
Colossians: Purpose and Prayer

Col. 1:1-14

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Introduction

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This is the first in a series of messages that will take us through the book of Colossians. The plan is to work through four key passages and then to end with an open forum to review, make application, and answer any questions. This will take us through the five Sunday evenings in June. Given the constraints of this plan, I will not be preaching through every verse of all four chapters. Rather, I intend to land on specific passages that emphasize the purpose and key thematic elements of Paul's letter. So while it may feel like we are doing a little hop-skip-and-jump, we will actually cover the majority of the text while giving sufficient background for you to fill in the passages we skip over.

This first message will actually be both an introduction and then a look at the opening passage of Paul's letter to the church in Colossae. My primary purpose is to develop our understanding around the purpose of Paul's letter and then to look at his opening prayer that makes up the greater part of the first chapter. Through this look at Paul's purpose and prayer, I believe you will see the passion of Paul for the Colossae church. Here we will see the heart of a shepherd who is genuinely concerned for God's people and is writing to encourage and strengthen them against the destructive forces of false teachers. So let us dig in and take a closer look at this marvelous letter.

[opening prayer]

Some of you may remember that last year in June, Dan and Devon each preached a message out of Philemon. Most of you will recall that the books of Colossians and Philemon are closely connected. They are both letters from Paul to the church in Colossae. The historical background for Philemon is the same as Colossians. Both as a review and as a preparation for our tour through Colossians, let us add some color and depth to the backdrop before we launch into the letter itself.

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Colossae was a city in the Roman province of Asia. The city was located nearly 150 miles inland in a region referred to as the Lycus valley. Today we would see this region as the south-western part of Turkey. **[Slide 3-b]** In the centuries prior to Paul's letter, Colossae had been a wealthy and influential city due to its location along the main road to Ephesus. However with the birth of the Roman Empire its significance had faded as Laodicea became the political and financial center of the region.

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We can gather from both Colossians and Philemon that Paul had not visited the church in Colossae. Nevertheless, the churches in Lycus valley region were of enough significance to Paul's ministry that we have these two letters to this church as part of the New Testament. This church, along with those in nearby Laodicea and Hierapolis were the work of Epaphras, who was either the fruit of Paul's ministry or so closely connected that Paul is able to describe him as "beloved" and could bear witness to his work among them. It is possible that as a native of Colossae, Epaphras may have been sent by Paul to do the evangelistic work of an "indigenous missionary" to plant churches in the region.

While we do not know the size or makeup of the church at Colossae, we can infer from the text that it was made of up both Jewish and Gentile believers. Colossae was known to have a sizable Jewish population and Paul's references to those who "once were alienated and hostile in mind" in Col. 1:21 would indicate the presence of Gentiles as well. We can also assume the church was fairly strong as Paul opens his letter addressing them as "faithful brothers" and commends their faith in verses 3 and 4 of Chapter 1.

The occasion of Paul's letter is to address and oppose error being brought into the church by false teachers. From verse 8 and 9 we are to understand that Paul had received a report from Epaphras of both the faithfulness and strength of the church, but also of the danger of false teaching that had the potential to deceive and divide them. Paul's letter reveals his great concern that doubt might creep in, drawing them away from the centrality and realities of Christ. And that the impact of such error might lead to forms of legalism damaging the unity and love for one another as the body of Christ. Paul, led by the Spirit, does not directly spell out or define the error that was entering the church. But we can see its outline as it is shaped by his defense, much as the purpose behind a conversation can be inferred by the questions and topics that flow through the words and reactions of the speakers.

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It is important to understand some of the thematic elements that weave their way through the entire letter. Let me highlight three of these themes. **[Slide 4-c]** The first is the supremacy of Christ. This can be seen where Paul clearly speaks to the position, power, and authority of Christ the Lord. In light of the subtle error facing them, Paul urges them to remember who Christ is. How could they look to anything else but Christ who was at the center of the Gospel? The original message of redemption in Christ they had been given through Epaphras. Knowing Christ was the best defense and protection against error.

The best way to counter error is to proclaim the truth. You have heard it said that the way bank tellers are taught to identify counterfeit currency is by learning what real currency looks like. Similarly as believers, the best way for us to recognize and counter error is to know the truth. Not some human philosophy that has been blended with scripture, but God's truth based solely upon the revelation of Christ in scripture. That is why at Clearcreek, while we will warn of error and dangerous teachings; we will always provide a steady diet of God's word that solidly grounds us in biblical truth.

