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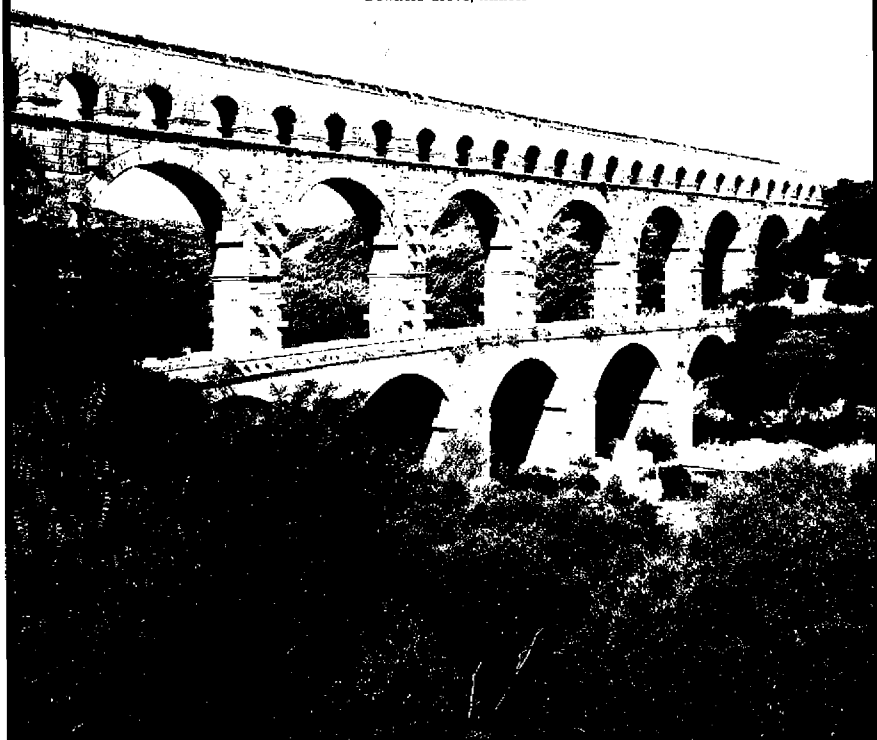
# COLOSSIANS

## R E M I X E D

SUBVERTING THE EMPIRE

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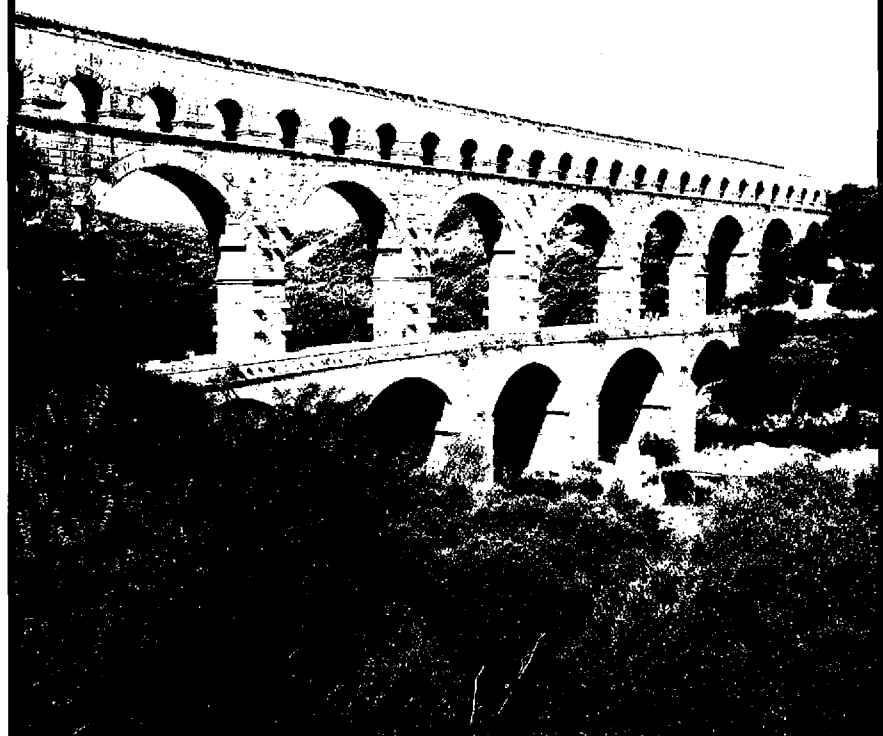
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PART THREE

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# PRAXIS REMIXED

SUBVERSIVE ETHICS



## AN ETHIC OF SECESSION



Halfway through dinner, our conversation partner announced, "I find that I am fundamentally incapable of making final or lasting decisions about ethical issues of any weight."

At this point it became clear that our "short" dinner break was going to be extended. We were in the middle of a day-long consultation on the way religion is covered in the print and electronic media, and our dinner partner was a young journalist. Twenty-nine years old and already the producer of a weekly three-hour radio news show that was broadcast nationally in Canada, Elanna was clearly on the fast track to a promising career. But our conversation about how religion fared in the media soon moved into a discussion of our own religious beliefs and ethical perspectives. That's when she made her rather remarkable ethical confession.

*Confession* is probably the right word. Not that she was looking for absolution (that would have required precisely the kind of ethical decision that she said she was incapable of), but it was a confession in the sense that this was a moral state of affairs that bothered her. She explained her predicament with some eloquence.

"As a woman, basically rooted in Gen X sensibilities, who works as a journalist at the end of the twentieth century, I find that whenever I'm about to come down on any issue—whether it be big issues of political, environmental or economic ethics or more personal issues of lifestyle, relationships and morality—I am paralyzed by the realization that there is always another angle on things. I'm paralyzed because it becomes clear that there are always other voices, other compelling arguments and alternative perspectives, that I need to take account of. And as I start really listening to these other voices, I end up losing my own. I have no voice in the midst of all of this. I am a listener, and when it comes time to speak, I am too confused by the plurality of options before me to be able to finally make a decision."

Notice that Elanna identifies four things that she thinks are relevant to her self-understanding. She refers first to her gender, then her generation, then her profession

and finally her historical situatedness at the end of the twentieth century. While she may well acknowledge that her ethical predicament is not unique to her, she thinks it is relevant to note that she is a female, Gen X journalist living at this time in history. Perhaps the issues are heightened for her as a journalist, who professionally is always looking for new perspectives and conflicting ways of telling a story. That's just good journalism. But she also situates herself historically and generationally. When pressed, she explained that being Gen X essentially meant that she shared the post-modern aversion to final answers that rule out and marginalize all other voices. She would likely share literary critic Terry Eagleton's cultural analysis:

We are now in the process of waking from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and its fetish of the totality, into the laid-back pluralism of the post-modern, that heterogeneous range of life-styles and language games which has renounced the nostalgic urge to totalize and legitimate itself.<sup>1</sup>

"Yes," Elanna would likely say, "modernity was a nightmare, and we need to adopt a more pluralistic approach to our lives. Yes, heterogeneity sure is better than the closedness of an imposed homogeneity." But her confession suggests that postmodern pluralism isn't as "laid back" as Eagleton suggests. Even if she wants to resist the "nostalgic urge to totalize," an inability to make ethical decisions of any import is disquieting for her.

