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COLOSSIANS
REMIXED

SUBVERTING THE EMPIRE

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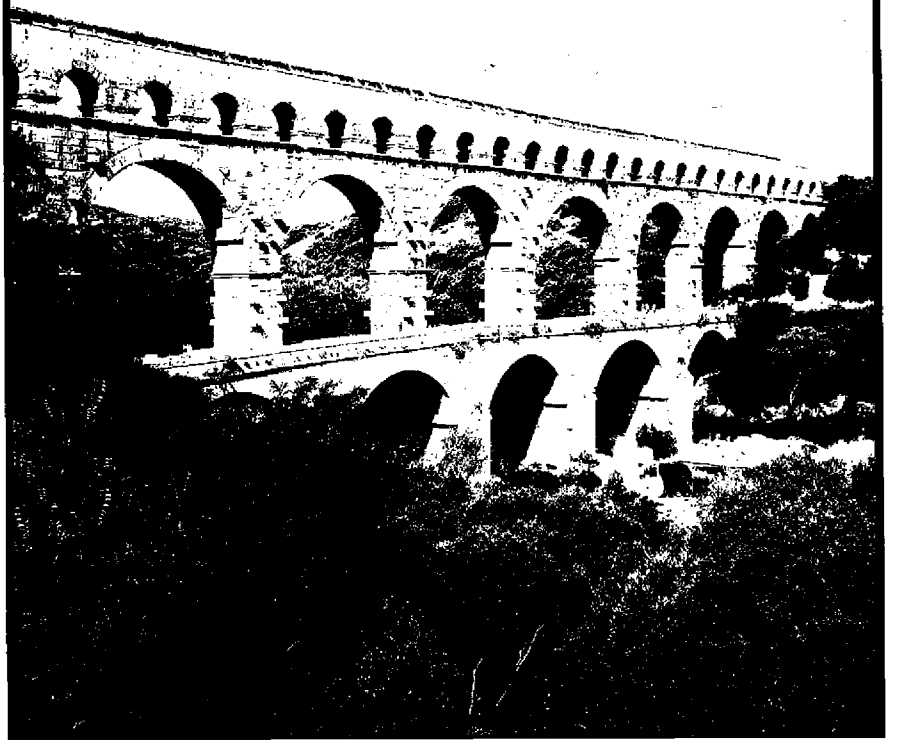

CONTENTS

Preface 7

PART 1: CONTEXT REMIXED: COLOSSIANS AND EMPIRE

1 Placing Ourselves: Globalization and Postmodernity 15
2 Colossians and Disquieted Globalization 38
3 Placing Colossians: Discerning Empire 49
4 Contested Fruitfulness in the Shadow of Empire 65

PART 2: TRUTH REMIXED: CONTESTED IMAGINATIONS

5 Subversive Poetry and Contested Imagination 79
6 Regimes of Truth and the Word of Truth 96
7 What Is Truth? 115
8 Faithful Improvisation and Idolatrous Lies 132

PART 3: PRAXIS REMIXED: SUBVERSIVE ETHICS

9 An Ethic of Secession 147
10 An Ethic of Community 169
11 An Ethic of Liberation 201
12 A Suffering Ethic 220
Bibliography 234
Author Index 247
Subject Index 249
Scripture Index 254

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WHAT IS TRUTH?

Do you mind if I interrupt?

No, go ahead.

I'm glad to see we've finally come back to truth. You started the last chapter by rehearsing how Paul is preoccupied with truth and knowledge in this epistle, and you ended by talking about "proving the gospel to be true" through the historical and cultural life of the Christian community. But in the middle, as you were talking about Foucault's "regimes of truth," I am not so sure we didn't kind of abandon truth and slip into rhetoric.

You might be on to something there. Can you explain this a little more for us?

Well, it seems to me that once you concede Foucault's point that truth is "produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint," aren't you saying that truth is simply a power game? If there is no more to truth than this kind of imposition of power, then the only argument for the truth of any particular position would be a rhetorical argument. The person or group with the best persuasive skills, and maybe the most social and economic power behind them, wins all contests for truth. Isn't this what you are left with?

If that is what we were left with, then Paul would certainly want to disown us.

What do you mean?

Think for a moment about Paul's social location and the location of the Christian community. If truth was simply a matter of rhetoric backed up by power, then it is pretty clear that the "word of the truth" that Paul proclaims is going to be on the losing side in the battle over truth in the world. It is, after all, the empire that has the power, and just to prove it, Paul is writing this letter from an imperial prison cell. Empires love to have a monopoly on truth. So Paul wants to appeal to a truth that is beyond rhetoric and not reducible to power—or at least power as the world understands it.

Why then did you walk down that Foucauldian path and subject both Paul and the "philosophy" to such a rhetorical analysis? You focused on the nature of their discourse—whether it was exclusionary, whether it engaged in power grabs, whether it sanctioned certain ways

to ascertain truth and censored others—rather than on whether the content of their discourse was true or not.

In the first place, we walked the Foucauldian path because it seems to us that there is ample evidence in the history of the church, and in our own lives, that truth claims do often function as violently ideological regimes. There is something therapeutic about such a deconstructive exercise, because it forces us to take a good look at what is really going on in our discourse and in our lives. It forces us to ask difficult and potentially embarrassing questions of ourselves, our tradition, and even the biblical text and its authors.

I can see the usefulness of asking such questions of ourselves and even of our various Christian traditions, but isn't subjecting the text to such a hermeneutic of suspicion inherently problematic—even spiritually dangerous? And doesn't the very posing of such questions arrogantly place us over the text? Isn't this really a modernist kind of attitude?

On one level, we agree with you. Much suspicion of the biblical text is a modernist power game. And insofar as the kind of suspicion we investigated in the chapter was postmodern, we also attempted to say in what ways we think this kind of textual criticism can amount to little more than facile, cheap critique. But we have another, more compelling reason to walk down this Foucauldian path.

What is that?

Well, it's William. You see, folks like William ask these kinds of questions of this text. As we said, William and countless others duck when they hear worldview talk and experience little more than revulsion when they engage a text that speaks with the kind of authority of Colossians 2. That allergic reaction to Paul's kind of rhetoric needs to be taken seriously. And it needs to be addressed if we are ever to hear Paul anew.

But when we hear Paul anew, we still need to address the question of whether what he is saying is true.

Sure we do.

Do you think your counterideological dimensions of the biblical metanarrative—even in the ways they are present in Colossians—prove the truth of Paul's gospel?

No. They don't "prove" anything at all. What we attempt to suggest by pointing out these counterideological dimensions is that the postmodern suspicion of all metanarratives as metanarratives is an overreaction. There is at least *this* metanarrative that contains the resources within itself to undermine its ideological distortion. Not all worldviews are regimes of truth, we are saying. The worldview on offer in Colossians is the kingdom of God's beloved Son.

But is it true?

Well, what do you mean by that?

Is the gospel that Paul proclaims true in and of itself? Is it an accurate reflection of the Truth that stands outside of what he says about it, outside of his interpretation of it? Is the truth "out there," or is it, as Foucault puts it, something we produce?

Why is it important for you that the truth is "out there"?

Because if it isn't "out there," if truth isn't objectively verifiable in some way, then we end up with relativism. My worry here is that you are so concerned about the postmodern reaction to absolutes that you end up watering down the gospel and providing a text with no absolutes at all. In fact, if I read you rightly, you identified a belief in absolutes with the philosophy under attack, as if the message Paul is preaching isn't itself a presentation of absolute truth.

This is a very deep-rooted concern for you, isn't it?

Yes. I raised similar issues in our first dialogue. At that time you held off on talking further about the postmodern critique of objective truth. I'm putting the issue back on the table because the last chapter didn't resolve the issue for me.

Before we try to respond to your concerns, we have one question for you. In our first conversation we focused on various dimensions of the biblical understanding of truth as fidelity, as relational and covenantal. Does that approach to truth mitigate any of your concerns here?

Yes and no. I have to admit that was a new way of thinking about truth for me. And I have to admit that what you were saying certainly appeared to be biblical and struck all kinds of intuitive chords in me. But I am still uneasy. If truth is as relational as you are suggesting, then isn't that just one small step away from a thorough-going relativism? Isn't the conviction that the truth is "out there" absolutely essential to the claims of Christian faith?

This is very interesting. You recognize that this way of speaking about truth is biblical, and such an understanding of truth actually strikes intuitive chords, but still you are uneasy. What we are talking about has both exegetical and experiential warrant, but still it makes you anxious. You identify the source of that anxiety as fear of relativism and a need for truth to be "out there." You know, there is a name for this kind of anxiety. It is "Cartesian anxiety,"[1] and in response to it we want to offer you this word of pastoral advice: Fear not.