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The second thematic element is Paul's presentation of the sufficiency of Christ. This is seen primarily in Chapters 1 and 2 and is also held out against the error being taught. And it continues into Chapter 3 as Paul provides practical instruction and the evidence of a life changed by the all sufficient power and presence of Christ in the lives of believers. This truth cuts to the heart of the error being introduced by false teachers. There is no richer experience. There is no deeper knowledge. And there is no greater power than that which we have in and through Jesus Christ. This sufficiency is clearly seen in the phrases "in Christ", "in Him", and "with Him" used throughout Colossians. Paul repeatedly points the church to Christ and all that they have in Him to strengthen their faith and lead them to holy lives for the glory and honor of God's name.

The heart of this defense is seen in Chapter 2 verses 8 through 23. The threat appears to be a philosophy or teaching that emphasized a kind of false humility and empty traditions that were aimed to achieve a greater fullness or degree of wisdom than they already had in Christ. To our modern ears this may seem to be an obvious threat. But to Jewish believers and recent Gentile converts, it is possible that the philosophy contained just enough truth to draw them in and to sound wise. This is the danger of establishing human interpretation as the standard of truth. Its subtlety and appearance of truth is a Trojan horse that conceals its danger and the threat that lies within.

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A third thematic element is evident in the love there is to be for brothers and sisters in Christ. First, Paul's love and concern for the church is directly evident in this letter as seen in his opening prayer, in his rigorous defense against the threat they were facing, and in his gracious prayers and gratitude offered at the end for his fellow partners in the ministry. As a true shepherd, in the face of danger of error and sin, his true care and concern is shown by a careful and biblical warning. This letter reminds us that both encouragement and warning are to be bathed in prayers of love and concern. This is the true heart of Christ and concern for his church.

We also see Paul's instructions on love made evident in the lives of believers. This can be seen in his instructions to the Colossians in Chapter 3 and in the closing remarks of Chapter 4. Because of all that Christ has done in us, there is to be a quality and character of love that should be on display within the body of Christ. This love is reflected in an attitude of putting off the sin that damages and destroys relationships and putting on the character of Christ who is our new identity. For if Christ is our identity and we are present with Him, then He should rule supreme in our hearts. And His rule will yield a deep love for the Church and the people of God who are the body of Christ.

Purpose

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With that historical and thematic background, we are led to the purpose of Paul's letter. Let's look at the opening of Paul's letter in verses 1 and 2 of the first Chapter. *"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father."* Paul opens the letter with a standard greeting of his time. Any of you who have taken one of Dale's Sunday School classes where he has taught an epistle will probably recognize the structure immediately. If the mark of a good teacher is how well his students remember what he has taught, then I must commend Dale for helping us, and me personally, for understanding the format and structure of the New Testament epistles.

There are some differences from a common greeting of that time that should be noted. First, Paul establishes his authority as an Apostle of Christ and by the will of God. While the Colossians had not met Paul, it is certain that they had heard of him and his ministry, especially through Epaphras. Paul thus establishes his credentials and credibility as one uniquely given authority as a messenger of Christ Jesus the Lord. A second difference is the uniquely Christian nature of the greeting addressing them as saints and brothers in Christ. Paul is not addressing just anybody; these are faithful brothers and sisters in Christ for whom Paul is grateful and concerned. A third and final difference is the depth of care indicated by Paul's sincere desire that they experience the grace and peace that comes from God alone. Paul's greeting reflects a genuine love for fellow believers that flows out of a shepherd's heart for the church. Here is Paul's desire and purpose for them to overcome error with the truth and knowledge of Christ their Savior so that they might grow in the grace and peace found in God their Father.

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While not directly evident in the opening greeting of the letter, we hear the genuine concern Paul has for the Colossians. The actual concerns are not clearly defined in Paul's letter. This is probably because they were not as important to the overall message and because the Colossians would have already been familiar with the object of Paul's concern. We should also assume that by the exercise of God's sovereign will, such detail was not include for us as well and that the presence of threat was more important than its nature and details.

Though the actual concerns are not defined, this has not kept scholars and commentaries from debating over the nature of the errors being taught. Several commentaries refer to the existence of what is called the "Colossian heresy". Whatever the error or heresy was, it was clearly the cause of Paul's concern. And while there is debate, there seem to be two likely possibilities that are offered outside of the text.