She makes reference to her gender as relevant to how she understands her "inability" to make final or absolute ethical decisions. While she is probably not suggesting that all women, simply by virtue of their gender, are in the same ethical quandary, she is at least implicitly saying that in her experience at least, women are more concerned about hearing all sides than men. Perhaps she has in mind Carol Gilligan's groundbreaking work *In a Different Voice*, in which Gilligan argues that girls' moral development is much more communally and other oriented than the competitive, individualistic and autonomous orientation typical of boys.<sup>2</sup> If this is true, then Elanna's gender is indeed relevant to the problem she identifies. Not only does her profession, her generational sensibilities and her historical situatedness give her an aversion to absolutistic moral pronouncements, but her very gender gives her a proclivity to withhold judgment until all parties have had their say. Add it all up and she is, by her own confession, "incapable of making final or lasting decisions about ethical issues of any weight."

Elanna also thinks that this is a problem. And she is especially clear that it is a

<sup>1</sup>Terry Eagleton, "Awakening from Modernity," *Times Literary Supplement*, February 20, 1987. Quoted by David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

problem when she finds herself faced with large ethical issues on either a societal/cultural level or personally. Whether the issue is the ethical implications and foundations of market capitalism and its drive to globalization, or the question of military intervention, or whether she would sleep with a guy on their second date or have an abortion, Elanna really would like to be able to make some life decisions, even if this does require a "nostalgic urge" to totalize and legitimate herself.

Our conversation only explored the complexity of the problem for a while. But we left her with two thoughts. First, if we are faced with a whole generation of people who share this incapacity to make weighty ethical decisions of at least some finality, then that generation will experience disturbing levels of personal and societal paralysis. But that's not all. Second, if someone is unable to make these kinds of decisions, then someone else will come along and make those decisions on their behalf. This kind of ethical and societal paralysis establishes ripe conditions for a new authoritarianism—even a new totalitarianism—to emerge.

Anxious paralysis, however, is not the only ethical stance available in a postmodern world. Nihilism is another option.

### *A Vacant Space*

The lecture on religion and postmodernity had just concluded, and the third-year semiotics class at the University of Toronto was dispersing. Eric came to the front of the classroom. We had already noticed Eric. He was the young man who obviously knew well the postmodern terrain we were traversing in our lecture; he also, well, kind of *looked* postmodern. At least he looked as if he'd be comfortable in the more anarchist side of the postmodern shift, given his torn blue jeans, black boots, body piercings, unkempt hair and beard. Our kind of guy! He had been thoroughly engaged during the lecture and discussion, and he wanted to continue the conversation. So he asked whether we had heard the French postmodern author Julia Kristeva when she had lectured on campus earlier in the semester. No, we replied, unfortunately we missed her lecture.

"Oh, that's too bad, because she also emphasized the importance of the 'other' in her lecture."

Trying to push the issue a little further, we asked, "Did she make any reference in her talk to Emmanuel Levinas?"

"No, why would she?"

"Well, Levinas is rather well known for his position on the ethical importance of the 'face' of the other, and it would have been interesting if Kristeva was at all indebted to Levinas' rather Jewish postmodernism. But if this isn't the case, then we are curious to know about how Kristeva spoke of the other and what she based her ethical position on."

"She based it on the only thing any ethical position can be based on—her personal experience as an immigrant, as an 'other.'"

"That seems a rather thin basis for a social ethic."

"But it's the only basis possible. Any appeal to something beyond personal experience would amount to a metanarrative, and we all know where that leads." (At this point we began to wonder who was trying to draw out whom in this discussion.)

"Well, yea, that's right," we replied, "and it seems to us that everyone does live their life in terms of one metanarrative or another, even if they are unaware of it, and even if they espouse a postmodern incredulity toward all metanarratives."

"I share that incredulity very deeply," Eric replied, "and if there's one thing that is clear from your lecture it's that you not only have a metanarrative but are also pretty sure that it's the true metanarrative and that everyone should adopt it." (Things were starting to get a little hostile.)

"You're right in discerning that we live our lives out of a particular metanarrative, and you have also discerned correctly that we hold to this story as the truth about the world. But we don't think that there is anything unique about us or about other religious people in this regard. Everyone, we contend, lives out of a metanarrative, everyone roots their life in a grounding worldview that directs their praxis and serves to legitimate that praxis."

"Not everyone! That is a totalizing move designed to reproduce everyone else in your own image. I don't have any worldview or ultimate beliefs that serve to legitimate anything. That's the point. To be postmodern is to acknowledge that the space in human life where these kind of ultimate beliefs reside remains permanently empty. It is a vacant space in which nothing will ever reside."

A vacant space of ultimacy. Nothing beyond himself that will direct his praxis in the world, and certainly nothing to legitimate his actions. In fact, for Eric, anything that would serve to give his life legitimacy would require surrendering personal responsibility. He must be his own legitimacy, with no appeal to outside standards.

Elanna and Eric are both postmodern, but they respond to the postmodern shift differently. They both live in a plural universe in which choice reigns supreme and life is devoid of any final legitimations. For Elanna, the multiplicity of choice and cacophony of voices result in an anxious paralysis. She experiences what sociologist David Lyon calls the "vertigo of relativity" and the "abyss of uncertainty."<sup>3</sup> Lyon puts it this way: "The postmodern context, with its emphasis on individual choice and consumer preferences, when mixed with epistemological doubt and pluralism, creates a heady cocktail that seems quickly to befuddle and paralyze."<sup>4</sup> Elanna is befuddled and paralyzed, and she doesn't like it. Everything in her postmodern world, indeed everything in her postmodern soul, tells her to "keep her options open," but she is finding this a confusing and lonely existence. Maybe she is looking for something

<sup>3</sup>David Lyon, *Postmodernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 61.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.* pp. 64-65

or someone to believe in. Maybe she is contemplating closing down some of her options by entering into a commitment.

