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Reconciliation, Victory, and Christ:

An analysis of soteriology in Colossians and atonement motif

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Colossians Exegesis

By

Matthew Thomas

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Introduction

Paul’s letter to the Colossians is perhaps one of the most ignored letters in the entire Pauline Corpus. Questions of authorship have led many to exclude Colossians from any serious study of Pauline theology.[[1]](#footnote-2) Although Colossians is often ignored by those seeking to understand the theology of Paul, it contains great insights into several key ideas. In particular, Colossians serves as a fitting place to discuss Pauline understandings of Salvation and in particular the concept of atonement that emerges from such a study. The purpose of this study is to examine the key passages that deal with salvation within Colossians and then to expand upon those ideas to examine how such an understanding may impact the traditional understandings of atonement within Christian theology. Two passages, in particular, serve as the key for unlocking Paul’s beliefs concerning salvation in Colossians. Colossians 1:15-23 and 2:8-15 provide the foundational understandings for how salvation is to be understood in Colossians. Once these passages have been analyzed and the traditional understandings of atonement that have permeated church history have been examined then it is possible to discover how the atonement understanding of atonement bears upon the larger understandings of atonement seen in the gospels and the New Testament as a whole. Soteriology and the subsequent understandings of atonement found in Colossians are not isolated ideas to the New Testament but hold theological significance for the entire New Testament.

Colossians 1:15-23

Following the customary introductory material of the letter, the letter to the Colossians turns immediately to the question of Jesus and the work of Christ. The material found in Colossians 1:15-20 is often seen as a pre-Pauline composition that Paul inserted into the text.[[2]](#footnote-3) This argument is made on the basis that the language immediately preceding verse 15 and immediately following verse 20 contains first person plural pronouns to address the recipients of the letter, while the text in verses 15-20 such plural language is conspicuously missing.[[3]](#footnote-4) While the hymn material of 1:15-20 predates the writing of Colossians, several adjustments or alterations have been made to the original material to suit the needs and purposes of the letter to the Colossians.[[4]](#footnote-5)

The hymn can easily be divided into two strophes that are denoted by the respective repetition ofo[j which serve to create parallel structures of the text.[[5]](#footnote-6) The hymn is therefore divided into two parallel sections with parallels in which 1:15 mirrors 1:18b, 1:16 mirrors 1:19-20.[[6]](#footnote-7) Through this structure this hymn is able to function as one of the preeminent Christological statements within the New Testament.[[7]](#footnote-8) This passage is not unique in the New Testament, although the level of Christology is perhaps higher than what is seen in other Pauline passages, but is in keeping with the Christology of places such as John 1:1-4 and Hebrews 1:2-4.[[8]](#footnote-9) The hymn as it stands in the present text of Colossians possesses an “impressive number of terms which either do not appear at all elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, or are used otherwise with a different meaning.”[[9]](#footnote-10) The hymn serves as a definitive statement regarding the person and work of Christ and is therefore important for understanding the nature of salvation in Colossians because it is through Christ that salvation is achieved.

What then is the message of this hymn? The hymn very clearly celebrates Jesus as “creator and reconciler of the universe.”[[10]](#footnote-11) It is this cosmic nature which the hymn possesses that gives it such power in defining the person of Christ and his role in salvation. Paul’s use of the hymn serves as an effective means of illustrating that Jesus is not only the Jewish Messiah but he is also the lord of all creation.[[11]](#footnote-12) This point allows Paul to then speak with confidence that the message of Jesus is open not only to Jews but to Gentiles also since they are also included in the kingdom of Christ since it is encompassing of all creation.[[12]](#footnote-13) In salvific terms Christ is shown through this hymn to be “the agent of God in the whole range of His gracious purpose towards men.”[[13]](#footnote-14) The work of Christ extends not only from the work of creation but also to the work of redemption and reconciliation and extends on to the final consummation of all of history.[[14]](#footnote-15)

While Paul speaks on such cosmic terms throughout his use of the hymn, he does not allow the message to become so ethereal that no practical application can be obtained. One of the suspected additions of Paul is found in 1:18a where he refers to Christ as the head of the church.[[15]](#footnote-16) Christ is therefore seen as not only the head of the entire cosmos but also the head of the church, which is defined as the body of Christ and therefore interpretatively fits with the larger context in which Paul is writing.[[16]](#footnote-17) This addition of the reference of Christ as the head of the church allows Paul to then move into his first major discussion concerning soteriology, namely the idea of reconciliation.

