicative event and the manner in which the congregation participates in that event. Sermonic form contributes to the way listeners experience the gospel, the way they learn to think theologically.¹

There would seem to be at least two important reasons why, in planning the form of their sermons, preachers turn for guidance to scripture rather than some other source. First, that content is always linked to form constitutes a rudiment of biblical interpretation. Analyzing the composition and genre of a biblical text is an indispensable facet of the exegetical work one must do in preparing to preach from that text. This means that careful readers learn from the Bible more than just a theological message or a set of theological points or ideas; they also learn methods and styles of communication that affect the nature of that message and the kind of impact it can have on those who receive it. Simply put, interpretation entails rhetorical analysis. Preachers need to reflect on the biblical form they are working with (proverb, parable, hymn, etc.), what the form achieves (praise, instruction, correction, etc.), and how it achieves it (by creating feelings of acceptance, penitence, thanksgiving, etc.). Comparative study quickly reveals how different forms create meaning in different ways — and we have in the Bible an embarrassment of riches when it comes to different forms for the proclamation of God's word. Preachers are well-served when they practice recognizing the full range of such communicative possibilities.

Second, it is theologically appropriate for us to ponder how the forms and methods of communication at work in scripture ought to inform the dynamics of our preaching. There is a consensus in homiletics today that the biblical text ought to lend to the sermon not only its themes but also its structure, movement, and patterns of develop-

ment. An important goal for preachers, then, is to inhabit the entire world of language, images, and rhetoric discovered in scripture, and to articulate some part of that world for their congregations.² This does not mean, though, that we aim for sermons that replicate the biblical text or its form. Rather, in navigating the distance between text and sermon, preachers can aid themselves by discerning the impact the text has upon the reader as a literary work, the experience one has of reading it, and by trying to bring this impact and this experience to life for those who hear the sermon. In this sense, the sermon can say and do what the text says and does, and in the same way.³ To the extent that preachers allow the text to warrant both what they preach and how they preach it, their message becomes more biblical in its bearing, more faithful to scripture's way of making meaning.

Sermon and Story

In one way or another, considerations of this sort have played a role in most all treatments of what we usually refer to as "narrative preaching," a set of methods that has exerted a strong influence on homiletics for over twenty years. To be sure, there are many different ideas about what makes a sermon or a theory about sermon formation "narrative." Of special interest here are various proposals advanced by narrative theorists about how to relate the construction of one's sermon to the biblical text upon which it is based. For example, sometimes narrative preaching involves the vivid retelling of a biblical story, or shaping one's sermon so that it moves according to a biblical "plot," a narrative pattern adopted from the text. On other occasions it involves storytelling that focuses on non-biblical narratives, taking the text as a point of departure or as a conclusion, or basing the sermon on an image derived from the text, which generates for the preacher certain narrative structures or examples.⁴

Underlying these and similar proposals, it seems, is an *inductive* approach to preaching, one that aims not so much at the exposition of doctrine as the listeners' participation in an open-ended process, a shared exploration of their Christian life.⁵ A guiding assumption for this approach is that people are narrative beings, that they intuitively employ stories to understand themselves and their world.⁶ For its part, narrative preaching calls upon listeners to embrace certain kinds of stories, stories that help them discover the substance and "plot" of Christian life. In this vein, the preacher wants to recreate some part of the Christian story, bringing listeners into personal contact with it, inviting them to re-imagine their own stories in the light of the one preached. Understood this way, narrative preaching yields effective strategies by which the biblical text, construed as a story and a set of stories, furnishes both the content and the form of the sermon.

As influential as narrative methods are, they have not been immune to criticism, especially in recent years, to the extent that already homiletics appears to have entered its "post-narrative" phase.⁷ Detractors of narrative preaching have observed, for example, that too often the theological intent of the preacher's story is ambiguous or evasive, prone to multiple misinterpretations on account of the lack of rhetorical directness. Similarly, it seems that relying exclusively on narrative for preaching risks implying to listeners a false sense of closure to Christian existence, or offers them too many distracting details, or lends only one perspective to a complex issue. In addition, with its focus on the particular, narrative preaching is not especially well equipped for advancing the gospel's truth claims, or for clarifying what is the "point" of the biblical

text.⁸ Finally, the dissatisfaction with narrative preaching reflects, in part, the belief that people do not organize and interpret their experiences only as stories. Indeed, the Bible itself illustrates a host of non-narrative forms for recording religious expression, including hymns, laws, prayers, and letters. It seems that the methods ordinarily associated with narrative preaching do not adequately address the diverse ways that people can know and feel God in their lives.⁹