Eric, however, would see this as a loss of nerve. Worse than that, closing down the options, making a commitment to one vision of life, is nothing less than a "yearning for the absolute."<sup>5</sup> He would find himself in David Harvey's depiction of the postmodern condition: "Postmodernity swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and chaotic currents of change as if that's all there is."<sup>6</sup> Lyon describes this as embracing chaos: "Babel is valued; disorientation becomes a virtue. . . . No more nostalgia for the fixed, stable and permanent."<sup>7</sup> This is Eric's world. Disorientation is virtuous, because any vision of life that would provide a legitimating orientation will invariably oppress. If morality is a lie and truth is a fiction, then "the Dionysian option of accepting nihilism, of living with no illusions or pretense, but doing so enthusiastically, joyfully, is all that remains."<sup>8</sup>

There is something very attractive about both Elanna and Eric. Elanna's candid confession of paralysis and her longing for something that would animate her life and give it direction—without violently excluding other voices—gives expression to a deep desire for commitment and faith. And while Eric's aggressiveness can be a little off-putting, there is also something refreshing about a young man who really does attempt to live his life without illusion or pretense.

Befuddled paralysis or joyful and unpretentious nihilism? Yearning for the absolute or embracing chaos? These are two of the options facing a postmodern generation that has been shaped by the concomitant collapse of modernist epistemological self-confidence and the rise of a media-saturated, choice-driven global consumerism.

Does the epistle to the Colossians have anything to say to this kind of a world? Let us take a look at the third chapter of Paul's epistle.

### ***Ethical Direction for a Postmodern Culture?***

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you will also be revealed with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice,

<sup>5</sup>Robert Jay Lifton, "The Protean Style," 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. 132; excerpted from Lifton's *Boundaries: Psychological Man in Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1970).

<sup>6</sup>Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 44.

<sup>7</sup>Lyon, *Postmodernity*, p. 76.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 8.



slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col 3:1-17)

You know what's happening right now, don't you? William is ducking because he just saw an absolute racing toward his face, Elanna's befuddlement just got worse (though she *wants* to hear this ancient voice), and Eric is asking, "What fascist wrote this bit of oppressive moral instruction?"

This text presents a postmodern reader with a whole host of problems. To begin with, the issue at hand—for Elanna and Eric *and* William—is lived life in *this* world, but the text seems to counsel an otherworldliness that is decidedly alien to the consciousness of any self-respecting postmodernist. Not only is the otherworldliness alien, so also is the language in which it is couched. What does it mean to "set your minds on things that are above"? What's this business of "hidden" and "revealed"? And what on earth is this talk of "glory" all about?

As the text proceeds, postmodern suspicions about the meaning of this otherworldliness get confirmed. We need to think about that which is "above" because the author seems to be driven by a vision that loathes the human body. "Put to death whatever is earthly." What did Paul have in mind? Sex, of course! And when he moves from sex to language and emotions, it would appear that anything that involves passion, deep feelings and anger must be replaced by—what? Bourgeois passivity and politeness? If Paul is counseling a self-loathing passivity, then is he just legitimating such an ethic with his heavy-handed language about disobedience and "wrath" from above? From a postmodern perspective, this looks like a repressive totality system out to keep people in line. How could such a perspective ever be construed as an answer to the postmodern ethical quandary?

Even when the text moves to more positive instruction, it certainly looks like this is an ethic rooted in an absolutistic worldview. It's not as if any of these injunctions are negotiable. Rather, it would seem that the whole point of this ethical instruction, the ultimate direction the discourse is taking, is toward a totalitarian subservience—

"whatever you do, in word or deed, do *everything* in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Never mind the patriarchal character of the language; just take a look at how all-encompassing, uncompromising and totally controlling all of this is.

Here's the question. Can a text like Colossians 3 still be heard as good news in a postmodern culture that has justifiably grown suspicious of absolutistic totality thinking? The rest of this chapter attempts to answer this question affirmatively.

### **What Kind of Ethic Is This?**

Let's begin with the question of whether this is a life-denying, otherworldly ethic. Doesn't the text counsel us to abandon life in this world, with all of its historical situatedness, conflicting voices and intransigent ethical crises, for the sake of contemplation of higher, "heavenly" things? Isn't this what Paul is getting at when he says we need to set our minds on things that are "above," not on earthly things? And doesn't this give us an ethic that is so heavenly minded that it is no earthly good?

If this is what Paul were arguing, he would be demonstrating a profound inconsistency. Hasn't he just expended considerable rhetorical energy attempting to discredit precisely such a dualistic spirituality that is exclusionary and absolutistic? To a Christian community that might find something attractive in such a worldview, Paul insists that they are dead to this kind of otherworldly, totalitarian spirituality because they have been made alive in Christ, who sets us free from all of its rigidly imposed laws. Buying into such a spirituality, Paul argues, is to lose touch with Christ, who is the head, "from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God" (Col 2:19).

Notice again the metaphor of the "body" that is used here for the church. We have already noted that this is a term plundered from the empire. In 1:18 Paul says that the cosmic Christ is "the head of the body, the church." Bringing together these three words—*head* (*kephalē*), *body* (*sōma*) and *church* (*ekklesiā*)—was politically explosive, we suggested, because Paul is replacing Caesar with Christ and replacing the empire, with all its symbolic and historical power, with the church. The church is a body politic, he is saying, subject to an alternative sovereign. And he roots all of this in an understanding of the cosmos as created in, through and for Christ.

This creationally rooted political theology is at the very foundation of Paul's attack on the otherworldly spirituality in Colossians 2. Add to this the statement that the "fullness of deity dwells bodily" not only in Christ but in the Colossian believers (2:9-10), and you have a vision of life that is anything but dualistic.

Since Paul is an author of considerable insight and coherence, we should at least begin by giving him the benefit of the doubt and assuming that he does not contradict himself. If his whole argument is based upon such a radical affirmation of creation and a subversively this-worldly understanding of the gospel reconciling "all things,

whether on earth or in heaven" (1:20), then how could he now change his tune and counsel an otherworldly spirituality and praxis in chapter 3? Wouldn't such a move undermine everything he has argued thus far in the letter?

Close attention to the text demonstrates that Paul is proposing no dualistic ethic. In fact the very language that he uses continues the theme of creational affirmation. "So if you have been raised with Christ" (3:1): this is a resurrection ethic, and resurrection is decidedly bodily. To affirm Christ's resurrection and to identify the Christian community with it is to affirm the goodness of embodied existence in this world. Remember how Paul put it in his poem. Christ is "the firstborn from the dead." He is the second Adam, leading the new humanity embodied in the church. This may sound exclusivistic to postmodern ears, but it is hardly otherworldly. Resurrection is this-worldly language. In this chapter Paul is offering the community the contours of a resurrection ethic for life in this world.