Reconciliation

Colossians 1:19-20 contains the first inclusion of the idea of reconciliation in Colossians and so some attention should be given to this idea, since it is included in the pre-Pauline hymn. The use of this language to conclude the hymn demonstrates that all of God’s work is focused in Christ because in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.[[17]](#footnote-18) The statement is general in nature with no specific being given as to the birth, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, because in all of these events the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.[[18]](#footnote-19) Jesus is the culmination of all that God has intended for creation and it is through Jesus that the work of reconciliation was accomplished.[[19]](#footnote-20)

When Paul uses a form of the word avpokatalla,ssw translated as reconciliation in verse 20 and again in verse 22, what was his intended meaning? This specific compound usage of the word occurs only here in Colossians 1:20; 22 and in Ephesians 2:16.[[20]](#footnote-21) The word group in which this peculiar usage is found means simply “to reestablish proper friendly interpersonal relations after those have been disrupted or broken.”[[21]](#footnote-22) In other words, reconciliation implies a sense of restoration of relationship. The reconciliation mentioned in Colossians 1:20 and subsequently in 1:22 is different than the reconciliation of the world in 2 Corinthians 5:19 and Romans 8:21 and it is also different from the restoration of the relationship between Jew and Gentile in Ephesians 2:16.[[22]](#footnote-23) The scope of the reconciliation encountered in Colossians is both personal and cosmic and is a clear reference to the statement that all things were created by and for Christ in heaven and in earth.[[23]](#footnote-24) Structurally the Christ hymn of Colossians demonstrates the interconnection between creation and reconciliation.[[24]](#footnote-25) God has created the world through Christ and God has also brought about the reconciliation of creation through Christ. The question that remains unanswered by this text is, “when did the estrangement between God and creation occur that would require reconciliation?” The answer to this question is implied to be understood that at some point between the creation of the cosmos and the reconciliation that Christ brought about creation “fell” and the relationship between God and creation was changed.[[25]](#footnote-26)

How did God bring about reconciliation for creation? The answer to that question is found in the following line of Colossians. Reconciliation was brought about by God making peace through the blood of the cross of Christ. The mention of the blood and cross of Christ as the means of reconciliation is a direct reference to the death of Jesus.[[26]](#footnote-27) This mention of the cross grounds Paul’s understanding of reconciliation in the historical moment of the death of Jesus as opposed to a cosmic moment outside of human history.[[27]](#footnote-28) The importance of this is further expounded upon in Colossians 2:8-15 but this mention in 1:20 of the cross of Christ connects this hymn with the larger Pauline understanding that reconciliation occurred at the crucifixion of Jesus.[[28]](#footnote-29)

The theme of reconciliation as a means of understanding soteriology is of utmost importance in Colossians. The theme of reconciliation is continued by Paul in his discussion of the personal state of the Colossian believers in 1:21-23. Paul reminds the Colossians that they too were once alienated from God and in need of reconciliation. Paul is clear to use a similar form of the verb for reconciliation to connect the concept of reconciliation in the Christ hymn to the personal affects of reconciliation seen in the church in Colossae. Paul is quick to point out that reconciliation is the work of God and not the work of the Colossian believers.[[29]](#footnote-30) The reconciliation that God brings about is because of the evil deeds and thoughts of the Colossian believers and God is the active force in bringing about the reconciliation, much the way God was the active force in bringing about reconciliation through Christ in the Christ hymn of 1:15-20.[[30]](#footnote-31)

In many respects Paul’s connection of the Christ Hymn and the material of 1:21-23 is a masterful usage of the Greek language. Paul is able to connect the cosmic work of Christ in reconciling the entirety of creation to the reconciliation that took place in Colossae among the small group of believers.[[31]](#footnote-32) Paul is quick not only to remind the Colossian believers of their reconciliation toward God, but also to remind them of the life they lived before being reconciled.[[32]](#footnote-33) Paul describes the nature of the Colossian alienation as being related to their deeds and their minds (Col. 1:21). It is unclear as to exactly what type of alienation this would represent but it is highly probable that such alienation would have been represented by the idolatry of the Gentile way of life.[[33]](#footnote-34) In other words, Paul is stating that the Colossians have been reconciled to God through the death of Jesus and this reconciliation has restored the relationship of the Colossians to God that had previously been marked by their blatant disregard for the worship of God.