Easy to say, not so easy to live. I think relativism and subjectivism should strike fear into our hearts. Surely Allan Bloom was right when he wrote, "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative."[2]

Well, the first question we need to ask here is, relative to what? If truth is relative, what is it relative to in the minds of these students who so offended Professor Bloom? Of course, the answers are legion: truth is relative to your gender, your social standing, your relative power in society, your time in history, your religious tradition, your race, et cetera, et cetera.

All of this relativity spells the closing, not the opening, of the American mind, says

[1]Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), pp. 16-17.

[2]Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 25.

Bloom. But there is an interesting twist to all of this. You see, while Bloom's statement is offered as both an "objective statement" and a lament, the statement itself can actually be seen to prove the point of relativity—much to Bloom's chagrin.

Note, for example, that Bloom writes as a tenured professor who did not have a very good experience of teaching at Cornell in the 1960s. Indeed he is a white male professor who has no difficulty with using the male pronoun as generic for all students in his statement. It's as if he hasn't noticed that something called feminism has begun to reshape the face of American culture and scholarship. He is a professor with classical training and a classicist understanding of the world who is deeply disappointed that the discipline of reading the great books of the Western tradition has come into bad times during his career.

Our point is that Bloom's lament about relativistic students needs to be heard, understood and evaluated in terms that are relative to Professor Bloom himself. He makes his statement, indeed he writes his apologia for a classicist understanding of the world and the academy, not as a neutral observation from nowhere but as a lament uttered from a particular social, intellectual, professional, historical, political, racial and gendered perspective. His statement about relativism is, if you will, a relative statement.

I am not going to debate the details of Bloom's book with you—it is actually a little before my time—but surely your critique doesn't totally eliminate the concern he has raised about relativism. Even if it could be established that his own views are rather biased, that doesn't mean bias is okay. Rather, it means we need to be even more diligent in our attempts to be objective.

How do you know when you are being objective?

When you are submitting your ideas, beliefs and truth claims to rational evaluation.

That is precisely Bloom's position. He insists that reason has a "special claim" on us, that we need to submit to the "primacy of reason" because where the "rule of reason" holds sway the "voice of reason is not drowned out by the loud voices of . . . various 'commitments.'"[3] But despite all this commitment to reason, it takes only a little scratching at the surface of the rhetoric to discern all kinds of special interests at work in Bloom's book.

So is Bloom just inconsistent, or is the problem deeper?

The problem is much deeper. The problem has to do with commitment. Note that he says that the voice of reason must not be drowned out by the loud voices of various "commitments." Let us give you a postmodern translation of that: the hegemonic, absolute and finally authoritative commitment to reason trumps all other commitments.

Come again? How are you reconfiguring the relationship of reason and commitment?

It's really quite simple. All that we are saying is that the commitment to reason is

[3]Ibid., pp. 39, 259, 266, 261.

just that—a commitment. And this commitment has no more rational foundation to it than any other commitment.

Are you saying that we shouldn't be committed to rationality?

Yes, that is exactly what we are saying. We shouldn't be "committed" to rationality for two reasons. First, we should be committed to Jesus, not to rationality. And second, once we become committed to rationality we are engaging in idolatry, and promiscuous copulation with idols bears bad fruit in our lives.

Hold it for a second there. Surely the way we are "committed" to rationality is very different from what a commitment to Christ is like. And surely a commitment to being rational is not in itself any more idolatrous than being committed to being ecologically friendly in the ways I dispose of my waste.

Well, we think it is even possible to make an idol out of ecological concerns if they become the ultimate and final criteria by which all decisions in life are made. But this hasn't been the characteristic idolatry of Western culture, nor is it a very powerful temptation to most Christians. The commitment to reason, however, is the most insidious idolatry to capture the imagination of the church in its history. What is so insidious and ingenious about this commitment is that it has for so long managed to disguise the fact that it is a commitment.

Think about it for a moment. Seldom is the commitment to rationality ever recognized to be a commitment.[4] It is just being rational! But the heart of the postmodern deconstruction of this tradition of rationality has been to uncover how this commitment to rationality is a commitment, how this tradition of rationality is a tradition. This has been a central feature of the modernist commitment to reason; it has attempted to eschew all tradition, all historically situated perspective, in favor of a universal stance that leaves the religious wars and conflict of traditions behind. But this has been achieved only at the cost of elevating one tradition—the particular, historically situated tradition of the Enlightenment itself—over all other traditions.[5] We have not avoided tradition, we have not risen above historical particularity or the limitations of temporally and spatially bounded perspective; we have simply granted final and imperial hegemony to one tradition over all others.

And from a Christian perspective, the greatest tragedy is that the church has mostly bought into this lie.

I am still worried that this amounts to relativism. Is the truth "out there" or not? And can we know the truth objectively?

We understand your dilemma, and we recognize that there is a valid problem you

[4]For a powerful critique of the belief that reason is religiously neutral, see Roy Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality: An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).

[5]Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

are addressing. Truth cannot be reduced to "what your peers will let you get away with."[6] This rather famous, though flippant, remark by Richard Rorty may cynically reflect much of what goes on in the academy, but it's much too reductionistic to satisfy a reflective Christian.

More than that. Christians believe that the truth is the truth even if your peers won't let you get away with it. Jesus died at the hands of his peers in the contest over truth.

Great point. Truth is, in the end, not reduced to a matter of agreement. After all, oppressive regimes love to manipulate agreement.[7] Truth is always contested. And if truth really does set us free, as Jesus said, then truth participates in a life-and-death conflict with oppression.

Then don't we need "objectivity" to avoid such oppressive paths?

Well, it hasn't worked so far; why should it start to work now?

What do you mean?

We mean that the twentieth century was the most violent century in history and that the most oppressive regimes we have seen have all claimed to be basing their power on nothing less than an objectively and scientifically based ideology. We need only think of the three holocausts of the 1940s and 1950s to see the point. Germany was at the pinnacle of Enlightenment civilization, and the gas chambers were seen as a scientifically sound and efficient way to bring a solution to the problem of the "genetically deficient" Jews. It was scientific objectivity and American know-how that produced and justified Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And it was in the name of scientific dialectical materialism that Stalin sent all dissenters to the gulags.

Our point is that "objectivity" does not set us free from oppressive regimes. In fact, every modern ideology has hidden behind the façade of scientific objectivity. To be postmodern is to say, enough! Enough of this kind of objectivity. Indeed, to be postmodern is to not be able to "get over" these holocausts, but rather to allow these events of radical evil to bring into question the whole Enlightenment ideology of objectivity

Let's say that I can "get over it." Let's say that I can write off these admittedly terrible events as aberrations. It wasn't objectivity that brought the holocausts but the sinfulness of the human heart. If you will grant me that (even if we will still disagree), then again, what's the problem with objectivity?

The issue isn't objectivity as a particular kind of intellectual discipline used to perform certain kinds of intellectual exercises. In this sense, attempting to be "objective" when sitting on a jury or performing a physics experiment or trying to understand a complex argument is an important and necessary stance to take. Our problem is not with objectivity per se but with an *objectivism* that privileges a certain kind of objec-

[6]Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 176.
[7]Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*, ed. Mark Achbar (New York: Black Rose, 1994).

tivity in the quest for something called "truth."

Objectivism makes the truth into a passive entity "out there" that is best discovered and grasped by means of the detached observation of knowing subjects who adopt a stance of neutrality. Objectivism posits that truth is achieved when we make propositions, statements and reports about the objects "out there" in the world that accurately *mirror* the way things are. These propositions must conform to the "canons of reason" and be reproducible "by other knowers operating by the same rules."[8] The rules, however, dictate that human subjectivity, historical context, religious beliefs and so on must not be allowed to influence the quest for truth. Objectivism, then, is an approach to knowledge that attempts to eschew all perspective rooted in particular times, places and traditions, in order to aspire to the "view from nowhere."

The problem is, there is no view from nowhere! There is no neutral standpoint. There is no detached objectivity. Knowing the world is not a matter of simply mirroring reality "as it really is," because we have no access to reality "as it really is" apart from the place in which we stand and the view or views of the world afforded to us from that place.[9]

Rorty's remark about truth being what your peers will let you get away with is flippant, but we think he is right when he insists that we have no access to something called "reality" apart from the way we represent that reality in our language. Since we never encounter reality "*except under a chosen description,*" we are denied the luxury or pretense of claiming any immediate access to the world.[10]

Note the problem here isn't whether there is a world that in some important respects is "out there." Postmodernists do not, as a rule, step out into moving traffic under the illusion that the world is just a matter of their perspective. The world may well be "out there"; the only question here is one of access. Do we have access to the world apart from perspective? The answer, we suggest, is no.

So are you saying that the whole modernist enterprise of objectivism is bankrupt?

That pretty much sums it up. And we are not alone in our judgment. We agree with Miroslav Volf when he writes:

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[8]Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1983), p. 27.