But this raises the question of Paul's use of heaven language. Why does an ethic purportedly for life in this world counsel meditation on that which is above? This is a very important question, and how we understand this passage hangs on it. Look closely at the text. Paul tells the readers/hearers to look above, and he tells them why: "If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above *where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God*" (3:1). Why should we "seek things that are above"? Because Christ is seated there at the right hand of God.

Elanna can't make ethical decisions or embark on a path of praxis with any security because there are too many voices, too many claims on her life, and for her imagination there is nothing that matters above all else. Praxis has everything to do with *sovereignty*. What or who is sovereign in life? What is it that matters the most? What provides both a bedrock for our life—a sense of ultimacy—and an orientation? Paul's language here is all about sovereignty. The Risen One is "seated at the right hand of God," says Paul. In terms of the story he is telling, the Risen One ascends to be with the Father, and from there he begins to exercise his legitimate rule over all of creation. In this story, ascension language is sovereignty language.

The clear allusion to Psalm 110:1 ("The LORD says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool'") speaks of "a king exalted to dominion but whose rule is not yet fully achieved."<sup>9</sup> There is a hiddenness to Christ's rule, Paul is saying. The enemies, the principalities and powers, have not yet been brought into total submission to this Christ.

So what's going on here? In Colossians 2:15 Paul says that Christ "disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them" on the cross, thereby exercising his sovereignty, his rule over the empire. This rule was established on the

<sup>9</sup>Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1999), p. 147.

cross and confirmed in the resurrection. Rome could not keep Jesus in a grave sealed by the empire. But Paul, Lydia, Nympha, Onesimus and everyone else involved in the church at Colossae knows that Rome still rules the empire through military might, socioeconomic structures and the captured imaginations of its subjects. What then do we say about the rule of Christ? We say something about the ascension. This rule is hidden in heaven. It is hidden because the earthly powers have not yet fully submitted to Christ.

Here is a classic paradox in Paul's thought. Christ has *already* defeated the powers, but his reconciling rule has *not yet* been fully established in history. The purpose of this section of the letter to the Colossians is to help them navigate life in the dynamics of that "already and not yet." Indeed, this already/not-yet that characterizes the unfinished story of Jesus also characterizes the unfinished story of his followers. They have *already* been raised with Christ, they have *already* died to the empire, but their life is hidden with Christ and has *not yet* been revealed.

So what does it mean to "seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God"? Perhaps it means something like "Set your hearts on and allow your imagination to be liberated to comprehend Christ's legitimate rule." Maybe it also means something like "Allow your vision of life, your worldview, your most basic life orientation, to be directed by Christ's heavenly rule at the right hand of God." To use language from the Gospels, perhaps it means "Strive first for the kingdom of God" (Mt 6:33). Thus the passage sets us off on a direction that can lead us only to its conclusion. What begins with seeking things that are above ends with "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col 3:17). Seeking that which is above is a matter not of becoming heavenly minded but of allowing the liberating rule of Christ to transform every dimension of your life. The rest of the chapter attempts to give some direction along the way.

But perhaps there is more going on with Paul's language of our life's being "hidden with Christ in God" than just the already/not-yet dynamics of the story he is telling. You see, if there is one thing any empire wants you to believe, it is that "what you see is what you get." Empires project a sense of all-embracing normality. Not only do empires want us to think that reality is totally composed of the structures, symbols and systems that have been imperially constructed, they also want us to believe that the future holds no more than a heightened realization of imperial hopes and dreams. Whether it is the eternal rule of the Pax Romana or the complete marketization of all of life and every corner of the globe, the result is the same. In fact, sameness is what it's all about. Empires "are caught in an ideology of continuity and well-being in which human reality is covered over by slogans."<sup>10</sup>

It doesn't matter whether the slogan is "Pax Romana," "There is no lord but Caesar," "Just do it," "Free trade," "Travel the information highway," "Ride the long boom of economic prosperity," or President George W. Bush's post-9/11 declaration "You are either with us or you are with the terrorists." All these slogans create a discourse that is constructed by and for the empire. The empire insists on a continuity between its present and any imaginable future. Things must remain the same or at least develop along the same ideological path. But Paul here shouts out, "You are dead to all of these lies of the empire! You are not bound by the ideology of sameness! You are no longer held captive by the powers that want to maintain the present brokenness, oppression and idolatry! What you see is *not* what you get—there is much more!"

Again the issue at hand is the imagination of the Colossian Christians, and by extension our imagination. If we can think only in terms of what the empire will allow us to see, then the empire has taken our imagination captive. What Paul is struggling for is the ability to see "just beyond the range of normal sight."<sup>11</sup> Praxis requires vision and orientation. But if all the maps are provided by the empire, if all the reality we can see is what the empire has constructed as reality for us, then our praxis will never be creative, and it will never be subversive to that empire.

Paul insists that not only is the redemptive rule of Christ hidden, so is the true meaning of our lives if we follow this Christ. We don't allow the empire to captivate our imagination and set the final terms of our praxis in the world, because we can see a kingdom that is alternative to the empire. And we don't allow the empire to close down the possibilities of the future for us, because we can see a future in which what is hidden is revealed—both Christ's rule and our own completion and fullness. Such a vision provides a hope that not only is subversive to the empire but also provides a radical direction for Christian praxis.

So what kind of an ethic is this? It is a *resurrection* ethic that refuses to bow the knee to the empire and its idols. It is an *ascension* ethic that refuses to be subject to the principles of normality. It is a *liberated* ethic that dares to imagine a world that is alternative to the present brokenness. It is an *eschatological* ethic of hope that engenders a this-worldly praxis in anticipation of a coming kingdom.

But Eric wants to know whether this is also a hegemonic ethic imposed by an author with totalitarian designs. And William still suspects that this ethic comes flying at him with another long series of oppressive absolutes. These questions must be addressed. So we add two more adjectives to describe this ethic. In contrast to William's absolutes, this is a *relational* ethic. And as a partial answer to Eric (though he won't be convinced by it), this is a *narrative* ethic.

<sup>11</sup>An image borrowed from Bruce Cockburn's song "Hills of Morning," from the album *Dancing in the Streets*. © Golden Mountain Music, 1979.

### A Relational Ethic

Absolutes, William insists, are unrelated, timeless truths that come at us as nonnegotiable moral laws. Is this what Paul is up to in the third chapter of Colossians? Partially yes, mostly no. Yes, there is something nonnegotiable about what he has to say. Paul is not proposing that we have an open conversation about whether a Christian ethic really needs to avoid idolatry or practice forgiveness. But this does not mean he is simply serving up a series of absolutes that demand our obedience. Rather than laying absolutistic moral laws on us, Paul offers us an intimately relational ethic.