The first of these was a subversion of the Gospel through Gnostics who taught that a greater access and relationship to God could be achieved through special knowledge and wisdom. This would seem consistent with Paul's use of the words "fullness", "knowledge", "mystery", and "wisdom" in the letter. Paul's concern with "plausible arguments" in verse 4 of Chapter 2, may allude to the subtlety and appeal of such arguments to be more spiritual and wiser than others. This is often the attractiveness of false teaching. To those deluded by such error, it appeals to pride in having risen to a higher intellectual plane than others. But it is nothing more than rebellion against God by elevating man's truth above God's.

The second possibility is a form of Jewish syncretism that appears to add the false-piety of various forms of asceticism and regulations along with a mysticism that emphasized the role of angelic and demonic powers. These teachers combined or “syncretized” various elements of religions, often pagan, into a special or higher form of religion. Again, those following this empty philosophy were drawn to a perceived elite status that allowed one to see and understand mystical revelations and visions. The denial of self and adherence to strict regulations were seen as elevating oneself to this higher plane.

Lest we relegate such subversions of the Gospel and scripture to the past, one only has to look to the syncretism of post-modern thinking with biblical truth today. Such error diminishes the centrality of Christ and the authority of Scripture in a way that dilutes the Gospel and leads the church astray. Is it not true that liberal theology, emergent church philosophies, and post-modern evangelicalism present the same dangers today? Should we not contend for the faith and defend against error with a passion and love for Christ and the church? Then let us, like Paul for the Colossians, have the same concern for error and false teaching that would damage the church and keep the lost from hearing the true Gospel.

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Paul also has a deep care for the church of Colossae. This is seen in his opening prayer, which will look at in more detail shortly. Paul’s care is seen in both word and deed. In the first and last chapters, Paul’s love overflows in words out of his gratefulness to the Father for their redemption and faith in Christ. He notes their faithfulness and growth as believers. He refers to beloved brothers and fellow servants in Christ. Paul is a faithful shepherd who loves and cares for the sheep.

Paul’s care is seen not just in words but also in deeds. True love and care will be made evident in action. While it is supported by words of encouragement and gratefulness, it is exercised in deed as well. We see Paul’s commitment to prayer on their behalf; prayers of thanksgiving and intercession. He tells of his struggle for them and for the church in Laodicea. And we see the circumstances from which Paul writes the letter. He is imprisoned and yet writes so selflessly. Paul is the kind of shepherd who does not consider his own suffering in light of the needs of the church. Paul is a humble shepherd who is willing to pour out his life for the church.

Prayer

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Paul's heart for the church is clearly seen in verses 3 through 14, which represent the opening prayer of the letter. This passage may be divided into two sections. The first being verses 3 to 8 where Paul's prayer is one of gratitude for the church. The second being verses 9 to 14 where it is largely a petition for grace to the church. These two elements form a prayer that is rich with meaning and application for us today. Here is a prayer that is to be modeled and serves to lead us in our prayers for one another.

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Verses 3 to 8 comprise a prayer of gratitude that is marvelous and yet humbling to read. It is easy to skim over these verses and miss the meaning and implications of Paul's prayer. So let's read these verses carefully together. *"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit."*

There is a unique tone and quality to this section that expresses the personal and selfless nature of Paul's concern for the Colossians. There is much that could be said here, but let me focus your thoughts on a few key points. But do not miss that the essence of Paul's thanksgiving is based upon what God is doing in the lives of the Colossians. These verses express a sincere and caring thankfulness that at the same time acknowledges the redemptive and ongoing work of the Gospel in the lives of believers. It is both thankful and encouraging at the same time establishing God as the object of our thanksgiving.

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The first observation to make is that there is a sustained attitude of gratitude. Paul's personal predicament of prison marks this as even more striking. Paul and his companions (thus the "we" of verses 3, 4, and 9) always thank God for His work among the Colossians. It was a foundational and regular part of their prayers for them, not out of some formula or prescribed order, but in response to the marvelous work of God in their lives. So great was their appreciation for what God had done, that they could not pray without acknowledging the source and sustainer of their faith.

This is a humbling example. There is a consistency to their thanksgiving that is carried along by the Gospel realities of Christ in their lives. There is a fresh response to redemption that does not take salvation and the power of the cross for granted. It is a joyous, glad hearted response to the love believers have for one another. These verses should drive us to our knees in repentance for hearts that are too often not thankful for God's work in others and thus fail to bring him the glory and pleasure He is due.