[9]Rodney Clapp argues that "there is no such thing as safely and absolutely secured knowledge. Knowledge is particular and perspectival and as such is always contestable" (*Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs* [Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2000], p. 28).

Now we can already hear the Christian objectivist retort: "Are you sure that there is no such thing as safely and absolutely secured knowledge?" The implication, of course, will be that Clapp's statement is self-contradictory: he demonstrates precisely what he seeks to deny by making such a seemingly secure statement against the possibility of epistemological security. So let us reply to that rhetorical ploy right now. Even the statement that there is "no such thing as safely and absolutely secured knowledge" is itself "particular and perspectival, and as such . . . always contestable."

[10]Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism and Philosophy," in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* ed. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman and Thomas A. McCarthy (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), p. 57. Italics in original

> The agenda of modernity has overreached itself. Its optimism about human capacities is misplaced and its assumption that there is a neutral standpoint wrong. There can be no indubitable foundation of knowledge, no uninterpreted experience, no completely transparent reading of the world. A cosmic or a divine language to express "what was the case" is not available to us; all our languages are human languages, plural dialects growing on the soil of diverse cultural traditions and social conditions.[11]

We concur totally. If modernity overreached itself, then objectivism is an expression of intellectual pride. The problem is that we abandoned all epistemological humility.

What do you mean by "intellectual pride"?

Well, it takes a fair bit of pride to believe that autonomous human reasoning will bring about a sort of secular utopia. But there is more. You see, modernity is a cultural movement rooted in a reaction against Christian faith. Two things that Christian faith has a high regard for are finitude and fallibility. Modernity attempts to erase the limitations of finitude by means of a scientific method that seeks near-infallibility. That is the path of idolatry.

A Christian view of knowledge, however, has good reasons to be humble precisely because of finitude and fallibility. Finite knowing is always limited. We know the world only from a particular perspective or worldview that can function both to open up and to close down the world to us. Since we are fallen creatures, distortion and the tendency to close down knowledge are never far from our attempts to know the world. Postmodern suspicions of totality claims are well founded. Recognizing the situated particularity of all finite knowing and the universal brokenness of all knowers should engender a deep humility in our knowing that runs counter to the aggressive arrogance of objectivism.[12]

Then wouldn't the path to truth be just a more chastened, more humble objectivity?

That's a start, but it doesn't go far enough. You see, the issue of how we know something depends on what it is we are attempting to know. Philosophically, this is to say that ontology precedes epistemology; that is, our understanding of being precedes our understanding of knowing. For example, if the world is viewed in fundamentally materialist terms (the whole world is matter in motion governed by unbending laws), then certain kinds of techniques for knowing such a world will be given the status of orthodoxy, in the academy and in society at large. In a mechanistic world, scientific processes that are preoccupied with measurement, repeatability and law-

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[11]Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), p. 243.

[12]Richard Mouw has wisely argued that while we must be "actively working to discern God's complex designs in the midst of our deeply wounded world," that discernment must be rooted in an appropriate sense of "modesty and humility" (*He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001], p. 50).

determined behavior are privileged over such things as intuition, myth and feeling. How you understand the nature of the world shapes how you go about knowing it.

So the question is, what kind of world is best known "objectively," and is that the world Christians inhabit if their imagination and worldview are biblically shaped? Let's try to get at this from the opposite direction. Instead of talking about the objectivists, listen to what Foucault has to say:

> We must not imagine that the world turns toward us a legible face which we would have only to decipher; the world is not the accomplice of our knowledge; there is no prediscursive providence which predisposes the world in our favor. We must conceive discourse as a violence we do to things, or, in any case as a practice which we impose on them.[13]

On one level this is a postmodern unmasking of the violence that is part of any aggressive knowing of the world, such as objectivism. But Foucault isn't simply engaging in a critique of modernity here. He is also saying something about the world. If the world does not turn a legible face toward us, if it is not something we can know and if there is nothing that helps us know the world, then knowledge is always a matter of violence and imposition.

However, in stark contrast to the anthropocentric preoccupations of both modernity and postmodernity, biblical faith affirms that creation is an eloquent gift of extravagant love. This is not a world of objects that sit mutely waiting for the human subject to master them. Rather, this a world of created fellow subjects, all called into being by the same Creator, all born of the Creator's love, all included in the Creator's covenant of creational restoration, and all responsive agents in the kingdom of the beloved Son. Philosopher Albert Borgmann describes biblical faith wonderfully when he speaks of "the eloquence of reality."[14] A creation called into being by the Word of God, created in, through and for Christ in whom all creation coheres, is not a mechanistic system but a dynamic, personal, living creation that has a voice. This eloquence is manifest in the witness of the stars (Ps 19), the groaning of creation (Rom 8:22), the joyful singing of the trees of the field (Ps 96:12), the vomiting and mourning of the land (Lev 18:24-28; Jer 12:4; Hos 4:1-3) and the hosannas of the rocks on the side of the road (Lk 19:40).

But surely the biblical language about creation singing, groaning and the like is all metaphorical.

Of course it is metaphorical! But the metaphors that one employs both bear witness to and give shape to one's view of the world. A materialist worldview that talks about the world in mechanistic terms also necessarily has to revert to metaphors—the metaphors of machines. So also do all worldviews.

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[13]Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Travistock, 1970), p. 316.

Could you give another example?

Well, consider the language used for forests. Whether we see trees as crops, or products, or habitats, or parks, or responsive agents in God's creation that have a capacity both to sing for joy and weep in travail will have profound effects on how we will go about getting to know trees. If biblical metaphors shape your understanding of creation, then something like a tree is no longer "merely an object in our world of experience but also a subject of relations in its own right. It is acted upon and it acts."[15] If this is true, then the categories of objectivism, with their penchant for distance and detachment from the "object" under investigation, become hopelessly inadequate.

Okay, let's say that our view of the world is profoundly shaped by these biblical metaphors of a responsive creation. I still don't understand what this means for how we know the world.

It means that we attempt to engender a listening epistemology. If the world is eloquent, if it speaks and if we share a profound kinship with all other creatures, then we need to develop the skills to listen more attentively to creation and to interpret what one author has described as "creational glossolalia."[16] This means we need a science that functions as "an invitation to engagement with nature."[17] That engagement calls for nothing less than a love for the subject.[18]

Remember that the Hebrew word for knowing (*yada*) doubles as the word used for sexual intercourse. It is this kind of knowing Paul is talking about when he prays that the Colossian Christians would be filled with all wisdom and understanding and the knowledge of God's will. Well, if our imaginations are biblically shaped, if we know the world, and know God, with this kind of holistic intimacy, and if we believe that all of creation is so known by God and is invited to know God in this way, then shouldn't that inform how we know the world? Why would we settle for the abstract coldness of detached objectivity when we had already tasted the tangible warmth of intimacy? Why would we think that disinterestedness is an epistemological virtue in a world suffused with intimate relatedness?

This is a relational epistemology rooted in a relational ontology. Since we confess that this relationship is rooted in the love of God, knowing this world is always at

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[15]Charles Birch and John B. Cobb Jr., *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 123. See also Brian J. Walsh, Marianne Karsh and Nik Ansell, "Trees, Forestry and the Responsiveness of Creation," *Cross Currents* 44, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 149-62.

[16]Calvin G. Seerveld, *Rainbows for the Fallen World* (Toronto: Tuppance, 1980), p. 11. Scott Hoezee cites John Calvin's insistence that when we are contemplating the vast array of creatures in God's world, "we should not merely run over them cursorily and, so to speak, with a fleeting glance; but should ponder them at length, turn them over in our minds seriously and faithfully, and recollect them repeatedly" (*Remember Creation: God's World of Wonder and Delight* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998], p. 29). Such a "pondering" is at the heart of a listening epistemology.

[17]Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 163.

[18]John Stott insists that the works of creation are to be the "subjects," although not the "object," of our worship ("The Works of the Lord," in *The Best Preaching on Earth: Sermons on Caring for Creation,* ed.

heart a matter of love. Such an epistemology of love is described beautifully by N. T. Wright: "The lover affirms the reality and the otherness of the beloved. Love does not seek to collapse the beloved in terms of itself."[19] And Parker Palmer writes that "the act of knowing *is* an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own."[20]

Again, what does this look like in practice?

It's difficult to really say, because our imaginations have been so captivated by modernist objectivism that we have few role models. But there have been some. Think of John Muir, the father of the national parks system in the United States. Muir would sit down beside unfamiliar plants every day to "listen" to what they had to say. He combined the analytical scrutiny of his botanical training with an empathic sensitivity that attended to the particularity of the plant within its web of environmental relationships. Of trees he said, "I could distinctly hear the varying tones of individual trees—Spruce, and Fir, and Pine, and leafless Oak. Each was expressing itself in its own way—singing its own song, and making its own particular gestures."[21]

A similar perspective characterized the work of Nobel laureate Barbara McClintock. Her genetic analysis of corn plants was informed by a view of each plant as "a unique individual," a "mysterious other" and a "kindred subject."[22] For McClintock the complex intricacies and detailed analysis of plant genetics required the intimacy of a listening epistemology in order for her to "know" her subject in truth.