Consider again the kind of language that Paul has been using. In the critique of the philosophy in chapter 2, he crafts his words carefully to bring out the relationship the Colossian Christians have with Christ. From 2:9 to 2:15 Paul uses the phrase “in him” (or its parallel “with him”) seven times. “In him” the fullness of deity dwells bodily (2:9). And you have come to fullness “in him” (2:10). “In him” you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision (2:11). When you were buried “with him” in baptism, you were also raised “with him” (2:12). And God made you alive together “with him” (2:13) because God triumphed over the rulers and authorities “in him” (2:15). This profound relationality is foundational to Paul’s ethic. Since you have been raised “with Christ” (3:1), your life is hidden “with Christ in God” (3:3), and when Christ “who is your life” is revealed, then you also will be revealed “with him” in glory (3:4). Because you are so deeply identified “with Christ” and so profoundly shaped in who you are by being “in Christ,” your way of life will reflect that relationship. It is not so much a matter of Christians behaving in a certain way just because God said so or because it is good for you. Rather, Paul is saying that Christians live a certain way because of the matrix of relationships that characterize new life in Christ, and especially because of a living relationship with the risen Christ, whose story of death and resurrection we share.

### A Narrative Ethic

The targum offered in the last chapter suggested this gloss on Colossians 3:1-4:

So the issue isn’t whether to live out of a metanarrative or not, but which metanarrative, 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.

Alasdair MacIntyre has written, “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”<sup>12</sup>

Praxis—that is, human culture-forming, ethical behavior in daily life—is narratively grounded because we act out of who we are. And who we are—our character—

<sup>12</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre

is formed by the story of our life and how that story is interpreted in the context of larger stories or grand narratives. There are two important points here: praxis depends on character, and character is narratively formed.<sup>13</sup> Even in a postmodern world, "the human mind continues to think in terms of stories" and "naturally seeks to order experience, looks for explanations of sequences of events, is attracted to dramas."<sup>14</sup> There is, if you will, a "narrative quality" to human experience.<sup>15</sup> In "allowing ourselves to adopt and be adopted by a particular story, we are in fact assuming a set of practices which will shape the ways we relate to our world and destiny."<sup>16</sup>

Adopting and being adopted by a particular story is what Paul's letter to the Colossians is all about. Paul struggles with all the strength that is in him (Col 1:29) to help this young community become secure and deeply grounded in the story of Jesus that these converts have already adopted as their own. And he does so by telling them that this story has also adopted them. They can dwell in the story and allow it to reshape their imagination because it is not a story that simply happened to someone else but is now *their* story. They are now *in* this story, and on this basis Paul calls them to adopt a set of practices that are consistent with it.

By identifying the life of these converts with every significant event in the story of Jesus, Paul reinforces the idea that the community has been adopted by the story. In the last chapter we noted how Paul counters the preferred amnesia of idolatry by retelling the story of Jesus in the midst of his attack on the philosophy in Colossians 2:8–3:4. In typically Jewish style, Paul doesn't just retell the story but ties the identity of the present generation of believers to their participation in that story. You have "died" with Christ (3:3), you were "buried" with him (2:12), you are "raised" with him (2:12; 3:1), you set your minds on Christ, "seated at the right hand of God" (3:1), and you "will be revealed with him" (3:4) in his coming. Death, burial, resurrection, ascension and second coming—five decisive markers in the story of Jesus. Paul tells us that Christian identity and praxis are rooted in our identification with and participation in these events. The story of Jesus is our story. This is the story that shapes our character and sets the direction of our praxis.

In the letter to the Colossians Paul is trying to shape this community in such a way that the story of Jesus, rooted in the metanarrative of Israel, becomes the medium in which they live. The third chapter of the epistle attends to that set of skills, the virtues and practices that are formed by living in this story. "Biblical narrative logic simply

<sup>13</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays on Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Fides, 1974).

<sup>14</sup> Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 183.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 65–88.

<sup>16</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell, "From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics," in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 105–126.

demands a specific, visible people, a society or societal remnant, a *polis*.<sup>17</sup> And this people, this polis, must live in certain ways and not in other ways if it is to be true to its own narrative, its own story. The rest of this chapter attempts to unpack something of what this looks like.

### *An Ethic of Secession*

This is the opening stanza of Wendell Berry's poem "The Mad Farmer, Flying the Flag of Rough Branch, Secedes from the Union."<sup>18</sup>

From the union of power and money,  
from the union of power and secrecy,  
from the union of government and science,  
from the union of government and art,  
from the union of science and money,  
from the union of ambition and ignorance,  
from the union of genius and war,  
from the union of outer space and inner vacuity,  
the Mad Farmer walks quietly away.

Berry—Kentucky farmer, Christian poet, novelist, essayist—counsels an ethic of secession. Where power and science are united with money, ambition is driven by ignorance, and human genius is employed in the service of war, there is only one option, says Berry: walk quietly away. From such unions we must secede. But secede to what or whom?

From the union of self-gratification and self-annihilation,  
secede into care for one another  
and for the good gifts of Heaven and Earth.

Secession is always from something in order to join with something else. Berry calls us to secede from a culture of concomitant self-gratification and self-annihilation (they are, in the end, the same thing) into a life of care—for one another and for the good gifts of creation. This is an ethic of gift in the face of a culture of commodity. It is such an ethic of secession that Paul proposes in Colossians 3:5-17.

We can already see the look of incredulity on the faces of Elanna, Eric and William. You call this a secessionist ethic? Take a look again at that first verse: "Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)." That may be secessionist if what you want to secede from is bodily, sexual life! But why would we ever be tempted to buy into a self-loathing rejection of our sexuality?

<sup>17</sup>Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 90.

<sup>18</sup>*The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998), pp. 162-63.



Such a question, though, is fundamentally wrong-headed. You see, if Paul is rejecting anything here, it is precisely the self-loathing sexuality that has characterized the so-called sexual revolution. Paul offers an ethic of sexual life in the face of sexual death. He calls the Colossian Christians to "put to death" a certain pattern of human relationships because those patterns are themselves deadly.

To begin with, notice that Paul is clearly rooting this ethic in the narrative that has preceded it. Since Christ "is your life" and since that life will be revealed with him in his return (3:4), "put to death, therefore, whatever is earthly" (3:5). There is, says Paul, a life-and-death struggle going on here. Clearly rooted in the covenantal traditions of Israel, in which Moses placed before the Israelites two options—life and prosperity or death and adversity—Paul here sets up a stark contrast between a lifestyle that leads to death and one that is life-giving. Like Moses, he passionately calls this community to "choose life" (Deut 30:15-20). And just as the life Moses called Israel to choose is "in the land," so also is Paul's ethic an ethic for this-worldly community building. All the sins or vices he attacks in this section of the letter are things that tear community apart, and all the virtues he recommends enhance its growth and flourishing.

