

Meditation: Christ—The Mystery of God Revealed

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Twentieth century atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell purportedly said that the one question he would ask God if, finally, he were to meet him face to face is, “Sir, why *did you* take such pains to *hide yourself*?”¹ In one sense—which will be examined later—Russell’s query is not illegitimate. Russell was simply evidencing the inescapable reality that he is indeed an offspring of Adam and Eve and a member of the family of creatures who, like their original progenitors, believe the lie and suppress the truth—namely, “the knowledge of the mystery of God—Christ—in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowl-

edge” (Col 2:3). Russell’s query is no different, then, from that of any sentient being who can possess awareness of an invisible almighty deity only by faith in what that deity chooses to reveal about himself.

The Colossian Christians were being persuaded by philosophers of their own day to ask

similar questions about the invisible God. Fortunately, the invisible God, who both cares for them and called them to himself through the preaching of the gospel by Epaphras (1:7), also spoke to them by means of his appointed emissary, the apostle Paul, who himself directed the Colossians’ attention to God’s consummate self-disclosure in the person of Jesus Christ. Paul knew that only in Christ could the Colossians—or *any* offspring of Adam—regain possession of all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge that our original parents enjoyed by means of uninterrupted communion with the God who both created and *is* our life (3:4; cf. Acts 17:24-29). Paul proclaimed to the Colossians this God who, quite the opposite of Russell’s assertion, took such pains *to reveal* himself. In order to present knowledge of the only true God—the God who, resisting the proud and giving grace to the humble, has “hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children” (James 4:6; Matt 11:25)—the apostle knew no other message to communicate than Jesus Christ and him crucified, the

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identical message he declared to the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:23; 2:2). The singular life-giving message of Jesus Christ as the mystery of God revealed is the message of the apostle Paul in Colossians 2.

Paul wants his newfound spiritual siblings to be secure for eternity in this life-giving communion with Jesus Christ through embrace of the orthodox (i.e., rightly viewed) understanding of the invisible God, namely, that he has willed to disclose himself through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Paul is aware of the distortions that are circulating among the Colossians as a result of some who were teaching and preaching “persuasive” (2:4) views of God derived from the fertile imaginations of their “fleshly minds” (2:18), rather than from that which “God willed to make known” and “now has been revealed, and was taught in all wisdom by Christ’s appointed and divinely inspired apostles (1:26-29). Affirming, therefore, his God-willed authority to reprove error in the name of Jesus Christ (1:1-2), Paul constructs an intimately personal yet veritably engineered treatise of first, orthodoxy (chap. 1), then orthopathos (chap. 2), and finally the expected result, orthopraxy (chaps. 3-4).² The second chapter of the letter contains the fulcrum of Paul’s message to this newly founded body of believers in Christ.

MYSTERY REVEALED

The cunning philosophers attempting to beguile the Colossians preyed upon their infatuation with *knowledge*. The frequency of Paul’s use of some terms in this letter seems to indicate that the Colossians’ fetish for *knowledge* (1:9, 10; 2:2, 3; 3:10) and understanding *mystery* (1:26, 27; 2:2; 4:3) or *hidden things* (1:26; 3:3) might be similar to our own culture’s “frankly idolatrous devotion to our own capacity to understand.”³ Nevertheless, Paul assures the Colossians that God in Christ alone provides for them “all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery;” for in him “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,” as well as “the whole fullness of deity ... in bodily form” (2:2-3, 9).

Jesus Christ is the unveiling of the *mystery*—i.e., undisclosed or hidden knowledge—that is God. This knowledge alone could satisfy the Colossians’ seeking intellects and affections. No higher knowledge of the Power of the universe *can* be discovered, though one searches the entire tangible or philosophical expanse of that same universe.