While Paul has presented a very clear and concise understanding of reconciliation to that point, he concludes the section by placing a demand upon the life of the reconciled people of Colossae.[[34]](#footnote-35) Paul reminds the Colossians that while God is the initiator of reconciliation, the recipient of that grace must live a life that is marked by reconciliation. The purpose of this reconciliation was to present the believer as holy and without blemish. This is in keeping with Paul’s language of sacrifice.[[35]](#footnote-36) It is the purpose of reconciliation; therefore, to present the believer to God, much the way an animal would have been presented for a sacrifice.[[36]](#footnote-37) Reconciliation requires a response upon the reconciled individual and through this language Paul is quick to remind the Colossians that reconciliation requires a life that is marked by holiness, made possibly only by the death of Christ.

The Victory of Christ

While Paul discusses reconciliation in Colossians 1, the soteriology of Colossians is further developed through Paul’s treatment of the work of Christ in Colossians 2:8-15. It must be remembered that throughout Colossians that Paul is writing an “occasional” letter, meaning he is writing for a specific purpose. Paul’s statements of 2:8-15 are built off of his warning of 2:8, directed toward the particular theological issue that prompted the writing of the letter. While this should be kept in mind, it in now way diminishes the soteriological material that can be gleaned from this section of Colossians. The clearest connection between 2:8-15 and 1:15-23 is found in the repetition of the theme that in Christ all the fullness of the deity of God dwells in bodily form.[[37]](#footnote-38) While considerable commentary can be made on the various images presented by Paul in this passage of Colossians, in the interest of soteriological study and eventual connections to atonement motif is the material found in 2:13-15.

Paul begins in Colossians 2:13 by reminding the believers in Colossae of their state prior to the work of Christ. Paul states that the believers were dead in their sins, a reference not to a physical condition but to the spiritual death that was the result of their alienation from God.[[38]](#footnote-39) Paul then emphasizes that while the believers in Colossae were spiritually dead, they have been made alive through Christ. This motif of comparing the life before Christ with the life after Christ is a common motif in Pauline writings particularly in Ephesians 2. Paul emphasizes that the Colossians have been forgiven and that because of their forgiveness they have entered into a new way of living in Christ.[[39]](#footnote-40) While this motif of life before Christ and life after Christ is common in Paul’s writings, the material found in Colossians 2:14-15 is an expansion of this idea that provides an understanding of how this new life has been accomplished.

Paul begins in 2:14 to explain that Christ has done away with the ceiro,grafon that stood against us. It is important to understand this word in order to fully capture the significance of what Christ has done. Quite literally it means “a hand written document,” while specifically it refers to a “certificate of indebtedness.”[[40]](#footnote-41) In other words, Paul is stating that Christ has cancelled the record of debts that stood opposed to the Colossian Christians. The usage of this word is only found here in the New Testament and so it is difficult simply based on context to determine what was meant when Paul used the word.[[41]](#footnote-42) Some interpreters have attempted to connect this certificate of indebtedness to a pact made by humanity with Satan, but there is no evidence from the passage to suggest such a state of affairs.[[42]](#footnote-43) Other’s (including the early church fathers of the school of Antioch) sought to understand ceiro,grafon as a reference to the law of Moses.[[43]](#footnote-44) This interpretation is equally difficult as it sounds rather unlike Paul to discuss the law in such negative terms as being done away with and being nailed to the cross.[[44]](#footnote-45) A popular understanding in the contemporary world of the record of indebtedness would be equivalent to an IOU that humanity owes to God.[[45]](#footnote-46) F.F. Bruce affirms this idea by contextualizing the record of indebtedness as being attributed to the “mountain of bankruptcy which you were bound to acknowledge but could never have any hope of discharging.”[[46]](#footnote-47) While this interpretation may be an acceptable means of understanding ceiro,grafon, it does little to explain how the term would have been understood in the Colossian situation.[[47]](#footnote-48) Perhaps the best explanation of how this word should be understood in context would be to understand it as not simply a removal of a debt that is owed but the complete, permanent eradication of the debt.[[48]](#footnote-49) The debt is caused by God’s righteousness and man’s sinfulness and so God’s laws do not cease to apply but that God’s laws no longer function as a means of condemning humanity.[[49]](#footnote-50)

Paul states that the ceiro,grafon is not only done away with, it is nailed to the cross. Quite literally Paul understands that the record of indebtedness has been crucified.[[50]](#footnote-51) This may in fact be a play on the practice of nailing the condemnation of the crucified criminal on the cross, much in the way that the sign declaring Jesus as the king of the Jews was placed above his own head.[[51]](#footnote-52) Paul has therefore shifted salvation from simply restoring of a relationship/restoration as seen in Colossians 1 to the complete destruction of the condemnation that led to the alienation of the believer. Paul modifies his language once again in 2:15 as he shows that not only has the written record of indebtedness been destroyed, but the cross has become a symbol of triumph.