So when Paul says "put to death . . . whatever in you is earthly," he is not counseling otherworldliness. Rather he is saying, "Abandon the false allegiances, the pretentious sovereignties, that have held you captive. Secede from the unholy unions of power and money, genius and war, outer space and inner vacuity, that distort your lives." Put to death what is earthly *means* put to death the remaining vestiges of an imperial imagination and praxis that still have a grip on your lives. Put all of this to death before it kills you.

### ***Seceding from Imperial Sexuality***

This is a very interesting list that Paul composes. While he is concerned primarily with promiscuous, self-gratifying expressions of sexuality outside of trothful commitment (fornication), the distortion of personal character that such practice entails (impurity), uncontrollable and insatiable sexual appetite (passion), and a desire directed only to self-gratification (evil desire), he most evocatively concludes this whole list with "greed" or covetousness, which he is quick to identify with idolatry. Sexual sin, greed and idolatry—what is the relation among these? Why end a list of sexual sins with an economic sin? Because sexual sin is fundamentally a matter of covetousness, an insatiable, self-gratifying greed that has the control and consumption of the other person as its ultimate desire. Sexual sin is sin not because it is sexual but because it is invariably covetous. It replaces the pleasure and sexual enjoyment of two people in a loving relationship with a self-centered gratification of sexual longings that can never be fulfilled apart from commitment. Such sin breaks the back of trust that is at the heart of community, and it is a *community* that Paul is striving to build here.

For imaginative resources to understand the dynamics of sex and greed we turn again to Berry, but this time to his essays rather than his poetry. Berry believes that sex-

ual love is at the heart of community life. "Sexual love is the force that in our bodily life connects us most intimately to the Creation. . . . It brings us into the dance that holds community together and joins it to its place."<sup>19</sup> Both marriage and community require "trust, patience, respect, mutual help, forgiveness—in other words, the *practice* of love, as opposed to the mere *feeling* of love."<sup>20</sup> This practice is rooted in respect of the other, mutuality, self-sacrifice and responsibility for the consequences of sexual love.

In stark contrast to this vision of sexuality, Berry describes something he calls "industrial sexuality." "Like any other industrial enterprise, industrial sexuality seeks to conquer nature by exploiting it and ignoring the consequences."<sup>21</sup> This is the sexuality of the marketplace, in which "everything could be sold on the promise of instant, innocent sexual gratification, 'no strings attached.'"<sup>22</sup> While the ideal of the commercial economy is "the completely seducible consumer, unable either to judge or to resist," committed, truthful love exists in an economy of a "momentous giving" in which there is nothing to sell. Berry prophetically concludes, "If the community cannot protect this giving, it can protect nothing—and our time is proving this is so."<sup>23</sup>

When Paul says, "Put to death . . . fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed" he is desperately trying to protect this kind of momentous giving. In a world that finds it difficult to protect anything, this text calls us to an ethic that not only secedes from the commodification of all of life but also embodies a sexual praxis that is subversive to industrial sexuality. Think for a moment about how none of Paul's injunctions make any sense to a world in which all of life is reduced to marketable commodities. In a world in which sexuality is a matter of erotic encounters "with no strings attached," Christian marriage is all about "tying the knot." In an anxious world of covetousness and competition, we choose a path together rooted in trust, intimate self-giving and a shared life. In place of utility we see affection, corporate control is replaced by personal risk, and disposable consumption gives way to enduring enjoyment.

An ethic of sexuality rooted in community and fidelity subverts the fragmented world of cold economic efficiency by embracing the ridiculously inefficient life of committed love. Lovers held together in public vows of covenantal commitment have no interest in accumulating a multiplicity of intimate relationships, because they believe that their relationship, their love, is *enough*. And there is no word more offensive to a culture driven by unlimited economic growth than the word *enough*.

Late modernity and its so-called sexual liberation has given us little more than a sexual atmosphere of predation and recrimination—the most devastating opposite of

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<sup>19</sup>Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), p. 133.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>Wendell Berry, "Feminism, the Body and the Machine," in *What Are People For?* (New York: North Point, 1990), p. 191.

<sup>22</sup>Berry, *Sex, Economy*, p. 134.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 134, 138.

the trust in which sexual and communal life can flourish. We live in a sexual wasteland that bears only the bitter fruit of violence, loneliness, betrayal and broken hearts. The ethic Paul is offering us here promises the good fruit of love, mutuality, fidelity and healing. John Francis Kavanaugh notes that "in a culture which portrays life-commitment as impossible and undesirable, men and women who enter into personal covenant by mature and free consent are taking a radical stance."<sup>24</sup> It is to such a radical stance, we believe, that this text directs us.

We need to be clear that sexual practices are always of a piece with broader socio-economic and cultural practices. It is precisely an ideology of unlimited economic growth that engenders an insatiable sexual practice of unlimited partners. This is why Paul connects sexual sin with covetousness. In our culture, the unrestrained economic greed of global market capitalism pimps sexual promiscuity along with its entertainment products, communications systems, automobiles and running shoes.

You see, if the empire is all about economic growth driven by a lifestyle of consumption, then *all* of life becomes a matter of consumption—including our sexual life. Multiple sexual partners is just good capitalism.

Let's be clear about this. The neoconservative economic policies that took hold of Western societies at the end of the twentieth century, together with their free-trade global agenda, function as the ideological ground and legitimation of a cultural ethos of sexual promiscuity—regardless of how personally pious the perpetrators of this kind of economics might be.

By identifying sexual sin with covetousness, this text gives us the resources to cut through this kind of duplicity. There is no point in getting all morally absolute about sexual promiscuity if Christians are screwing around with the same consumerist way of life as everyone else. This text gives us the language to identify what is going on here for what it is: idolatry.

### ***Seceding from Imperial Idolatry***

We have already argued that Paul has been addressing questions of idolatry throughout his critique of the philosophy in chapter 2 of the epistle. The only explicit reference to idolatry, however, is found here in Colossians 3:5, and it comes as no surprise that this idolatry is connected to covetousness and sexual sin. In the prophetic tradition idolatry invariably resulted in sexual sin wedded to economic injustice.<sup>25</sup> Paul's

<sup>24</sup>John Francis Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981), p. 132.