Or consider economists like Bob Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange, who listen to the groaning of creation in the form of ecological despoilation, the voices of the most indebted nations of the Two-Thirds World, and the complaints of the unemployed, homeless and working poor. These economists have developed an economics of care in the face of an economic orthodoxy that has made gods out of efficiency and growth.[23] This too requires a listening epistemology—hearing the voices drowned out by the dominant paradigm.

All of this hangs on commitment. McClintock, Muir, Goudzwaard and de Lange do their science from a committed place, from a particular perspective that they hold with something like faith.

And Christians know the world from a committed place, a place of faith.

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[19]N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK/Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), p. 64. For a similar attempt at a more holistic epistemology see Esther Meeks, *Longing to Know* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2004).

[20]Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known*, p. 8.

[21]Quoted by Richard Austin in *Baptized into Wilderness: A Christian Perspective on John Muir* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987), p. 29.

[22]Quoted by Jay McDaniel in *Of God and Pelicans: A Theology of Reverence for Life* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1989), pp. 86-87.

[23]Bob Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange, *Beyond Poverty and Affluence: Towards an Economy of Care*, trans. and ed. Mark R. Vander Vennen (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994).

Yes, that's right.

But not everyone holds the same beliefs. People have different commitments. So they'll "know" the world differently.

If you keep going down this path you'll be a postmodernist.

Not so long as I am afraid of relativism. And isn't that where all of this leads if our knowing is rooted in faith without any court of appeal beyond it?

Well, if there is any court of appeal, it is God who sits as the judge. The deep blasphemy of modernity is that it made "reason" the judge. Now if you submit your faith claims to the adjudication of reason and you justify your belief in the sovereignty of God or the authority of the Bible on the basis of reason, take a close look to see what is *really* sovereign and where real authority lies. Reason ends up being the sovereign authority. The Bible has a word for this kind of thing: idolatry. We have taken a good dimension of human life—cognitive reasoning abilities—and made a god out of it, subjecting all else to its authority.

Again, what then is the alternative?

Recognize that all reasoning is rooted in what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls "control beliefs." In a revolutionary work in Christian epistemology, Wolterstorff took Immanuel Kant's enlightenment belief that religion should always be within the bounds of reason and put it on its head by claiming that the opposite was the case and reason was always within the bounds of religion. Reasoning is an activity done by real, honest-to-goodness alive human beings, not detached brains objectively crunching data like a computer. And these embodied human beings are, at their core, religious creatures who necessarily place ultimate faith and trust somewhere. It is from this place of faith and trust that people reason. Wolterstorff argues that "in weighing a theory one always brings along the whole complex of one's beliefs." The most foundational of these beliefs are "control beliefs."[24]

While modernists are "embarrassed" about such talk of beliefs and faith, postmodernists should have a more sympathetic view of the role of faith and belief in all knowing, since they have been so adept at uncovering precisely such beliefs where, by modernist standards, they were not supposed to be. This is what Richard Rorty calls a "final vocabulary."

> All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. . . . These are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. I shall call these words a person's "final vocabulary." It is final in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse.[25]

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[24]Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 62-63.

[25]Richard Rorty, "Ironists and Metaphysicians," in *The Truth About the Truth: De-confusing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World*, ed. Walter Truett Anderson (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), p. 100.

For Rorty, a final vocabulary is not something one acquires by means of objective metaphysical reflection. Rather, a final vocabulary is a poetic achievement—it is a way we learn to use certain kinds of metaphors to engage and describe the world. In this light we think it is no accident that Paul writes a poem as the heart of his letter to the Colossians. To say that Paul writes this epistle to shape and form the worldview of the young Christian community in Colossae is to say that he is trying to provide them with a final vocabulary that is alternative to the empire's.

Is there an appeal to anything beyond a final vocabulary—like maybe to the world?

If you are asking, are there any external criteria by which final vocabularies are evaluated, then Rorty would answer no. And we would agree with him. In other words, we do not believe that there are any metaworldview criteria by which all worldviews can be fairly evaluated. You see, whatever criteria one would propose would themselves be worldview dependent.

So we are left with relativism after all.

Only if relativism is the only option available when the so-called religious neutrality of objectivism has been unmasked for the particular worldview and particular final vocabulary it is. We don't believe this. In fact, to believe this is to grant an epistemological primacy to objectivism that we have been resisting throughout this whole dialogue. To use biblical language, don't allow the idol to set the terms of the conversation.

So what criteria are there to evaluate worldviews, and where do they come from?

To begin with, any criteria are worldview dependent, so the criteria for the truthfulness of a worldview we propose would not necessarily convince everyone. That said, we suggest the following. Any worldview, any final vocabulary or set of control beliefs, needs to

1. be comprehensive in scope. Is it truly a *world*view? Does it open up all of life, or are there serious blind spots, places where the worldview in fact seems to put blinkers on its adherents?
2. be coherent. By this we do not mean that the worldview must manifest the theoretical coherence of a system of thought (worldviews are not systems, nor are they theoretical in character) but that the vision of life hangs together and is not at war within itself.
3. sensitize its adherents to justice. Perhaps this is a very clearly Christian criterion, but it is, interestingly, shared by many worldviews, including postmodern takes on these issues. Does the worldview legitimate oppression of the other, or does it open us up to the needs, cries and pain of the other?
4. be humble about its own claims and therefore open to correction. If a worldview is held with a sense of universal finality, then it has been distorted into a totalizing ideology. Recognizing the fallibility and finitude of all human knowing should entail a humility in the manner in which we hold our final vocabularies and a will-

ingness to have our worldviews opened up and expanded (even corrected) through hearing the voices of other people who live out of other visions of life.[26]

5. be able to generate a praxis that puts into action the vision of life that is at the heart of the worldview.[27] A worldview that does not take on flesh in a particular way of life is no worldview at all.

Is this list offered in order of priority? Is comprehensiveness most important, then coherence, and on down the line?

No, it is not a matter of saying that if these five criteria are all fulfilled, in the order in which they are here presented, that then one has "justified" the truthfulness of the worldview. That would itself, be too mechanistic for us. And it isn't that each criterion is more important than the next. In fact, we think that given the way things usually function in human life, praxis is most important. When people are first attracted to another worldview it is usually because of the lived lives, the praxis, of the community that holds it. The truth of the worldview must be embodied if it is to be known.

In a provocative essay entitled "There's No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It's a Good Thing Too," Phillip Kenneson argues that part and parcel of the objectivist's view from nowhere was detachment from any particular community in order to adopt a more universal standpoint. We have already seen this to be an impossible and bankrupt epistemology. Kenneson, however, pushes the point further and says that when Christian objectivists claim that the gospel is "objectively" true, they are also abandoning the church as the locus of the truth claims of the gospel.

> Too often appeals to the objective truth of the gospel have served as a means for the church to evade its responsibility to live faithfully before the world. In short, Christians insisted that the gospel was objectively true regardless of how we lived. The paradigm I am advocating frankly admits that all truth claims require for their widespread acceptance the testimony of trusted and thereby authorized witnesses. . . . What our world is waiting for, and what the church seems reluctant to offer, is not more incessant talk about objective truth, but an embodied witness that clearly demonstrates why anyone should care about any of this in the first place.[28]

Embodied witness—that is what we've been talking about all along.

Then it all hangs on us?

Well, an awful lot more hangs on us than we have been willing to admit.

And you are saying that this is the epistemology of Colossians?

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[26]It needs to be added that this "other" could be the other of any other worldview or the "otherness" of the voice of God, Scripture and creation.

[27]Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984), pp. 36-40.

[28]Phillip D. Kenneson, "There's No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It's a Good Thing Too," in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 166.

Paul isn't writing a letter about epistemology, and the kinds of struggles we are having around objectivism would be quite alien to him. Nonetheless, we think that this embodied, relational epistemology of love is pretty close to what Paul is getting at.

I'd like to see some evidence from the letter.

Okay, look at this section from 2:1-4:

> For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face. I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments.[29]

Paul is concerned with plausible arguments, so we can say that epistemology isn't all that far from what he is talking about. What makes an argument plausible? In this passage Paul has made plain the purpose of his letter to the Colossian Christians and their friends down the road in Laodicea. He is worried that they might be deceived by plausible arguments. Our question is, what would make an argument in favor of a worldview alternative to the gospel seem plausible to these young Christians?