If we take these sorts of concerns seriously, we are drawn to the conclusion that in preaching listeners not only need stories about how they and others experience faith, they also need ways of reflecting on these stories critically and practically — they need ways of understanding what is ultimately important in these stories about Christian life. Even as they preserve and create stories, then, it is necessary for preachers to state what they think their congregations should believe and do in response to these stories, and to marshal arguments in support of their appeals. In order to do so, preachers must assert the legitimate authority that they have within their communities: they must both tell the story and bear witness to it, and then urge others to do the same.¹⁰ This means making a case for what both the preacher and the listeners have at stake in the gospel, for what choices face them as people committed to some version of the Christian story. Not incidentally, this also means greater attention on the preacher's part to biblical texts and sermons that are not plainly stories, greater openness to non-narrative ways of thinking and speaking theologically.

Colossians as Paraenesis

Paul's letters offer an array of rhetorically compelling, non-narrative models for structuring Christian proclamation. At the same time, they may also demonstrate ways of conveying and reflecting upon the various types of narratives that help orient the identity and mission of the church. In order to understand how this occurs in the epistle to the Colossians, it is necessary to begin with some exegetical observations regarding its literary form, or genre.

Scholars have generally interpreted Colossians as a polemical tract, an attempt to refute a "heresy" of some kind that threatens the Christians in Colossae. Accordingly, exegesis of the letter often relies upon a reconstruction of the oppositional group's system of beliefs and an explanation of how Paul counters this system, point by point. Recently, though, a few scholars have suggested that the letter's primary intent is located not so much in a critique of external forces but in moral instruction for building Christian community. In this case, the text might best be classified as an example of epistolary *paraenesis*, a common form of direct discourse in antiquity.¹¹ As *paraenesis*, Colossians delivers a didactic speech from a trustworthy leader to converts who are struggling to assimilate the doctrine and ethos of their new movement. This speech represents a vehicle for socialization and moral formation, one that assists the readers in habituating received teachings and fulfilling their initial commitment to a new way of life. The letter's guidance toward this end consists principally of reminders, appeals, and directives regarding conduct within the church. The most urgent concern for the Colossian Christians, as befits their status, is not their need to learn correct doctrines, but their need to live the doctrines they already know, to internalize the gospel so that it molds their character fully and concretely.

Given its interest in reinforcing previously-learned patterns of belief and behavior, teachings and ways of teaching that are somehow *traditional* in nature are of the

utmost importance in paraenetic instruction. Colossians, for its part, makes extensive reference to materials, events, and concepts that would have been familiar to the readers. These references ultimately serve as reminders of the particular, Christian *worldview* that the letter advocates in conjunction with its instructional purpose. The letter's readers, especially being former pagans, had with conversion not only adopted a new moral code but with it a new way of viewing reality. It seems that the success of Colossians' paraenetic appeal depended largely on its practical value in helping the readers to disengage from their previous worldview(s) and consolidate their new one. Paul wants to show how his recommendations accord with presuppositions apropos of this new worldview, furnishing a plan of action which palpably validates it. Thus references to worldview in a paraenetic text like Colossians are governed by rhetorical interests, by a need to direct and motivate people in realizing a certain kind of life.

The Narrative Dimensions of Colossians

This fundamental relationship between paraenesis and worldview in Colossians implicates also a fundamental relationship between paraenesis and narrative. This follows from the basic observation that all worldviews are conveyed to some extent by narrative means, that stories are a common device for structuring the assumptions, values, and expectations laden in a worldview. Converts to Christianity, for instance, adopt its worldview in part because they are able to identify with the logic of the various stories that support it; they are able to recognize the congruence between Christian stories and their own personal stories. As Christians, they are invited to participate not only in a new worldview but also in a new narrative universe.¹²

Colossians, like other paraenetic texts, refers on numerous occasions to narrative elements of the worldview that it advances, though it is important to point out that the manner in which it does so is governed by rhetorical rather than narrative considerations. In other words, the letter does not consist of straightforward narration or storytelling. Rather, Paul alludes to parts of his narrative universe selectively, in concert with the specific appeals that make up his exhortatory speech to the readers. So while the letter does not represent a narrative genre, it is nevertheless possible to isolate the major events of its paraenetic worldview and organize them so as to expose the text's underlying narrative dimensions. Such narrative analysis indicates that Colossians refers to not just one, but to three stories, or three kinds of stories, which can be outlined as follows.