<sup>25</sup>For example, consider Hosea. This prophet condemns Israel for an idolatry (2:5, 11-13; 4:12-19; 8:4-6; 10:1-6; 11:2; 13:2; 14:8) that results in a lifestyle of sexual sin (4:18; 7:4) and economic injustice and violence (4:2; 6:8-9; 7:7; 10:4, 13-14; 12:1, 7-8). Moreover, the dominant metaphor in this prophet for Israel's sin is adultery or whoredom (1:2-9; 2:1-13; 4:10, 12; 5:3-4; 6:10; 9:1), which results, Hosea insists, in fruitlessness and barrenness (4:10; 8:7; 9:11-14, 16; 10:1, 8; 13:14-15).

ethic of secession from all idolatry is deeply rooted in Israel's faith. In biblical perspective, human beings are constitutively, structurally image-bearers. That is to say, human beings are created in such a way that they invariably root their lives in an ultimacy that is authoritative, grounding and directive of all that they do. We are, if you will, *Homo religiosus*. Created in the image of God, we can do nothing other than seek a God (or god) to serve and image in the totality of our life, especially in our stewardship of the rest of creation.<sup>26</sup> If we turn away from our covenanting Creator, this does not mean we are no longer image-bearers. Rather, such turning away will necessarily result in idolatry: we will find something in the creation to serve as our god, something to which we give ultimate allegiance. We will take some thing, or more usually some dimension of creatureliness that is in itself a good gift from the Creator, and make it into our god, thereby distorting it (whether it be fertility, national or ethnic identity, security, scientific analysis, technological power or economic growth) in such a way that what was good comes to have demonically evil power over our life.

There is, however, a certain dynamic to idolatry. Graven images not only usurp our proper place as God's image-bearers, they also serve to transform our lives in their own image. After describing the impotent sterility of idols, the psalmist offers this observation and curse: "Those who make [idols] are like them; so are all who trust in them" (Ps 115:8). Idols may well be human products, but they act back on their producers with demonic power. Once humans relinquish their calling to image the Creator in covenantal faithfulness and give their hearts to false images, alien gods, it is inevitable that their lives will be deformed in the image of the idol. Kavanaugh puts it this way: "Remade in the image and likeness of our own handiwork, we are revealed as commodities. Idolatry exacts its full price from us. We are robbed of our very humanity."<sup>27</sup>

So why must we put to death a life of sexual immorality rooted in a culture of insatiable consumption? Because such a life is ultimately idolatrous and it will kill us. The path of idolatry is a path of death because it (a) cuts us off from Jesus Christ, who is our life, (b) cuts us off from who we are as God's proper image-bearers and stewards of all of life (including sexuality and economic activity), and (c) cuts us off from what we really desire. The goodness, meaning and enduring pleasure of our sexuality is lost and killed in a promiscuous, self-gratifying lifestyle. The life-giving, fruit-bearing joy of creation is lost and killed by a consumptive, greedy and idolatrous worldview that leaves our lives fundamentally barren.

It is not surprising that God is incredibly angry about all of this. It is not surprising that Paul then says, "The wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient" (3:6). This God, after all, is the Creator God of life who comes to redeem all of creation and to

<sup>26</sup>For a powerful analysis of the biblical notion of humankind created in the image of God, see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2005).

<sup>27</sup>—Kavanaugh, "Idolatry," 10.

restore his image in humanity. Is it any wonder that he is angry when the object of his love is constantly distorted and abused through idolatry? If this God did not respond to such a travesty, such a mockery of his good creation, with wrath, we would wonder how deep his love really went. Wrath is the right response to screwing around with idols. Wrath is the appropriate emotion in the face of adulterous infidelity. God's loving wrath can be seen both in the very brokenness, dehumanization and barrenness that such idolatry produces in sociocommunal life and in eschatological judgment. This is necessary if we are to live in a moral universe. Those who have been sexually brutalized, economically oppressed, ecologically raped and reduced to commodities in a world system of global consumerism need to have a court of appeal before which they can bring their legitimate complaint. That court, Paul assures them, is the judgment seat of God.

Paul concludes this discussion of sexual/economic sin by saying, "These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life" (Col 3:7). That is the life of the empire—not just the Roman empire or the empire of global consumerism but the empire of darkness. In Christ we have come to say to the darkness, "We beg to differ."<sup>28</sup> We have seceded from the empire of darkness and been granted citizenship in the kingdom of the beloved Son. So why would the death-dealing lifestyle of the empire have any more appeal for us?

While some readers of Foucault might see in this text an attempt to create docile bodies that are acted upon but do not themselves act, the opposite is the case. In the face of an imperial consumerism that commodifies sexuality and renders us disempowered and docile, this text calls us to live sexual lives that are set free by truthful commitment and that are therefore subversive to the empire.

### *The Discourse of Violence*

We could summarize what we have just said about Colossians 3:5-7 thus: Economic brutality always results in sexual brutality, and that idolatry is the brutality of all brutalities—doing violence to our very identity as creatures called to image our God. An ethic of secession calls us out from such a culture of violence.

The next list of vices Paul offers brings our attention to this kind of violence as it is manifest in our feelings and our language. After reminding the Colossians that they no longer live according to the empire, Paul says, "But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices" (3:8-9). Is this a call to bourgeois passivity and middle-class politeness? Is this a repression of any and all strong emotions and deep feelings that might be uncomfortable? Given the fact that Paul's whole discourse in this letter, especially in chapter 2, is full of strong language and emotions and that just two verses ago he has spoken of God's wrath, it

would seem that middle-class politeness and the repression of emotions is not what he is talking about here. Rather, he is talking about the discourse of violence that serves to justify the sexual and economic violence he calls us to abandon.

Just as Paul opposes sexual sin and economic injustice that reduce other people to objects of sexual greed and economic exploitation, so he is here concerned with the emotional dynamics of such objectification. The anger, wrath and malice he warns us against all entail the reduction of another person to an object of contempt with whom we have no connection, no compassion, no community. Such seething anger results in a rage that justifies any and all malicious intent in relation to other people. These are violent construals of other people that necessarily result in their marginalization and exclusion at best and violent extermination at worse. In a world of jihad, ethnic cleansing and tribal holocausts, together with the objectification of the poor, drug addicts, homosexuals, immigrants and visible minorities, Christians do well to secede from a culture of such violence.

Violent emotions give rise to violent language. The objectifying and demonizing of the other in anger, wrath and malice comes to expression in slander and abusive language. Interestingly, slander is the translation of the Greek word *blasphemia*. To bear false witness against someone, or to cast a whole community in a negative light that would justify violence against them, is blasphemy, says Paul, because it slanders people who are also created in the image of God. Such slander necessarily gives way to abusive language that dehumanizes its object.

Now we need to ask ourselves, is Paul really concerned about suburban politeness here? Is he concerned about cleaning up the language of the local youth so that they stop using *fuck* as a punctuation mark in their discourse? Well, yes, that is an abusive form of language—and it is uncreative. But is that the only kind of abusive language we face? Or might there be another kind of violent discourse that is integrally tied to the kind of market sexuality we were addressing above?