Colossians 2:15 contains several translational issues that greatly impact how this passage is understood. First of all the word, avpekdusa,menoj has several varied meanings. It is most commonly understood as “stripping off,” which would imply that Christ stripped off the powers and authorities.[[52]](#footnote-53) The use of this word in that fashion is a possible and was the interpretation provided by the Greek Fathers who believed that Jesus stripped off the powers and authorities or took them off like a garment that clung to him upon the cross.[[53]](#footnote-54) The difficulty in understanding this text is in large part caused by the question of the subject of the sentence, Christ or God. Grammatically it would be assumed that God is the subject since God is the last explicitly stated subject in 2:13, however, it is possible that through the crucifixion imagery the subject has shifted to Christ.[[54]](#footnote-55) It is highly likely that the subject has remained God and so it can be rendered as God has stripped off the powers and authorities and it is God who has triumphed over them by the cross. It was therefore God who achieved victory over the powers and authorities through the cross of Christ.[[55]](#footnote-56)

Paul’s use of language in this one verse is remarkable. The imagery that Paul constructs with his language is that of the defeat of personal spiritual powers and the “breaking of their dominion under the figure of a military defeat, and the parade of the vanquished in the triumphal procession of the conqueror.”[[56]](#footnote-57) Paul’s language, reminiscent of a Roman Triumph, may have held slight political overtones, especially when read in the perspective of the cosmic nature of Christ found in the Christ Hymn of 1:15-20.[[57]](#footnote-58) In other words, Paul’s use of language in this section of Colossians in particular could have been a subtle attempt to show that not only has Christ defeated the spiritual powers, but Paul has also defeated the earthly powers as well.[[58]](#footnote-59) Such a theory may have some support, but may in fact miss the larger point of the passage, particularly in relation to salvation. This language has deep theological significance in the development of structured atonement theories although it is highly likely that Paul did not have a single theory of atonement in mind.

Atonement Theory in christian theology

In order to understand how Colossians impacts atonement theory, it is first necessary to look at the dominant atonement theories prevalent in Christian theology. In the larger picture, atonement theory is a popular topic of discussion in contemporary scholarly circles, and this is in large part the result of a lack of single church teaching on atonement. Theories about the atonement unlike the doctrine of the trinity or the doctrine of Christology have never been codified into a single teaching by the church.[[59]](#footnote-60) In terms of systematic presentations, there are fundamentally three traditional methods of exploring the issue of atonement.  These three ways of speaking of atonement can be classified as objective, subjective and dynamic understandings of atonement.[[60]](#footnote-61) The objective view of atonement is perhaps the most commonly held understanding of the atonement by Christians and was first developed by Anselm of Canterbury during the late 11th century.[[61]](#footnote-62) Anselm’s understanding of atonement is found in his work *Cur Deus Homo?* (Why a God-Man) in which he attempted to persuade unbelievers of the necessity of salvation purely on the basis of reason.[[62]](#footnote-63) Anselm's desire is to show the overall rational quality of the atonement, and to this end Anselm based his argument largely on feudal ideas prevalent during his lifetime.[[63]](#footnote-64) In defining the atonement Anselm begins with his understanding of sin that he defined, using feudal language, as the “refusal of God's vassals to give their Sovereign what is due him.”[[64]](#footnote-65) Anselm further expresses the belief that this act of sin impinges upon God's honor and God's honor must be satisfied.[[65]](#footnote-66)  Humanity is unable to satisfy the honor of God because of man's sinfulness. In Anselm’s reasoning only someone who is both human and divine can provide satisfaction for humanity and by being divine can be without sin.[[66]](#footnote-67)

This understanding is the basis of Anselm's theory of atonement and the answer to the question of why God became man, namely to provide satisfaction for the sins of humanity and to restore the honor of God. This objective imagery for the atonement provides a basis for viewing the atonement that does not take into consideration the life and ministry of Jesus but instead sees the death of Jesus as the primary focus for the incarnation of Jesus.[[67]](#footnote-68) There are serious questions that must be dealt with when examining Anselm's theory of atonement; particularly, why would a loving God turn against his own son by having him killed in order to satisfy the sins of disobedient humanity?[[68]](#footnote-69) Most perplexing for some was the question of why God would accept the death of an innocent man for the payment of man's sin debt led to the development of the subjective view of atonement.[[69]](#footnote-70)