Perhaps an answer to this question can be discerned in what Paul says more positively about his purpose in writing. He says that he wants "their hearts to be encouraged" and for their community to be "united in love, *so that* they may have all the riches of assured understanding." This is really quite remarkable when you think about it for a moment. Something like assured understanding—that is, a settled firmness in one's faith and a deep confidence in the truth of the gospel—is rooted, most foundationally, in encouraged hearts and the unity of love in the Christian community.

I'm not sure I'm getting it.

Well, it seems that Paul thinks that personal and communal despair and enmity within the community have the greatest power to rob us of assured understanding. It is hard to be sure about your faith when you are discouraged of heart and experience the Christian community as a place of bitterness and enmity.

Paul cuts through much of the intellectualism of contemporary Christian thought here. We tend to think that if we can help Christians get their theology right—even form a biblical worldview—then they will have a firm foundation for their knowledge of Christ. Now obviously we don't want to knock the importance of such reflection—we are writing this book as an exercise in worldview formation—but we want to make sure we have our priorities straight and a clear sense of how things work in human life. The lived experience of deep-rooted encouragement and communal love is foundational for assured understanding.

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[29]Much of the exegesis that follows first appeared as a "Commentary" column by Brian J. Walsh in *Third Way* 24, no. 4 (June 2001).

I still don't quite get it. Why should such assured knowledge be so integrally tied to the quality of life in the Christian community?

Who is this knowledge about?

Christ.

Precisely. And who is this Christ but the incarnate Word of God, full of grace and truth? Remember, from a biblical perspective truth is not a correspondence between ideas and facts. Truth is embodied in a person. If incarnate truth is to be known in its fullness, then it must be met in the flesh. If this truth is not enfleshed in our lives and in the community that claims to bear witness to it, then it quite literally becomes unknowable to us. We cannot know this truth, we are stripped of assured understanding, because—well, we can't *see* it. In this respect, seeing—experiencing, touching and feeling—is indeed believing. Maybe that's why Paul is so concerned about people who have not seen him "face to face." They have not had the opportunity to see how he embodies the truth.[30]

When you put it that way, I can begin to see your point. Of the friends of mine who have abandoned Christian faith, very few of them stopped believing in Christ because of intellectual problems with the Bible or because they were seduced by some other worldview or belief system. Rather, they tend to abandon Christian faith because of the irrelevance, judgmentalism, internal dissension and lack of compassion they experience within the Christian community. Rather than finding the church to be the community that most deeply encouraged them in their struggles, they lost heart in their discouragement and lost their faith in the process. Rather than experiencing the church as the site of the most profound hospitality, love and acceptance, they felt excluded because of their doubts and struggles.

This is our point. What makes an argument that is alternative to the gospel plausible? Is it the internal consistency of the argument? Is it its scientific verifiability? Its political and economic power? No, what makes an argument that is alternative to the gospel plausible is the implausibility of the Christian community itself.

When the church fails to be a listening community, attentive to the cries of the poor, then the gospel is implausible and alternative social philosophies take on an air of plausibility. When the church becomes a site of bitter enmity while the world is spinning ever more quickly into war and violence, then the gospel is not only implausible, it is an embarrassment. In the face of such failures to be a community that embodies the truth that came to save the world, it is no wonder that alternative visions become more plausible to us.

The knowledge that Paul is talking about in this passage is "Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." One would think that once we have met in this Christ all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, no mere imitation of wisdom, no false claims to knowledge, could ever be plausible to us

[30]We are indebted to Nik Ansell of the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto for this insight.

again. But the implausibility of the opposition is dependent on the plausibility of the gospel as it is enfleshed in the historical and cultural life of the church.

So the church needs to put up or shut up.

That pretty well sums up a biblical epistemology. We need to struggle to discern Christian paths in politics, the arts, ecology, economics and all the rest of our life because the very plausibility of the gospel hangs on it. That's why Paul must move beyond his attack on the false philosophy in Colossians 2 to sketch out what Christian life looks like on the ground. The false philosophy will remain plausible as long as the Christian community is immature in its Christian character. So it is to further character formation that Paul turns.

But before we follow him into that discussion, let's return one more time to Paul's rhetorical attack on the "philosophy" in the rest of chapter 2 and ask how we might hear this text address the twenty-first century.

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FAITHFUL IMPROVISATION AND IDOLATROUS LIES

Earlier in this book we offered a targum on Colossians 1:1-14 in the face of what we have called "disquieted globalization." At that time our imaginary reader interrupted us with questions about exactly what we were up to in that rather odd genre. Our discussion quickly focused on questions of exegesis. What is going on when we write a targum that criticizes a view of truth as a "detached set of verities"? Why do we take Paul's language of wisdom, knowledge and understanding in that text to be in conflict with a modernist understanding of truth and knowledge? After our second targum, on the Colossian poem, other questions arose. Why do we name names? Why do we interpret language of "thrones, dominions, rulers and powers" as having sociocultural reference? And our discussion of Colossians 2 in the face of what Foucault calls "regimes of truth" gave rise to more questions in the last chapter concerning truth. Can we offer exegetical support for the rhetorical moves we are making when we contrast regimes of truth with the kingdom of God's beloved Son? And what are the broader implications of these moves for a Christian epistemology and ethic?

In a few pages we are going to offer another targum—this time on Colossians 2:8—3:4. While we certainly do not want to foreclose on any further discussion of that targum, we want to anticipate a question we think may have been lying behind our reader's concerns from the beginning. What kind of a hermeneutical method is being employed when one writes a targum? How do we move from an ancient text addressing a very different socioeconomic and cultural context to the contemporary situation? Or to put it concretely in terms of our study of Colossians, what is going on when, in our targums and throughout the book thus far, we make a jump from the dynamics of the Roman empire in the first century to problematics of globalization and postmodernity in the twenty-first century? What justifies these kinds of interpretive moves?

In response to these questions we need to describe the model of biblical authority we are employing, and then we need to indicate the principles that guide the actual writing of a targum.

An Unfinished Drama

It should be rather clear by now that we read a text like Colossians in the context of a broader narrative understanding of Scripture and the life of the church. Paul's thought, we have argued, is deeply rooted in the metanarrative of Israel. This metanarrative provides the matrix of meaning within which Paul understands the story of Jesus and the life of the body of Christ. But this raises an important hermeneutical question. How does a narrative, indeed a metanarrative, function authoritatively in the life of the community that adopts this grand story as its own?

Borrowing from N. T. Wright, we find it helpful to understand the task of reading and living out of the biblical story in terms of an unfinished six-act drama.[1] If Act I consists of *creation,* where the Author's plot intentions are initially revealed and the scene is set, then Act II is the *crime* or the *break in the relationship,* the garden revolt in which we meet the first major incursion of plot tension or conflict in the story. The remainder of the narrative, which consists of the often tortuous route to the resolution of this tension, could be divided into four further acts. If Act III is the story of *Israel* and Act IV the story of *Jesus* (the decisive, pivotal act that begins to unravel the plot conflict at its deepest roots), then Act V is the story of the *church* beginning on the day of Pentecost, and the sixth and final Act is the *eschaton* or consummation in which the Author's narrative purposes are finally realized.

What is unusual about the biblical drama, however, is that the script breaks off in the midst of Act V, resulting in a sizable gap between Act V, scene 1 (the story of Pentecost and the early church), and the climactic finale of the drama in Act VI. While there are many clear indications of the shape that Act VI will take (the restoration of all of creation and the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth), there is no canonically established script that gets us from the beginning of Act V to the final Act VI. We are now living in Act V and are on the stage as actors in this divine love story that seeks to restore the covenantal bond between the Creator and his beloved cre-

[1]N. T. Wright first developed this approach to biblical authority in "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?" *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991), and employed it further in *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK/Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 139-43. Following J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), chap. 8, we modify Wright's five-act model into six acts. Recognizing that we compromise the Shakespearean overtones in so doing, we think it is theologically necessary to create a little more discontinuity between the history of the church and the consummation of all things in the second coming. Hence our distinction between act 5 and act 6 below. Beyond this, our position is essentially the same as Wright's. See also Brian J. Walsh, "Reimaging Biblical Authority," *Christian Scholar's Review* 26, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 206-20.

ation. Our task is to keep the drama alive and move it toward Act VI, recognizing that in this final Act God becomes the central actor again and finishes the play. But how do we move the drama forward? We turn to the Author and ask for more script. And the Author says, "Sorry, but that is all that's written—*you* have to finish Act V. But I have given you a very good Director who will comfort you and lead you."

So here we are, with an unfinished script, at least some indication of the final Act and a promise that we have the Holy Spirit as our Director (though not a new writer!), and we have to improvise. If we are to faithfully live out the biblical drama, then we will need to develop the imaginative skills necessary to improvise on this cosmic stage of creational redemption. Indeed, it would be the height of infidelity and interpretive cowardice to simply repeat verbatim, over and over again, the earlier passages of the play. The task is not so much a matter of being able to quote the earlier script as it is to be able to continue it, to imaginatively discern what shape this story now must take in our changing cultural context.