Isn't there something deeply abusive and dehumanizing about the way advertising uses sex to sell everything from condos to cars? Isn't the ubiquitous presence of advertising in our lives and the total domination of space by commercial life—on the Net, on the street, on television, in the elevator, at the urinal—an abusive invasion of consumerism into the very warp and woof of our daily lives? And from a Christian perspective aren't slogans like "Just do it," "Coke is the real thing," "The American Way of Life" and "Homeland security" all discourses of violence? After all, the American way of life and national security serve to legitimate the escalation of global warming through withdrawing from the Kyoto Accord, and isn't this an act of anticreational and unneighborly violence? Doesn't Nike's slogan come part and parcel with sweatshops in the Third World?<sup>29</sup> Aren't all of these slogans em-

<sup>29</sup>Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2000) pp. 198–201.

bedded in an imperial agenda of global domination?

In his 1994 annual report, the president of Campbell's Soup Company wrote, "As I look forward to the future, I shiver with business excitement. That's because Campbell's Soup Company is engaged in a global consumer crusade."<sup>30</sup> This is a crusade to capture both consumer taste and culinary practice. There is nothing that Campbell's would like better than to have more markets of people who will forget how to make soup for themselves and will become dependent on a can. Or consider this moment of enlightened business ethics from David Glass, CEO and president of Wal-Mart: "Our priorities are that we want to dominate North America first, then South America, and then Asia and then Europe."<sup>31</sup> Business development is couched in the language of domination. This, we contend, is the abusive language of our time. When "free trade" means corporate sovereignty, "fiscal responsibility" means that the poorest in our society have to put up with even less, "quality of life" means quantity of consumption and the "liberation" of Iraq means the expansion of the Pax Americana, then our language has been debased and deformed into a discourse of deceit that justifies violence.

Or consider an advertising campaign from McDonald's which tells us, "There's a little M in everyone." The global arches have so branded our consciousness that we all bear their image. For Christians who confess that humans bear the image of God, this language is both abusive and blasphemous.<sup>32</sup>

If we want to find abusive language and identify the discourse of violence of our time, we are terribly short-sighted if we don't look beyond the obscenities of the street or the schoolyard. It is in the double-speak of corporate executives, the spin of politicians, the come-on of the advertisers, the cultural lies of the pharmaceutical companies and the biotech firms, and the false humanistic optimism of the cybernetic revolution that we meet abusive language in this culture. Paul is saying that this was the discourse of our past life in the empire, the discourse of lies that we were liberated from when the "word of the truth" came to us (1:5). And sometimes we need to employ strong language in the face of such lies.

Vancouver street poet and activist Bud Osborn opens up new vistas for us when it comes to the nature of abusive language. In his poem "Amazingly Alive" Osborn tells the remarkable story of his experience of resurrection in "a culture teachin ten thousand ways/ways to die/before we're dead."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup>Quoted in *Adbusters: Journal of the Mental Environment* 31 (August/September 2000): 2.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup>The sad fact is that this campaign, though abusive, is telling the truth. Eric Schlosser notes that 96 percent of American schoolchildren can identify Ronald McDonald and that "the Golden Arches are now more widely recognized than the Christian cross" (*Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* [New York: HarperCollins, 2001], p. 4).

<sup>33</sup>Bud Osborn, "Amazingly Alive," in *Hundred Black Poets* (Vancouver, B.C.: Arsenal Pulp, 1990), pp. 7-11.

so here I am  
here we are  
amazingly alive  
against long odds  
left for dead  
north america tellin lies  
in our head  
make you feel like shit  
better off dead

so most days now  
I say shout  
shout for joy  
shout for love  
shout for you  
shout for us  
shout down this system  
puts our souls in prison  
  
say shout for life  
shout with our last breath  
shout fuck this north american culture of death

shout here we are  
amazingly alive  
against long odds  
left for dead  
shoutin this death culture  
dancin this death culture  
out of our heads

In an ancient culture of death, the apostle Paul mounted a rhetorical attack on those forces that would separate us from Christ who is our life. He used the biblical language of idolatry to make his point. In a late modern culture of death Bud Osborn uses graphic language to depict the violence this culture inflicts on the souls of the most vulnerable, and he does so in the context of a joyful testimony of resurrection. We think that Paul would approve. The real abusive language isn't found in Osborn's critique of a culture of death in the light of resurrection life. Rather, the real abusive language is in the often sanitized ways of talking and thinking that serve to make this culture of death appear normal and acceptable. Indeed, when the church's language, in all of its piety, serves to give an air of normality to an idolatrously constructed culture, thereby functioning as a polite cover-up for a comfortable life in the empire, then that language is also abusive.

Perhaps the air of normality that characterizes life in the empire is the crux of the



issue for this ethic of secession. The ethical crisis of Christianity at the turn of the millennium is that Christians by and large accept the empire as normal. Here is Wendell Berry's prophetic appraisal of the church:

Despite protests to the contrary, modern Christianity has become willy-nilly the religion of the state and the economic status quo. Because it has been so exclusively dedicated to incanting anemic souls into Heaven, it has been made the tool of much earthly villainy. It has, for the most part, stood silently by while a predatory economy has ravaged the world, destroyed its natural beauty and health, divided and plundered its human communities and households. It has flown the flag and chanted the slogans of empire. It has assumed with the economists that "economic forces" automatically work for good and has assumed with the industrialists and militarists that technology determines history. It has assumed with almost everybody that "progress" is good. . . . It has admired Caesar and comforted him in his depredations and faults. But in its de facto alliance with Caesar, Christianity connives directly in the murder of Creation.<sup>34</sup>

A predatory economy has ravaged the world. Christianity has flown the flag, chanted the slogans of empire and made an alliance with Caesar. Christian faith has made itself comfortable in the empire and taken up the role of comforter of the empire in its murder of creation.

We will never embrace an ethic of secession until we cease to be comfortable in the empire. Christians should feel "disjointed and out of place in a civilization which divinizes the thing."<sup>35</sup> Kavanaugh says that since Christian faith "at rock bottom conflicts with American culture, even subverts it . . . the practicing Christian should look like a Martian. He or she will never feel at home in the commodity kingdom. If the Christian does feel at home, something is drastically wrong."<sup>36</sup>

If Christians are not at home in a consumerist culture, then where do they feel at home? If they attempt to put to death the vices and character traits that are taken to be normal in our society, what kinds of virtues do they put in their place, and what kind of alternative community do such virtues engender? If sexual sin, economic greed and the discourse of violence characterize life in the empire, what is the alternative character of the kingdom?

<sup>34</sup>Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," in *Sex, Economy*, pp. 114-15.

<sup>35</sup>Kavanaugh, *Following Christ*, p. 99.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 112.