The *mystery* to which Paul refers is not merely God disclosed to the created order, for he tells the affections-starved Colossians that the mystery is *Immanuel*—that is, Christ *in you*, the hope of glory (1:27). The implications of *Christ in us* are vast! Contemplate them; for they include, but are certainly not limited to notions pertaining to: the design and creation of a “living being” (Gen 2:7) in the image of Christ, who himself would add that same created human nature to his own divine nature for eternity; the definition of “life” as that which God alone possesses intrinsically (John 5:21, 26), and is now identified with the “hope of glory”—that which was hidden from ages and generations past, and is veiled still to all who are yet captive to dead affections (Col 1:26a; 2 Cor 3:14-16); and the boast-silencing, pride-crushing, awe-inspiring grace of God to enter into a covenantal relationship with the likes of us as we are brought into faith union with Christ (Rom 9:15-16; John 15:16). The multifaceted mystery of the invisible God is not some esoteric knowledge accessible only to an elite group of shamans or the like. Paul informs the Colossians that knowledge of the invisible God, who created and rules the universe, is available to all who will simply believe that, in the person of Jesus Christ, God proclaims to his fallen cosmos, “I AM.”

The so-called knowledge with which the false teachers are attempting to seduce the Colossians cannot provide the attainment of fullness that it promises. Precisely to the contrary, the literally damned emptiness that is the inescapable end of all philosophy devoid of Christ is the destiny away from which the inspired Paul longs to divert his “faithful brethren” in Colossae. Their desire for knowledge must be directed to Christ, the

revealed mystery of God in whom alone they, or any seeker of so-called higher knowledge, can find not only objective but also personal fullness. Because the Creator of human beings has “set eternity in their heart” (Eccl 3:11), he has designed them to find ultimate fulfillment only in himself. Only “in him” can the infinite penalty for humanity’s sin against him be satisfied. Only the offended God who will serve exclusively as Judge of his mutinous creation can forgive us “all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and [take] it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross” (2:13-14). Only by an infinite being can an infinite penalty be expiated; no finite creature qualifies to accomplish such a responsibility. *Fullness*, that is, attainment of the mystery, which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, can be found nowhere else than “in him,” the incarnate second person of the divine Trinity, Jesus Christ.⁴ For these very reasons Paul affirms for the Colossians—and for believers today—that “in him you have been made complete” (2:10). That is, the search for both objective and personal fulfillment concerning the mystery of the universe and of God is genuinely and consummately satisfied for anyone, who by faith alone affirms that “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” are hidden in Christ. The human creature was designed and created to find consummate fulfillment and satisfaction nowhere else, nor *will* he find such fulfillment anywhere else; for the blindness that has come as penalty for sin can be overcome nowhere else except by Christ’s atonement on the cross (2:13-14; cf. John 1:10-13). This cosmic truth is so inescapable that even the venerable Augustine would effuse rightly, “The thought of you [God] stirs him [mankind] so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”⁵

IN CHRIST ALONE

Paul’s own encounter with Christ on the road

to Damascus catapulted him from his staunch devotion to the half-truth of Judaism to an equally staunch devotion to the full revelation of God, as had been foretold in ages and generations past (1:26), in Immanuel—Jesus Christ. Paul was convinced by God the Son incarnate himself, therefore, that “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3)—perpetually sought by God’s estranged image bearers ever since mankind’s eviction from the presence of those treasures (Gen 3:23-24)—could be re-acquired only by partaking of the fruit of the tree of life, which is Jesus Christ (Gen 1:9b; 3:22b; cf. Col 1:28; 2:2, 10; 3:4, 17, 23-24). The apostle communicates in perfect harmony with the entirety of the Scriptures the singular message of God to mankind: “I AM the LORD.” The mystery and image of the invisible God (1:15, 26-27; 2:2; cf. Heb 1:3) are graciously and volitionally disclosed to humanity (and the entire created order [Eph 3:8-11]) in *theanthropos*—the God-man. In Jesus Christ, the God who created and sustains the universe proclaims consummately, “I AM the LORD.”⁶ All who will to hear will hear. To the “evil and adulterous” anti-humanists (in the truest sense), who disdainfully bear a grotesquely marred image of their Creator, precisely because they choose to believe the lie rather than the truth, no further sign will be given; for if these reject the “showing of himself” that God has already graciously provided “at various times and in various ways,” surely “neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead” (Matt 12:39; Heb 1:1; Luke 16:31). The apostle, then, has no other message for the Colossians (or for the Corinthians or for all of humanity, for that matter) than “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 1:23; 2:2).