The primary or "master" story in Colossians comprises a Christian explanation of reality and history in broad, universal terms.¹³ Everything begins with God's act of creating the universe in, through, and for Christ: Christ is the firstborn of all creation, the one in whom God's fullness dwells, and it is only in him that the created order holds together. At some point, though, there arose a situation of estrangement between God and creation, especially what the author refers to as the "elemental spirits of the universe" and the "old" human being, the fallen humanity, dead in sin and subject to these cosmic powers. But so that he might be preeminent in all things, Christ was sent by God to achieve reconciliation. Through his death and resurrection Christ disarms the cosmic powers, overcoming the forces of death and sin in the world. Those called by God to be "in Christ," to be baptized into his body, are forgiven their sins and "raised with Christ." In the end, God will reveal Christ in glory and will sit as judge of all humanity. Those who have been true to their call will receive their share of the

inheritance God has set aside for them.

The protagonist of the next story is the text's author, Paul himself.¹⁴ Called by God to be an apostle, he proclaims the gospel throughout the world and, with the help of his colleagues, founds many churches, including the one in Colossae. Even as he suffers personally on behalf of Christ and his mission, he continues to lead, encourage, and teach the members of his congregations. Although he is now incarcerated and physically absent, he is with the readers "in the Spirit." He hopes to be with them in the end, too, as he presents his converts to God as people who are "mature in Christ."

The third story we find in Colossians is a local story; its central figures are the readers themselves.¹⁵ Formerly, as pagans, they were enemies of God, ignorant of divine wisdom and mired in sin and vice. But thanks to God's call and the proclamation of the gospel, they "received Christ Jesus the Lord" (2:6). Through baptism they put on the new self, being renewed in Christ and reconciled with God. They belong now to the church, the body of which Christ is the head. If they continue to recognize their new life in Christ, holding fast to him and growing in him, they will finally be revealed with him in glory.

As these summaries suggest, each story concentrates on a particular perspective appropriate to a Christian worldview. The first story affirms the sovereignty and love of God through Christ, furnishing all three stories with a strong sense of narrative coherence and direction. The second story shows how the one called by God to lead the church and proclaim the gospel plays a vital role in serving both Christ and the local congregation. The third story reminds the readers that they have their own story as a Christian community, a story for which they must take responsibility. When examined together, the hallmarks of these three stories appear especially in the identification of three divine *mandates* and the delineation of how these mandates connect the stories and protagonists in vital ways: God accomplishes reconciliation through the cross, Paul is commissioned by God to proclaim the gospel, the readers are called by God to be baptized and to live the gospel. All three mandates are initiated by God, all three relate to the revelation of God's mystery, the gospel of Jesus Christ (1:26-27), and all three advance God's cosmic plan of redemption. This correlation provides a key to understanding the logic of both the letter's narrative universe and its paraenetic appeal. Certain standards of belief and action are warranted for the readers because they correspond with this logic and help define their narrative identity. In this universe, life in Christ can not be construed simply as a local affair; rather, the commitments appropriate to that life must be determined as well in their relation to the stories of Christ and of Paul, and the ways that God's purpose is revealed in those stories.

The Discursive Dimensions of Colossians

As important as these stories and narrative elements are for Paul's message, investigating them in fact tells us nothing about the *form* of the letter. As mentioned earlier, the principles that govern its composition are paraenetic, not narrative in character. Literary analysis of the text suggests for Colossians not three stories but a three-part rhetorical structure, one which is comparable to that of other ancient paraenetic texts. Thus 1:3-2:7 functions as paraenetic *affirmation*, 2:8-23 as paraenetic *correction*, and 3:1-4:6 as paraenetic *exhortation*. These three parts of the letter represent not only different formal categories, but especially different styles of communication, which in turn reflect educational objectives and strategies of the

paraenetic genre. The author affirms for the readers certain principles of Christian faith, he warns them about certain threats to that faith, and he prescribes a way of living that is worthy of that faith. The substance and significance of the three stories outlined above, then, come to expression not as narrative creations but according to the apostle's instructional interests in guiding the Colossians. This is how the author asserts his own assessment and application of these stories, bringing their normative aspects to the fore. In effect, Paul wants to prove his version of these stories to be "true" — to be valid in terms of this community's experience.