It is important to note, however, that such imaginative improvisation must be so deeply immersed in the text, and so completely absorbed in the story, that our imaginations are transformed and liberated by the vision the story sets before us. Deuteronomy 6:6-9 gives us a sense of how such an imagination would be shaped. According to Deuteronomy, every moment of every day is supposed to be filled with Torah, with the story of who God is and what God has done. We should so indwell this story that it permeates our very being, so that it is constantly on our tongue and at the heart of our daily discourse. The cadences of this tale should become our native tongue. The Deuteronomy text doesn't limit the impact of this story just to our waking hours—even when we are asleep we dream in its symbols and metaphors! This story is on our hands so that we see it enacted in all that we do, and on our forehead so that others see the story in all that we think and say. Our homes and our life in the public square are to be shaped by this story.

This story has come from somewhere and is going somewhere, and we can truly know where we are going only if we know where we have come from. In order to have vision we must have memory.[2] Indeed forgetfulness or amnesia is precisely what strips us of vision—without the past there can be no future. So our contemporary improvisation must be informed and directed by both a profound indwelling of the biblical vision of life and a discerning attentiveness to the postbiblical scenes that have already been acted out in the history of the church.

There is a certain dynamic in this approach to biblical authority that could be described as a dance between innovation and consistency. Our serious reading of Scripture must be characterized by fidelity to the thrust of the narrative and thus provide our life with a consistency and stability, a rootedness. At the same time, however, the

[2]Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

Bible as an unfinished drama gives us freedom for historical innovation and thus a creative and imaginative flexibility in our historical responses. It is only by maintaining the essential relationship between stability and flexibility that we "may avoid the hazards" of both a rigid fossilization of our faith and a "deeper *relativizing* which gives up everything for a moment of [contemporary] relevance."[3]

As we read through the biblical story, it is clear that the Israelites themselves retold their stories with such fidelity and innovation. As the ancient Israelites encountered new situations, they remembered and interpreted their traditions in such a way that they engaged contemporary problems and concerns. Indeed without such dynamic interpretation, the texts and the traditions contained within them were seen to be incomplete.[4] There is therefore a dynamic of "inner-biblical exegesis" wherein various biblical traditions are creatively reworked in Israel's Scriptures. As the biblical story unfolds, the received traditions were "adapted, transformed, or reinterpreted."[5]

James Sanders describes this biblical dynamic as both stable and adaptable. This text tells the true story that provides the very identity of the believing community. Herein is stability. But that community can be sustained through time and changing circumstances only if the story is adaptable to those circumstances. Herein is flexibility. Sanders discerns in the constant telling, retelling, reciting of the story within the Bible itself precisely such an adaptability.[6]

Stability and flexibility, fidelity and creativity, consistency and innovation—these are key if a narrative text is to have any current authority in our lives. It seems that Paul himself understood something of these dynamics in Christian life and discipleship. Recall the wonderful mixed metaphors he strings together in Colossians 2:6-7: "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving." Paul frames metaphors of solidity and stability (rooted, built, established) with metaphors of growth and dynamic change (live, or "walk," and abounding, or "overflowing"). Roots that do not bring forth dynamic growth and change are taking in no new sustenance and result in a stultifying conservatism that grinds the biblical narrative to a halt. Growth and change, however, if divorced from firm foundations and deep roots are tossed by every new cultural wind and lack identity and consistency.

What is true of Christian life in general is true of the task of reading and interpret-

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[3]Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), p. 7.

[4]See Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Paul and His Story: (Re)interpreting the Exodus Tradition* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic, 1999), chap. 1, and Michael Fishbane, "Inner-biblical Exegesis: Types and Strategies of Interpretation in Ancient Israel," in *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 4-5.

[5]Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), p. 6.

[6]James Sanders, "Adaptable for Life: The Nature and Function of Canon," in *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), p. 19.

ing Scripture. Fidelity to the Scriptures, attempting to indwell this story and embody it in our lives, requires creative improvisation, and that improvisation, if it is to be Christian, requires fidelity.

Dynamic Analogy

So here is the question.[7] If we are called to faithful improvisation, how can we read a text like Colossians in such a way that its ancient character and historical distance from us is honored and not erased, yet it is as fresh and current as if it had been written this morning? Can the text have that kind of currency for us? How do we read this text and make it integral to our lives so that it can continue to speak anew to us?

If Christian life is a matter of living in an unfinished drama, then the improvisatory discipleship to which we are called requires something of a double immersion. We must be immersed in the biblical story—in this case Colossians—and we must be immersed in the world. Only through such a double immersion will we have any ability to discern faithful improvisations from missteps and dead ends. Rooted in a biblical vision of life, being formed in our very identity and character by this narrative, we attempt (in fear and trembling) to discern a path ahead. Such discernment requires something like the cultural analysis we have been engaged in throughout this book.

But how do we move from the issues addressed in a particular biblical text to particular contemporary issues? We propose that we adopt a stance of *dynamic analogy*, seeking to discern dynamic equivalents in our own cultural context to that which is addressed in the text.[8] Developing a similar approach with specific reference to Colossians 2:8-15, Andrew T. Lincoln says what is needed is that "we determine the analogies that underlie the metaphors [of the text] and then in an act of imagination . . . explore whether there might be striking contemporary images that will make graphic how Christ's death deals with whatever has a hold over people's lives in our world."[9] If Paul's concern in the text under consideration was to address practices and forces that had a hold on people's lives in Colossae, then our interpretation of the text must identify similar forces and practices in the late/post modern world. Our interpretation must be carefully attentive to the particularities of the text (not too quickly moralizing or generalizing without attending to the internal dynamics and tensions of the text) and must be rooted in the overall plot, tensions and resolutions of the biblical narrative. This is how the interpretation seeks to maintain the deep roots of fidelity and stability. But if the interpretation is to be serviceable to the listening community today, it must engage in the always risky business of identifying and naming

[7]Much of what follows first appeared in Brian Walsh's article "Late/Post Modernity and Idolatry: A Contextual Reading of Colossians 2.8-3.4," *Ex Auditu* 15 (1999): 1-17.

[8]On "dynamic analogy" see Sanders, "Adaptable for Life," p. 70.

[9]Andrew T. Lincoln, "The Letter to the Colossians," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 11:627.

the rulers, authorities, principalities and powers of our own cultural context, thus addressing real temptations facing the contemporary Christian community. This creative improvisation requires serious cultural discernment.

The analogies we make in such an interpretation are always dynamic in at least two ways. First, no analogy, no imaginative connection, made between this ancient text and what we discern to be the principalities and powers of our own time is final. These are dynamic analogies—imaginative hunches that we hope are suggested by reading the world through biblical eyes and maybe even inspired by the Holy Spirit. Second, the analogies are dynamic in the sense that we are not suggesting to have found clear, strict one-to-one parallels between the concerns addressed in the text and the contemporary context. Our intentions are more humble than that and more tentative.

With this kind of interpretive approach, what might this ancient text have to say to postmodern cultural sensitivities in a context of global consumerism? We offer you another targum, extending our reading from Colossians 2:8 to 3:4.

(Re)citing Paul: Colossians 2:8—3:4 Meets Postmodernity

Make sure that no one takes your imaginations captive through a vacuous vision of life rooted in an oppressive regime of truth that parades itself as something other than a mere human tradition, as if it somehow had privileged access to final and universal truth about the world apart from Christ. You see, in Christ there is a radical presence of Deity, fully instantiated and situated in the particularities of history. And you have come to partake in that presence; that fullness is yours in Christ, who is the very source of every rule and authority that purports to have sovereignty over your lives.

In him you find your legitimacy, your entrance into the covenantal community, because in relation to him your real problem—a deeply rooted sinfulness manifest in violence and self-protective exclusion—is addressed and healed. The symbol of legitimacy is not the size of your stock portfolio or the number of hits your website gets daily, but that ancient rite of baptism in which you die with Christ to all these pretentious symbols of self-aggrandizement and are raised with him through a trusting and believing faith in the power of God, who raised Jesus from the dead.

Don't forget that you were once dead too—dead in the dead-end way of life that characterizes our cannibalistic and predatory culture. But now you are dead to that way of life, and God has made you alive with Christ by dealing with the real problem through radical forgiveness. You see, when the idolatrous power structures that bolster this oppressive regime of truth nailed Jesus to the cross and poured out all their fury on him, all of your debts were nailed there too. All of the ways the empire of death held you captive and robbed you of your life—the exhausting and insatiable imperative to consume, the bewildering cacophony of voices calling out to us in the postmodern carnival, the disorientation and moral paralysis of radical pluralism, the loss of self in a multiphrenic culture, the masturbatory self-indulgence of linguistic and societal games, the struggle to not become roadkill on the information highway—all of this is nailed to the cross, and you are set free. Let's not beat around the bush here. What is at stake in this conflict at the cross is indeed

a power struggle. And Jesus takes precisely the principalities and powers that placed him on the cross—the idols of militarism, nationalism, racism, technicism, economism—and on that very cross disarms, dethrones, conquers and makes public example of them. In this power struggle, sacrificial love is victorious precisely by being poured out on a cross, a symbol of imperial violence and control.