THE INTEGRITY OF ORTHODOXY, ORTHOPATHOS, AND ORTHOPRAXIS

Paul fully understood the intrinsic relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. He understood, as New Testament scholar Richard Melick would articulate much later, that “orthodoxy without orthopraxy leads to *de facto* secu-

larism”—that is, irreligion governed by mere human wisdom.⁷ Accordingly, Paul preached the “full knowledge” that the Colossians unwittingly sought, namely, the orthodoxy that the revealed God alone in Christ had provided not only the wisdom to ground vital living in accord with the image that humanity was designed to reflect, but also *life* itself.

At the theological center of his address, the apostle exposes three core faults (all noted in 2:8) with the empty *philosophia* that the Colossians were entertaining.⁸ First, the “persuasive” (2:4) teaching is characterized as “the tradition of men.” Although beneficial as far as it goes (2:23), its value cannot be assessed as anything more than the wisdom of the world that the apostle excoriates the Corinthians for entertaining. Mere creaturely wisdom is insufficient to ground universal and eternal verities. In both Colossae and Corinth, this hubris of the self-affirmed wise one is proven futile by objective truth—i.e., the revelation of the Almighty Creator God, who *is* Truth. Acceptance of *knowledge*, that is, assent to what is *true*, is not merely a function of the intellect. Such a crucially important endeavor, with eternal consequences, necessarily involves the whole human being, including one’s *affections*. Here is where orthopathos necessarily intersects both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. People will be rescued from the guilt of their own sin by mere intellectual assent to the truth of their own evident failure from an objective standard of absolute perfection (1:28), for only fools believe themselves to be perfect in every way.⁹ Truth is foolishness to dead affections (1 Cor 1:20-31; Rom 8:7-8).

Second, the teaching is “according to the elementary principles of the world.” This phrase may be a technical term used by heretical teachers to contrast the superiority of either supernatural beings or an elite class of persons with special knowledge over beings with more elementary capacities. It could also be a nontechnical phrase, simply referring to foundational principles of rudimentary significance—e.g., rules, regulations, and

routines for life imposed by the Mosaic law (cf. Gal 4:9-10)—perhaps in comparison to other higher precepts.¹⁰ Either way, the one whose life has become hidden in Christ has been liberated from the penal constraints of the judaistic law (2:11-14). Such a one should not falter to re-enslavement to that from which he has been granted maturity (cf. Heb 6:1-3; 1 Cor 13:10). In the mind of the apostle Paul—as well as the Old Testament itself—returning to bondage to such elementary principles would constitute not only a departure from liberty and confession of the prophesied Messiah, but, in fact, a damning curse (Gal 3:10).

Third, the teaching is not “according to Christ;” that is, it does not comport with the person and work of Jesus Christ nor does it secure its terminus in him. This danger does not necessarily get at a specific doctrine, but at both the affections and the practice of those who name the name of Christ. Here again, the inspired theologian iterates the intrinsic connection between orthodoxy, orthopathos, and orthopraxy. If one confesses, by the Holy Spirit, the orthodoxy that Christ is God incarnate, then orthopathic love for both that truth and the God of that truth will produce an orthopraxic life commensurate with that devotion.