In part one of the letter, Paul is busy affirming certain principles concerning the gospel that are pertinent to his argument. These principles are conveyed chiefly via received traditions of Christian teaching and worship, including traditional materials (e.g., the Christ-hymn), concepts (e.g., forgiveness), and forms (e.g., intercessory prayer). It is important to note that Paul does not simply cite these traditions; he is not interested simply in bringing them to mind. Instead, he attests to the power of these traditions to name the hopes and commitments that he and the readers have as Christians. Thus, he affirms not only the gospel itself, the message of what God has done in Christ, but also his own authority as a bearer and interpreter of the gospel traditions as well as the good standing of the readers in that gospel. In all this, Paul demonstrates that the gospel in which the Colossians abide is and should be none other than the gospel that he himself proclaims.

In part two, Paul reveals one of the essential obligations of his apostolic office, the obligation to expose and condemn unchristian views, and to admonish those who are misled by such views. The warnings here seem to be aimed directly at the readers, though they take into account also a third party external to the epistolary exchange, whose untoward influence is undermining the congregation's welfare. The critique tends to issues of both theory (2:9-15) and practice (2:16-23), the former referring especially to christological questions, the latter especially to questions of moral conduct and worship. Specifically, Paul contends that commitment to Christ entails the rejection of "human" values and criteria, perspectives that belong to "the world" and to "the flesh," and not to Christ or the church (2:8, 11, 18-20). Paul's effort to discredit the oppositional group's teachings is not undertaken for its own sake, but with the ultimate interests of the readers in mind: they must acknowledge the present crisis, engage in meaningful self-examination, and rededicate themselves to a reformed life.

The positive counterpart to the form of religion rejected in part two is provided in part three, where Paul offers the Colossians moral guidance of a concrete and traditional nature. The rhetorical stance of the section is dominated by exhortation, practical instruction as to the kinds of moral standards that suit the affirmations of part one and demonstrate a clean break with "worldly" views of the sort berated in part two. Thus, the reader encounters extended advice as to Christian virtues, duties, roles, and practices. The *social* character of the exhortation is evident almost everywhere: readers are called upon to give up greed, anger, and falsehood, and to clothe themselves with love, peace, and patience. Paul's advice for the Colossians takes into view all sorts of interpersonal relationships, including the responsibilities of the church as a worshipping community (3:15-17, 4:2-4) and comportment within the household (3:18-4:1). All in all, Paul prescribes for the audience the life of a new covenantal community, one not unlike the covenantal community of the Old Testament, one sanctified by and dedicated to God in all respects.¹⁶

Responding to Colossians

If preachers were to ponder the model held up by Colossians in the ways suggested above, trying to learn from the form as well as the substance of Paul's message, how might they go about proclaiming the gospel to their congregations? Three points seem to warrant special attention.

First, preaching that is informed by the Colossian model assumes a community of people who inhabit a Christian worldview which can be interpreted at least partly as a narrative universe, a worldview that assumes and is communicated by means of stories. Integral to the text's preaching style is the selective use of references to three interlocking stories: (1) the story of Christ, (2) the story of the one who proclaims the word about Christ, and (3) the story of the community that needs to hear that word. Contemporary preaching that takes this dimension of letter's communicative strategy to heart can try to draw from the same types of stories.¹⁷ This means preaching that takes into account the story-shaped lives of our listeners as Christians, as well as the broader stories of what God has accomplished in Christ and what God is doing through our lives as preachers. Paul, then, invites us to tell the story of our own congregations in the light of Christ's story; he also invites us to bring our own stories to bear in the telling of that story.¹⁸

Second, the power of "story" in Colossians is evident in Paul's message, but this power is not developed in story-telling, or in narrative forms at all. Rather, we might say that the apostle authorizes us to use the second-person in our preaching, and especially to practice ways of reminding, correcting, and exhorting listeners from the pulpit. The movement of Paul's message in Colossians from affirmation to correction to exhortation serves as the "plot" of the letter, one that determines the relevance of the plots and features of the three stories to which he refers. It should be emphasized that the shape and substance of these three parts of the letter are governed by the rhetorical exigencies of the epistolary exchange, the need for the Colossians to renew their commitment to grow in Christ at a particular juncture in their life as a community. Thus, Paul does not affirm every aspect of the gospel, or point out every sin that the Colossians have ever committed, or exhort them concerning every matter of morality; he focuses only on what is pertinent to the case at hand.