The question of why would God desire the death of an innocent man was posed most forcefully by Peter Abelard. Abelard saw the death of Jesus not as a means by which God's honor was satisfied or as a means of paying for humanities sins but rather as an example of God's love for humanity.[[70]](#footnote-71) In this view, by seeing God's act of love on the cross, humanity is inspired to love God and it is through this desire that God is able to forgive sins.[[71]](#footnote-72) Abelard’s view also poses difficulties mainly in the fact that his view also substantially ignores the ministry of Jesus leading up to his death. Abelard's subjective theory does, however, answer some of the issues presented by Anselm's objective theory by showing that God's nature of love is the driving force behind the atonement.[[72]](#footnote-73) By placing atonement in the nature of God's own love as opposed to God's desire to have his honor satisfied, Abelard satisfies some of the most difficult theological issues that resulted from Anselm's theory. However, his failure to address the ministry of Jesus in his theory suggests that his theory is, like Anselm's, deficient in its perspective.

Theologians have often seen the dynamic theory of atonement as the first way of explaining the death of Jesus, as it is often the theory found within the writings of the Early Church Fathers.[[73]](#footnote-74) The dynamic theory of atonement is presented in its first quasi-systematic approach in the writings of Irenaeus.[[74]](#footnote-75)  The dynamic theory of atonement, represented by others such as Athanasius, held that the fundamental effect of the atonement was the defeat of Satan.[[75]](#footnote-76) The concept of the defeat of Satan that became the central idea of those who held to the dynamic theory of atonement was rediscovered and expounded upon by Gustaf Aulen in his work *Christus Victor,* in which he held that the dynamic view of atonement was indeed the “classical” view and therefore the closest to the understanding of the early church.[[76]](#footnote-77) Aulen termed his view of atonement *Christus Victor*. Fundamentally atonement is represented as “our rescue from distress by Christ who, like a brave and victorious knight, has been able to defeat the prince of darkness and free us from enslavement to death.”[[77]](#footnote-78)  *Christus Victor* atonement provides a wonderful connection between the death and resurrection of Jesus and his ministry principally because it sees the purpose of the coming of Jesus as part of the larger struggle of overthrowing Satan and freeing humanity from bondage.[[78]](#footnote-79)

In examining the three dominant theories of atonement within the history of the church, the question of how Colossians fits into this analysis proves important. It would be possible to apply to Pauline conception of reconciliation to the Objective theory of atonement as represented by Anselm, but this would ignore the triumph language found in Colossians 2. *Christus Victor* atonement would fit naturally into the language of Colossians 2 but this would largely disregard the reconciliation language of Colossians 1. A compromise could be posed by stating that the subjective view of atonement is the correct one, but this completely ignores the biblical language presented by the text of Colossians. A composite theory of atonement is necessary that understands the deficiencies of each prominent theory while affirming the validity found in each theory is needed. While an analysis of the entire biblical text would be necessary to affirm a complete theory of atonement would be impossible in such a limited space as this analysis, the soteriology found in Colossians can be examined alongside other atonement theories to determine how the claims of Colossians can be understood in a larger biblical context.

Atonement Theory, Colossians, and Jesus

How is the death of Jesus understood within Paul’s letter to the Colossians? How is salvation achieved through that death? As previously stated the idea of reconciliation permeates Paul’s understanding of salvation in Colossians. This reconciliation was achieved through the death of Jesus and by no other means yet Paul is incredibly creative in shifting the cross from a instrument of shame to an instrument of victory in Colossians 2.[[79]](#footnote-80) Through the cross, Christ has triumphed over the powers and authorities and cancelled the debt that stood against humanity.[[80]](#footnote-81) While this concept may seem to be relatively unique to Colossians, in many respects it is very close to the understanding of the work and death of Jesus as presented in the gospels. Two scholars, in particular, have attempted to analyze the ministry of Jesus for insights into understanding the death of Jesus. The first, N.T. Wright, has sought to provide an interpretation of the ministry of Jesus, which is centered on Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom of God and 1st Century Jewish religious understandings and how this proclamation ultimately led to the death of Jesus.  The second, J. Denny Weaver, has sought to show how the New Testament provides a clue to understanding the death of Jesus within a narrative context. While these two scholars have not directly dealt with the ideas presented in Colossians, their ideas provide tremendous insight into the theological understandings that arise from the text of Colossians.