If all of this is true, then don't allow the front-men of these vanquished powers to tell you what to eat and drink. Don't buy into the simulated grocery stores made to remind shoppers of an era in which shopping was more integral to community life. Don't be duped by advertising that tells you that various products are indispensable to constructing certain images and personas. This is all crap. They are still trying to captivate your imagination, to suck you into a globalistic regime of homogeneous consumption. Resist this McWorld nightmare with all the strength you have! Avoid the Disneyization of your consciousness! This stuff has no substance to it, no depth. It suffers from the unbearable lightness of being. But in Christ we find substance, something of weight and power.

And don't get sucked into consumerist ideology when it comes dressed up in the clothes of Christian faith. A "new manly piety" just might be more of the same old patriarchal power-grabbing, capitalist legitimating stuff that we have seen being pimped both at the mall and in the consumer-friendly church. And all the charismatic enthusiasm in the world, rolling the aisles with holy joy, amounts to little more than puffed-up humanism if it is devoid of a radical transformation of entire human lives. So much religious renewal seems so attractive, so comfortable, so safe. But it is fundamentally secular. Its cultural imagination remains in captivity to an idolatrous worldview, and it has lost contact with the real source of life. It cannot sustain deep and radical growth that is subversive of the regimes of truth because it is not nourished from the source of all things—it does not grow with a growth that comes from God.

If with Christ you died in your baptism to the principles of autonomous consumerism that still hold the world captive, then why do you live in a way that suggests that you are still in the iron grip of its ideological vision? Why do you submit yourself to its regulations to consume as if there were no tomorrow, to live as if community were an impediment to personal fulfillment, to live as if everything were disposable, including relationships, the unborn and the environment? Why do you allow this deceitful vision to still have a hold on you? Don't you know that copulating with the idols of this culture is like climbing into bed with a corpse that is already decomposing?

Let's be clear about this: the postmodern vision of a laid-back pluralism where people hold only to their local narratives and abandon any attempt to make truth claims beyond their personal opinions or traditional communities may look like a way to end the violence, to respect otherness and stop marginalization and genocide, but it is in fact totally and irrevocably impotent to accomplish any of this. It has a mere appearance of wisdom; it has no depth of vision to discern between paths of wisdom and paths of folly. It looks like humility, and it will lay on the guilt pretty thick for the years of violence legitimated by various metanarratives (including the Christian one!), but it is not humble enough. It fails to see that the real issue of violence, exclusion and marginalization goes much deeper—it lies in the violence, rebellion and deceitfulness of the human heart. Self-

imposed postmodern guilt trips can do nothing to heal the heart and can do nothing to stop the violence. Only the exhaustion of that violence on the cross can begin a real restoration.

You see, my friends, the postmodern incredulity of all metanarratives is well founded. The modernist metanarrative, of civilizational progress manifest in an aggressive conquering of colonized peoples, so-called scientific objectivism, a technological will to power and a market capitalism that would commodify all of life, deplete creational resources and create an ecological nightmare, was a tall tale—a lying, self-justifying ideological narrative. Yet humans are inherently storytelling creatures. And any local narrative will necessarily and invariably function as a metanarrative in the lives of those who hold it as their story.

So the issue isn't whether to live out of a metanarrative or not, but which metanarrative, and whose grand story. Without a grounding and directing story, no praxis is possible. That is why the crisis of storyless postmodern people, animated by little more than media- and market-produced images, is a crisis of moral and cultural paralysis.

But that's not the way it is with you, is it? You know which metanarrative brings life, don't you? You know whose grand story has set you free, don't you? Remember, in Christ you have died and were buried and have been raised to new life. His story is your story! Your identity and destiny are inextricably tied to the story of Jesus. And there is more to this story. The risen one is the ascended one, sitting at the right hand of God! If you have been raised with Christ, then, you must also make your own the rest of his story. Allow your imagination, your vision, your hope to be set on and directed by this image of kingly and restorative rule.

And this narrative of death, burial, resurrection and ascension still isn't the whole story. You see, Christ will return; his hidden rule in heaven will be revealed on earth—and just as his full glory will be revealed, so also will this be a revelation of *your* full glory as restored, renewed and fruitful image-bearers of God. When that happens, this whole business of exchanging your true glory as God's image-bearers for the kind of idolatry that continues to tempt and oppress you will come to a final and liberating end!

Do you feel incomplete, not yet fully who you are called to be? Good! Because you *are* incomplete, and any presumptuous sentiments otherwise would land you right back into idolatry. But we do live in hope. The struggle between the restorative rule of God in Christ and false, empty, deceitful pretenders to sovereignty—this struggle we experience deep within our bodies, our communities, our culture—will reach a final resolution in the return of Christ. Yes, we are waiting, but what we are waiting for is already stored up for us in Christ's heavenly rule and will be revealed in his coming. So live now, animated by that radically subversive hope.

What's the Deal with Idolatry?

You call that "humble and tentative"?

We knew you'd have another question.

Actually, I kind of appreciated your taking the time to anticipate some of my questions with that hermeneutical discussion that you used to set up this targum.

It was clear when we first talked that you had some misgivings about the whole

enterprise of trying to read Scripture this way, so we thought it was important to put our cards on the table as clearly as we could. But you have a concern now about humility and tentativeness?

Kind of. The last thing you said before launching into the targum was that you were up to something more humble and tentative here, but I have a hard time reading this broadside against postmodernity, the church and pretty much all of capitalist culture as either tentative or humble.

Well, the tentative humility we were talking about was describing our use of dynamic analogy over against any attempt at final, direct analogy. Our approach is tentative because we are not saying in this targum that Paul had in mind the contemporary idolatries of militarism, technicism, racism and economism when he wrote Colossians. And we try to demonstrate humility by saying that this is not the only appropriate way to read this text in our context, nor the only improvisatory move available to us. It happens to be the one that we think is necessary and appropriate at this time.

It still didn't sound too humble or tentative.

Actually, there's a reason for that. There is another implicit hermeneutical principle we are working with that we neglected to mention above. We think that any rehearing of a biblical text in a different cultural situation must attempt to maintain the audacity and offense of the original text. If this section of the epistle to the Colossians has an in-your-face feel to it in its original hearing, then a faithful rehearing must have a similar emotional and rhetorical tone. We have attempted to maintain that tone.

So if the text was offensive and upsetting originally, then you won't be satisfied until you have elicited a similar response.

You got it.

Sounds like you're asking for trouble.

No, just trying to be faithful to the spirit of Paul's text.

Well, faithfulness to Paul's text is really at the heart of a larger question I have that has more to do with where the targum is coming from than where it is going. It seems to me you have imported something into the text that, as far as I can see, just isn't there.

What's that?

Idolatry. I kept hearing a refrain that contained the word idolatrous.

That's right, we mentioned "idolatrous power structures," various contemporary idolatries, "copulating with" idols and exchanging the glory of God for idolatry.

But there is no place in the text where Paul actually identifies the problem he is dealing with as idolatry. If you are going to make a dynamic analogy from an ancient text to a contemporary context, then don't you at least have to make sure that the ancient text is actually employing the language, ideas or metaphors you're using to make your analogy?

That is a very important question. You're right, we do focus the targum on contemporary idolatry. For example, instead of talking about a "philosophy," we refer to a "vacuous vision of life" and "regime of truth" that is described as deeply idola-

trous and that takes our imagination captive.

That's another question I have. Why do you use the language of imagination here?

Because we agree with Walter Brueggemann's contention that one of the greatest dangers of our time is the "monopoly of our imagination."[10] Bowing before an idol, Brueggemann argues, is fundamentally a matter of "yielding the imagination" so that the world is experienced and interpreted in terms established by the idol. Consequently, "the key pathology of our time, which seduces us all, is the reduction of our imagination so that we are too numbed, satiated, and co-opted to do serious imaginative work."[11] This targum is, if you will, an exercise in subversive imagination that attempts to address head on anything that seeks to monopolize our imaginations, disempowering us from dreaming that things might be otherwise.

While the targum takes aim at various cultural realities that we perceive to be a threat to the faithful vitality of the Christian community—nationalism, advertising, certain kinds of charismatic experiences and manly pietism—the primary focus of the reading is on the various "isms" that continue to function as idolatrous forces, or "pretenders to autonomy," in our culture. A discernment of our times in terms of this particular constellation of idolatry is at the heart of the targum. Everything else revolves around this interpretation of the rulers, authorities, principalities and powers of our time. If this discernment of such idolatry is off the mark, then the whole targum fails.