Perhaps we can learn from Paul's formal and rhetorical strategies in constructing effective messages for our own communities. Once the particular need of the congregation to be addressed in the sermon has been determined, the preacher could begin by affirming for the listeners certain fundamental aspects of the gospel that are germane to that subject. This could provide a basis, then, for admonition, where the preacher shows where the community has failed in certain of its responsibilities to heed the gospel. The sermon's conclusion would invite the congregation to respond to what it had heard in concrete terms, with the preacher formulating an explicit call for action appropriate to the sermon's occasion.¹⁹ These three ways of communicating with the audience would provide the objectives and styles according to which connections could be made between the three types of stories that the preacher presupposes and draws from. In other words, the sermon's rhetorical requirements of affirmation, correction, and exhortation provide the criteria for deciding which parts of the stories to tell and how to tell them.

Third, the Colossian model suggests for preachers a certain way for understanding their listeners and their needs. Above all, it seems that Paul's rhetorical strategies take

into account the vulnerabilities of the readers as they struggle to serve God. The Colossians were committed to Christ, to be sure, but they were still making serious errors both in their conduct and in their assessment of the Christian situation. Thus, they still needed the advice, direction, and encouragement of their leaders so that they could grow in Christ; they needed to be told plainly what was expected of them. For those who take Paul's example seriously, the communities addressed in contemporary preaching are similarly composed of people who need more than to hear stories. They also need to be reminded of those things they already know they should affirm, lest they forget or become lax. They are people who occasionally misstep and need to be warned when they do so. And they are people who need to be counseled even as to the basic requirements of Christian living. The strategies of affirmation, correction, and exhortation not only recognize and respond to these basic needs, they also help define the responsibilities of those who serve the church, both generally and from the pulpit. Paul encourages leaders to take on these sorts of tasks for the benefit of their communities, and to do so by challenging their listeners with an interpretation of what the gospel means for their particular situation.

Notes

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 172-174.

² Gail R. O'Day, "Toward a Biblical Theology of Preaching," *Listening to the Word*, ed. Gail R. O'Day and Thomas G. Long (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 18.

³ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 33.

⁴ Richard L. Eslinger, *Narrative and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 141-174.

⁵ See esp. Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971).

⁶ For example, Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980).

⁷ For example, David L. Bartlett, "Story and History: Narratives and Claims," *Interpretation* 45 (1991): 229-240; William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 47-66.

⁸ David M. Greenhaw, "As One with Authority: Rehabilitating Concepts for Preaching," *Intersections*, ed. Richard L. Eslinger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 105-109.

⁹ Scott Black Johnston, "Who Listens to Stories?" *Insights* 111 (1996): 4-13.

¹⁰ Cf. Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster, 1989), 42-47.

¹¹ For detailed analysis see Walter T. Wilson, *The Hope of Glory: Education and Exhortation in the Epistle to the Colossians* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

¹² For example, N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 38-46, cf. 121-144.

¹³ See esp. Colossians 1:12, 15-23, 2:8-15, 20, 3:1, 4-9, 10-11.

¹⁴ See esp. Colossians 1:7-8, 1:23-2:5, 4:3-4, 12-13.

¹⁵ See esp. Colossians 1:12-14, 18, 21-22, 2:11-14, 19, 3:1-4, 7-9.

¹⁶ For example, compare Colossians 3:12 with Deuteronomy 7:6-8.

¹⁷ Cf. Edmund A. Steimle, et al., *Preaching the Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

¹⁸ Cf. David L. Bartlett, "Texts Shaping Sermons," in *Listening to the Word*, 159-160.

¹⁹ Cf. Thomas G. Long, "Shaping Sermons by Plotting the Text's Claim Upon Us," *Preaching Biblically*, ed. Don M. Wardlaw (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 88-91.