THE HAUNTING TENSION OF RUSSELL’S LEGITIMACY

As noted above, Bertrand Russell’s puzzlement is, in one sense, legitimate. Adam and Eve, the very first human beings created with the capacity for awareness of an invisible deity, enjoyed completely unobstructed communion with this invisible deity. He was not hidden from them. One may even argue that they enjoyed some form of corporeal interaction with him (Gen 3:8). We ought not be surprised by this mutually interactive *life*; for such living communion was the ultimate end for which the Creator made a creature in his own image in the first place.¹¹ As long as God’s *magnum opus* depended upon him unequivocally, the many splendored, transparent, communal *life* with God that the creature enjoyed would continue unhin-

dered. However, the creature's self-assertive rebellion would not only dissolve the covenant of life enjoyed between God and his image bearer, but the consequences of the covenant's dissolution would be equally many splendors; better, many corruptives. Chief among the corruptive effects that the creature would experience, in accord with the *death* he would now be experiencing, would be his blindness—that is, his inability to “see” his perfect, holy, gracious, infinite-personal, invisible Creator-deity. Because of the cosmic insurrection volitionally engaged by God's crowned creation, the perfect “sight” possessed by the perfect creature in a perfect environment has now been perfectly darkened. Sin being its own punishment—in many senses—the “wisdom” of man (i.e., his “sight”) has now been rendered foolishness (1 Cor 1:18; 1 Cor 2:16). The “natural man,” therefore, apart from the instrumentation of the gift of faith, will now never “accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him”; in fact, he “is not even able [to do so]” (Rom 8:7).

So, in one sense, Russell cannot be faulted for functioning within the bounds of his ability; he is unable to “see” the invisible God. One must be careful, however, not to dismiss Russell's accountability to respond to the self-disclosure of the invisible God that *has* been made available to him in many ways (Rom 1:18-20; Heb 1:1-3). For this self-assertive rebellious rejection of the invisible God's amazingly gracious *not* hiding himself, every human being who rejects the revelation of God in Jesus Christ will find himself without excuse in the day that he does indeed finally meet the Triune God face to face.¹² As long as these rebellious ones continue in self-willed rejection of simultaneously the most gracious and the most sorrowful revelation of the invisible God in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as savior of the world, they will continue “always learning [yet] never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Just like Jannes and Jambres, who opposed Moses (2 Tim 3:7-8), their consciences are darkened to the hope of acquiring “knowledge” that could be

theirs if they would but repent of the self-righteous hubris that blinds them to the mystery unveiled in Christ—the mystery of God revealed (2 Cor 3:12-16; 4:3-6). The apostle Paul elsewhere articulates his burden for these ones this way: “Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden [wisdom] which God predestined before the ages to our glory; [the wisdom] which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2:6-8).

CONCLUSION: FAITHFULNESS IN THE FACE OF PERSUASIVE HERESY

F. F. Bruce encourages,

When Paul says in Colossians 1:15 that all things were created through Christ, “things in heaven and things on earth, visible and invisible,” he might have added, had appropriate Greek words been available in his day, “personal and impersonal.” If it is asked whether the spiritual forces which Christ vanquished on the Cross are to be regarded as personal or impersonal, the answer is probably “both.” Whatever forces there are, of either kind, that hold human souls in bondage, Christ has shown Himself to be their Master, and those who are united to Him by faith need have no fear of them.¹³

Bruce is echoing Paul's confidence that those who have been made complete in Christ also have been known by Christ and therefore have no need to fear any loss of that fullness because Christ, having begun a good work in them, will complete it (Phil 1:6). Those who faithfully proclaim, then, the knowledge of the mystery of God—that is, Christ—also need have no fear of “persuasive arguments” that inevitably fall short of revealing the mystery because they fail to possess the truth entailed in God's own disclosure of himself in Jesus Christ. Those who have been commissioned

to preach the gospel need only trust the invisible God who ordained the efficacious means of unveiling the mystery that is himself.

Marvelously, God has ordained the foolishness of preaching as the means for unveiling the mystery (1:23, cf. 1 Cor 1:21). Why? Because no truth can be discovered about a personal being unless that being wills to disclose it. The infinite-personal God *willed* to make himself known (Col 1:27). The corrupted, darkened, idolatrous, dead affections of the self-worshipping one—who believes the lie, rather than the Truth—*cannot* discover, by his own means, the mystery that is God. God is therefore pleased to employ the hubris-confounding medium of preaching to disclose to the creature the most important and ultimately sought knowledge: Himself. Again, through the message preached, the invisible God proclaims, “I AM the LORD.”