Wouldn't the whole targum also fail if, in fact, the text that you are expanding or providing a gloss on does not actually talk about idolatry at all? The text under question (2:8—3:4) never mentions idolatry. And the only reference to idolatry in the whole epistle doesn't come until 3:5. Isn't this a real exegetical complication that threatens to undermine the credibility of the targum, regardless of how good your spiritual discernment of contemporary idolatry may be?

That's true, idolatry is never mentioned in the text. But things like rulers and authorities (*archai* and *exousia* in 2:10, 15) and elemental spirits (*stoichea* in 2:8, 20) are mentioned.

That is correct.

So here's the question. How did the rulers and authorities (together with the thrones and dominions) that are created good, in, through and for Christ, in Colossians 1:16 become fallen, hostile and in need of reconciliation four verses later (1:20) and even need to be disarmed by the time we get to 2:15?

I don't know.

Well let's look at a theory from Tom Wright and see if it works:

> What went wrong, then? Why are the powers so threatening? What went wrong was that human beings gave up their responsibility for God's world and handed their power over

[10]Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), p. 185.

[11]Ibid., p. 199.

> to the powers. When humans refuse to use God's gift of sexuality responsibly, they are handing over their power to Aphrodite, and she will take control. When humans refuse to use God's gift of money responsibly, they are handing over their power to Mammon, and he will take control. And so on. And when the powers take over, human beings get crushed. (Conversely, when you see human beings getting crushed, it's usually because there are powers at work that humans are powerless to stop.)[12]

Well, it's a nice theory. And it even makes sense of the overall problem of how the principalities and powers came to be so destructively powerful. But Paul doesn't spell out the problem so explicitly in terms of idolatry.

Actually, we think that he does spell it out, but in a way that is indirect unless you have ears to hear. Consider this. What if we were to describe to you a text and tell you that it was a biblical text, and that this text is attacking something it characterizes as a force that takes people captive and controls them? The text insists that while this force has that kind of control over people's lives, it is, paradoxically, nothing in itself. Indeed it is an empty deceit, worthless and without any substance. Further, this force is described as a mere human construct, a humanly imposed way of thinking that is characterized by a puffed-up, arrogant spirituality, though in fact it is impotent, does not profit and has no real value. The text goes on to say that this force is fundamentally alienated from and antithetical to God and that it will be, and already has been, dethroned and vanquished as the impostor it is by the one true God. Now what kind of biblical text might we be describing, and what on earth might it be talking about?

It sounds like the Colossians text we're discussing.

That's true, but it also has all the telltale characteristics of Hebrew prophetic literature, though it could be a psalm. Now check this out. Consider Colossians 2:8-23. The typical biblical rhetoric against idolatry is paralleled, item by item, in Paul's rhetoric against the so-called Colossian philosophy.

- Hosea 5:4 insists that idolatrous spirituality makes repentance and the knowledge of God impossible; Colossians 2:8 describes a captivating philosophy, closing down options for a full-orbed discipleship.
- Paul's depiction of this philosophy as empty deceit (Col 2:8), a shadow without substance (2:17) that has a mere appearance of wisdom (2:23), clearly echoes earlier biblical judgment on idolatry as worthless, vanity and nothingness (Ps 97:7; 115:4-7; 135:15-18; Is 44:9; Jer 2:4).
- The prophets love to remind idolaters that their idols are constructed by humans (Ps 115:4; Is 2:8, 41:6-7; 44:11; Jer 10:1-9; Hos 8:4, 6; 13:2; Hab 2:18); the apostle repeatedly claims that the philosophy threatening the Colossians is a human tradition (Col 2:8), a human way of thinking (2:18) that imposes human

[12] N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p. 18.

commands and teachings (2:20).

- Such a human tradition, says Paul, is puffed up without cause (Col 2:18) and deceives people by employing apparently plausible arguments (2:4, 8). Isaiah (44:18-20) and Hosea (4:6) say that idolatry results in a deluded mind and a fundamental lack of knowledge, and Habbakuk tells us that an idol is a "teacher of lies" (2:18).
- While Paul is clear that this philosophy with its imposed rules and regulations is of no value in checking the flesh (Col 2:23), the biblical witness insists that idolatry is impotent, without value, and does not profit (Ps 115:4-7; 135:15-18; Is 46:1-2; Jer 2:11; Hos 7:16; Hab 2:19).
- Idolatry is a matter of exchanging glory for shame (Ps 106:20; Jer 2:11; Hos 4:7; 7:16; 13:1-3; Rom 1:23); Paul says that the philosophy disqualifies, insists on self-abasement (Col 2:18) and promotes severe treatment of the body (2:23).
- Finally, Paul's proclamation that Christ disarms and triumphs over the rulers and authorities on the cross (Col 2:15) is clearly rooted in the prophetic confession that Yahweh is Lord and shares glory with no idols (Is 42:8; 48:11).

That's interesting. Those are pretty extensive parallels.

Essentially, we conclude from this analysis that the content of Paul's rhetoric against the Colossian philosophy not only legitimates but requires a reading of Colossians 2 in terms of idolatry. Whatever else we may say about the "philosophy" Paul opposes, we must say that it is idolatrous in character. Therefore any appropriation of this text in our time must similarly discern contemporary idolatry.

But that's not all. There are at least two other important parallels between Old Testament criticism of idolatry and our text. The first is that belief in and submission to idols is often criticized because Yahweh, not these false gods, is the Creator of heaven and earth (Ps 115:16; 135:5-7; Is 40:12-26; 44:9-28; Jer 10:11-16; 51:15-19).[13] In this light, it is no accident that the foundation of Paul's critique of both the empire and the Colossian philosophy is laid in the Christ hymn of 1:15-20, wherein all things—including thrones, rulers, dominions and powers—are created and redeemed in, through and for Christ.

A second dimension of the overall biblical understanding of idolatry that we find paralleled in our text is that idolatry is invariably connected to covenantal forgetfulness. The Decalogue is prefaced by a reminder that Yahweh is the God who led Israel out of Egyptian bondage, precisely because forgetting this foundational story always results in breaking the commandments prohibiting idolatry (and by extension, the rest of the Decalogue). Deuteronomy insists that the central temptation of a life of security and abundance in the land will be that Israel will forget its story of

[13]Interestingly, the same argument is found in Paul's sermon in Athens (Acts 17:24, 29) and in Romans 1:19-22; compare Deuteronomy 10:12-18.

liberation, will forget its liberating God and his healing word, and will embrace idols (Deut 4:23-28; 6:10-15; 8:11-19).

Paul's attack on the "philosophy" is animated by a similar concern to remember and not forget the story. His most potent weapon against the idolatrous worldview that threatens to take this community's imagination captive is precisely the retelling and remembering of the community's founding story. Having laid the foundation with reference to the local story of the reception of the gospel in Colossae (Col 1:3-8, 21), rooted that story in the new exodus effected through Christ (1:12-13), and then related that new exodus and the community's own story to the cosmic tale of the redemption of all things through the cross (1:15-20), Paul then delights to tell the story of Jesus' death, burial, resurrection, ascension and promised return (2:12-15, 20; 3:1-4). He retells this story in the heart of his attack on the philosophy because this philosophy, like all idolatrous worldviews, would take the community captive through a process of amnesia. Captivated by a system of regulations, visions and false spirituality, the community would forget its story and thus forget who they are as "saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ at Colossae" (1:2).

So let me see if I've got this right. Your targum is exegetically on good ground in focusing on idolatry because, first, the rhetoric of the chapter parallels Jewish diatribes against idolatry; second, the foundation of the critique is in a creation theology; and third, Paul counters the forgetfulness that leads to idolatry by rehearsing the Jesus story right in the midst of his attack on the philosophy. Is that it?

That's the argument in a nutshell.

And if Paul found it necessary to use an anti-idolatry rhetoric in this passage, then you believe any faithful contemporary reading must address the idolatries of our present culture.

That is precisely the point. Remember, idolatry is always a matter of images and imagination. In this targum we have attempted to read Colossians 2 in such a way as to engender an alternative imagination that subverts the rule of idolatry and sets us free to bear the fruit of the gospel in every dimension of our lives (1:6, 10). We have also attempted to indicate how postmodernity has a dehydrated imagination that is not up to the cultural crises and challenges that it has so clearly identified.

I guess the question is, can Christian faith do better? I mean, beyond Paul's rhetoric against the "philosophy" of his day, and your targum subverting contemporary idolatry and its postmodern cultural expression, does this "liberated imagination" actually bear fruit in everyday life?

Paul anticipates that question. That is why he deepens his reshaping of the Colossians' imagination in the next chapter by envisioning what this kind of renewed community looks like in its day-to-day praxis.