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The second observation is a sustained attitude that flows from a certain hope. The faith and love of believers is because of the certainty of the hope and truth of the Gospel that is secured in heaven in Christ. It is more sure than anything we hold to be secure in this world. Frankly, security in anything of this world is a myth. Our lives, our homes, and our families all hang upon the thread of God's sovereign will. This world and the things of this world are only temporary. On the other hand, eternity with Christ is based upon the word and promise of God; and it is more certain and sure than our finite minds can ever know.

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Not only is this gratitude a sustained attitude flowing from a certain hope, but a third observation is that it does so through a sure word. The certainty of our hope is based upon the sureness of the word of truth, which is the Gospel. It is the good news of Christ proclaimed, heard, and understood. It is evident in the changed hearts and lives of believers. This is something the Colossians and all believers should be familiar with. The word of truth that through the Spirit brings about faith; and through faith, redemption. It is the word of truth that bears fruit, producing a harvest of righteousness and grows the church by spreading the seeds of the Gospel throughout the world. It is the power of the sure word of the Gospel in the lives of the church that produces a heart of thanksgiving that is to be offered up to the pleasure and glory of our God.

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A final observation is that the gratitude flowing out of a certain hope comes through the sure word proclaimed by a faithful servant. To many of the Colossians it was Epaphras, who Paul calls a dear fellow servant and faithful minister, who proclaimed to them the sure word that led to their salvation. This is the man who Paul writes in Chapter 4 is *"always struggling on your behalf in prayer"* and who *"worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis"*. There are many who labor in ministry on behalf of the church; many who labor to bring the Gospel to the lost. It is through the church and people like Epaphras that God uses to proclaim his word to bear fruit and grow the church for the glory of His name. And it is Epaphras who brings word to Paul of their love in the Spirit and their faithfulness that is the cause for Paul's thanksgiving and prayer.

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In verses 9 to 14 the prayer of gratitude becomes a prayer of grace for the Colossians. In several ways, Paul's prayer for them is shaped by his concerns. So again let's look for how Paul's pastoral concern is seen in this prayer. *"And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."*

What would it have been like for the Colossians to hear this read aloud? Can you imagine it? How many of you know or know of Pastor John Street who was the original teaching pastor who founded Clearcreek? How many of you were greatly influenced and grew under his teaching and ministry? Well, think of what it would be like for us to have a letter from Pastor Street read aloud, regarding concerns he had for error in the church. Imagine as his letter begins, he offers a prayer for us that conveys the heart of a caring pastor and intercedes on our behalf in the areas where the error is most dangerous. That is what it must have been like for the Colossians.

Here again, I would like to make four key observations from this passage. Each of these elements of Paul's intercession for the church in Colossae is tied to his concerns; concerns which he addresses later in his letter. Paul begins his letter, in essence, by praying for them in the areas he is about to instruct them. We also see from verse 9 that from the time they first heard of the Colossians faith, they had not stopped praying for them. Such prayers were likely to have intensified at the report of the false teachers brought to Paul by Epaphras.

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The first observation is Paul's prayer begins with asking that they be filled with the knowledge of God's will. The sense of this request is that God would grace them with an abundance or fullness of knowledge of his will. Commentators note that the use of the word "fullness" here and throughout Colossians is both intentional and significant. Those who were teaching error and misleading the church were using this term most likely to appeal to a desire for greater and special knowledge. It is interesting that Paul qualifies this request for knowledge "*in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.*" The fullness of knowledge Paul asked for was not a special wisdom for the spiritually elite, it was to be framed by God's will with a wisdom and comprehension enabled by the Spirit. His prayer is not for the knowledge of men, but rather for a wisdom and understanding that leads to a knowledge of God's will.

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The second observation is that the purpose of such knowledge is walking worthy of the Lord. To walk in a manner worthy of the Lord is a glad hearted and willing obedience that springs from a heart in submission to Christ as Lord. This is an obedience that pleases Him in a way that is complete and full. It is obedience out of devotion and thankfulness. It is a righteousness that engages all of life bearing fruit in every area. It is a love for God that deepens and grows in knowledge of Him. It is evidence of the power of the Gospel both to save and sustain the believer in Christ. Paul's prayer is that a fullness of knowledge of God's will in the church will result in a worthy and mature walk that is demonstrated in every area of life.