Those who proclaim this good news need only concern themselves with faithfulness and accuracy of the message of Truth, despite the ever recurring appearance of erudite rejections of Truth. These “persuasive arguments” will never and can never find their grounding in any objective standard of truth. For objective truth can come only from One who is both omniscient and free from any means of subjective bias. Truth, therefore, *must* be revealed; it cannot be either devised or discovered. Such determinations of so-called truth, because they have no external grounding, are inevitably merely subjective, philosophical, socio-culturally, finite constructs. They cannot ever rise to the level of objective, absolute, infinite-personally determined *and revealed* Truth. This “true knowledge of God’s mystery” can be found only in Jesus Christ. So declares the inspired apostle Paul to the Colossians.

ENDNOTES

¹ Jesus Christ is the mystery of God revealed. Because the testimony of countless witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ is true, sadly, Russell—and many like him—will have no excuse for rejecting their Creator in that day when they finally meet him face to face.

² These are general divisions with many areas of overlap, since the three divisions are so integral to one another in genuine Christianity.

³ D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Evil and Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 202.

⁴ H. Wayne House elaborates on the nature of the believer’s life having “been made complete” by virtue of his or her union with Christ, in whom the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form. H. Wayne House, “Doctrinal Issues in Colossians—Part 2: The Doctrine of Christ in Colossians,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149: 594 (1992): 187-88.

⁵ Augustine *Confessions* 1.1.

⁶ Cf. Exod 3:14 with John 7:35; 8:12; 9:58; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5; see also Deut 18:15 with Matt 17:5; and John 5:18-26; 14:8-11; Phil 2:5-11; Col 1:15-18; 2:9; 1 Tim 3:16; Heb 1:1-3.

⁷ Richard R. Melick, Jr., *Colossians* (New American Commentary 32; Nashville: Broadman, 1991), 183.

⁸ The term *philosophia* (2:8) is a *hapax legomena* in the New Testament. The term may be a technical term employed by the apostle in specific polemic against the heresies being advanced—which heresies also may have used the term. One must be careful to note that Paul is not decrying philosophy itself, however, but rather *tes philosophia kai kenos apates*—literally, “the philosophy and empty deceit” of employing mere human wisdom—exclusive of consummate wisdom found in Jesus Christ—as instructive for any ultimately meaningful life. That Paul is not decrying philosophy itself is evidenced by his own affirming citation of philosophers known to his audiences (see, for example, Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12). Melick, *Colossians*, 172, 177; cf. 252-53; G. R. Beasley-Murray, “The Second Chapter of Colossians,” *Review & Expositor* 70:4 (Fall 1973): 470. Concerning notions of this teaching that has been characterized as “the Colossian heresy,” see F. F. Bruce, “Colossian Problems: Part 3: The Colossian Heresy,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141: 563 (1984): 195-206.

⁹ The only One who is perfect is obviously excepted here.

¹⁰ C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge: University Press, 1958), 92; J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles*

to the Colossians and to Philemon (3rd ed.; London: Macmillan & Co., 1897), 178; Bruce, "Colossian Problems," 204-05.

¹¹See, for example, Gen 2:7; Exod 33:14-16; Jer 11:4; 30:22; Ezek 36:28; Matt 1:23; Col 1:27; Rev 21:3. See also Jonathan Edwards' helpful and necessary distinction between *chief* ends and *ultimate* ends in Jonathan Edwards, *The End for Which God Created the World*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Ethical Writings, Vol. 8* (ed., Paul Ramsey; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

¹²Sadly, because Bertrand Russell succumbed to his Creator's righteous curse and died on February 2, 1970, his hubris has now been granted its opportunity. The consequences that he is now experiencing, as a direct consequence to the risk he took, are literally unimaginable. The living can only beg for rescuing mercy for others who today remain captive to dead affections.

¹³F. F. Bruce, "Colossian Problems: Part 4: Christ as Conqueror and Reconciler," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141: 564 (1984): 299.