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So Paul has asked for knowledge of God's will and for a worthy walk. The third observation is that Paul asks for the Colossians to be strengthened with power. Paul understands that to live in glad hearted obedience is only possible through the power of Christ in their life. It is far easier to live by rules and self abasement than to walk worthy of the Lord. O'Brien notes of this passage in the New Bible Commentary, "*Paul heaps up terms for power and strength to stress that: nothing short of God's almighty power at work within them will enable them to live in a way that is pleasing to him; his glorious might is more than adequate for the Colossians' needs;*".¹ Christ's power in the lives of believers is more than sufficient to face trouble, opposition, trials, failures, or any other difficulty of life. And so Paul contrasts the erroneous teaching of mystical knowledge and miraculous powers with a prayer for a Christ-enabled power for a worthy walk.

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The last observation is Paul's request for a joyful giving of thanks. The reason for this thanksgiving is based on remembering their inheritance in Christ and their deliverance from the realm of sin and darkness into the kingdom of light of God's only beloved Son. Paul prays that the Colossians would reflect on their redemption in Christ and forgiveness of sins with a heart of thanks. Not only would their thanks glorify God but would also remind them of who they were in Christ. Everything had been accomplished in Christ. There was no higher knowledge that they needed. They were already placed into the Kingdom of Christ. In Christ there is freedom and forgiveness from sin. This thought should produce a joyful giving of thanks in the heart every believer.

Conclusion

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So tonight, I have tried to do two things. First, I hope you have gained a sense for the backdrop into which Paul's letter arrives to church in Colossae. Paul's purpose is to encourage the Colossians and counter the error of false teaching with the marvelous truth of Jesus Christ. Second, I hope you have gained a sense of Paul's passion for the church in his opening prayer. It reveals the heart of a shepherd with a deep and genuine love for God's people. Paul's purpose and prayers are interconnected throughout the entire letter. And as we work our way through a few of the key passages, it will clearly evident how Paul's passion for people and sound doctrine are woven together.

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Before we conclude this message, let us take note of how Paul's passion, evident in this pattern of this prayer, speaks to us today. The pattern of Paul's prayer is one that boldly challenges us to uphold one another in a powerful way. As I developed this message it struck me that this prayer both humbles us and models for us, a prayer for the church. Not that this is some magic formula that dispenses the grace and power of God through repeating it in form and style. But rather, it is an appeal to the almighty God when offered from sincere hearts and it can shape our hearts and minds to pray in a way that is aligned with His will.

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So let me speak to my fellow Elders and those who are leaders at Clearcreek. Should we more regularly pray like this for those under our care and ministry and also for one another? Do we pray that our people would grow in knowledge so that error would be recognized and rejected? For the sake of church, are we willing to pour out our lives and defend against error like Paul and Epaphras? Let us encourage one another to this end for the glory and honor of God's name.

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These words should also speak to everyone in the church. As brothers and sisters in Christ who have been redeemed and transferred into the kingdom of light, do we pray like this for one another? Husbands, is this a regular prayer for your wife and children? Children, is this your prayer for your parents? Or have our prayers become feeble, weak attempts that are too quickly ended? I know these are hard questions, but I ask this not just of you, but also of myself.

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And what about ourselves? If Paul prays for believers in this way, is this not a manner in which we should pray for ourselves? Does this not establish, at some level, a measure of maturity in our walk with Christ? Let me be in Christ what he has saved me to be. To live in the knowledge of God's will; to walk in a way that is worthy of my Lord; to be strengthened in all power to please Him; and to joyously give thanksgiving as I daily remember the grace and mercy of redemption that has made me His child. What would God do in my life, if in some way, I prayed each day that God would do this in me?

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I know, in some way, many of you are thinking this is an impossible application. And humanly speaking, that is true. Is it an unattainable goal? This side of heaven, maybe. But is it a goal worthy of your efforts and prayers? The answer is, absolutely yes. So let us not be discouraged to press on and to work hard for the sake of Christ and His church. Let us pray for strength and power, knowing that all things are possible in Christ Jesus our Lord. Let us pray for one another, that we would be characterized, maybe not by perfection, but by a steady growth and maturity that cherishes and displays the glory of God in our lives. And let us be a passionate people of purpose and of prayer.

[closing prayer]

References

1. Carson, D. A. (1994). New Bible commentary : 21st century edition. Rev. ed. of: The new Bible commentary. 3rd ed. / edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970. (4th ed.) (Col 1:9). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press.