N.T. Wright’s seminal work, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, contains the fundamental assertion, similar to that of Albert Schweitzer, that Jesus was an eschatological prophet/Messiah who announced the kingdom of God and who died to bring it about.[[81]](#footnote-82) Wright draws upon two images in understanding the ministry of Jesus: that of exile and restoration.[[82]](#footnote-83) These two images provide a framework for understanding the work of Jesus, principally that Israel was in exile under Roman occupation and that restoration could only be brought about through the coming of the kingdom of God.[[83]](#footnote-84) The kingdom of God then becomes quite literally a way of bringing about the end of oppression by the Roman government (and their Jewish counterparts) and the setting up of a new age in which Yahweh would be the king of Israel.[[84]](#footnote-85) In Wright’s understanding, God would restore the people of Israel and establish the kingdom of God only after a long and extended period of suffering in exile; therefore, the suffering of the Messiah was part and parcel of the suffering that was necessary to bring about the kingdom.[[85]](#footnote-86) It is because of this understanding of the need for the Messiah to suffer that Wright understands Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem as intentional.[[86]](#footnote-87) Wright concludes that by taking upon himself the cross, Jesus would achieve victory for God by helping to usher in the kingdom of God through suffering on behalf of Israel.[[87]](#footnote-88)

While Wright attempts to show the connection between Jesus and his Jewish context, the connection to the language of Colossians is not a difficult one to make. First of all, Jesus is seeking the reconciliation of Israel to God as seen in Wright’s usage of exile/restoration language. While Paul is speaking to a predominantly Gentile audience about the reconciliation that has been brought about from their evil “Gentile” life through Christ, the connection to the reconciliation of Israel through the Kingdom of God is unmistakable. Jesus’ work was fundamentally concerned about the restoration of Israel which would have the side impact of reconciling all humanity to God (a theme seen in the Christ Hymn of Colossians 1:15-20).

While these ideas are interesting, they are not complete. J. Denny Weaver's analysis of the atonement provides a means by which the principles set forth by Wright can be expounded theologically. First of all, Weaver, as a Mennonite, asserts that Jesus’ ministry was inherently non-violent.[[88]](#footnote-89) Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the only way Jesus could have battled against the forces of Satan is by nonviolent means, particularly his own death.  Weaver argues that in some respects Jesus was a pawn in the cosmic chess match between Satan and God.[[89]](#footnote-90) Therefore, Jesus was killed in an apparent victory by Satan but was eventually vindicated by his resurrection. This turned the defeat into an ultimate victory.[[90]](#footnote-91) In understanding Jesus’ death in such cosmic terms, Weaver states that the authorities that executed Jesus were actually “in bondage to the power of evil” and Jesus was not accidentally killed but; rather, those who rejected the rule of God killed him.[[91]](#footnote-92) Weaver uses this view to argue against those who portray the death of Jesus as orchestrated by God as a form of divine retribution. In Weaver’s presentation Jesus is killed not because God ordains it but because of the violent forces that stand opposed to God and seek to destroy the work of God.[[92]](#footnote-93)

The language that Weaver employs to describe the death of Jesus is in large part keeping with the ideas presented in Colossians 2, namely the concept of victory. Weaver’s contribution is to define the precise nature of the power and authorities that Christ triumphed over. Weaver is therefore able to connect the concept of victory that is found in Colossians 2 with the larger narrative of the New Testament.

In bringing the ideas of Wright, Weaver, and Colossians together, it is clear that the ideas of reconciliation and victory that are presented in Colossians are not unique to this one letter. In fact, because of the analysis of Wright and Weaver it is possible to see how these ideas are the driving forces behind the atonement within the New Testament. Colossians, therefore, does not stand as a lone representative of a particular theory, instead, Colossians presents in succinct language ideas that are found throughout the New Testament. The concept of victory in particular is an important idea for those who seek to understand the ministry of Jesus to grasp. Paul states that God triumphed over the powers and authorities through Christ, and this is in large part keeping with the earthly ministry of Jesus, particularly represented in his healing ministry.

Theological Implications

Understanding the death of Jesus in cosmic, yet personal terms, is an important way of framing the concept of salvation. In particular, the idea of victory becomes a critical theme for contemporary Christians. The ideas of reconciliation and victory are far larger than simply what is found in Colossians, although Colossians provides a strong starting point for formulating an understanding of these concepts. If the ideas of Wright and Weaver are to be seen as correct in relationship to the ideas of Colossians, then the ideas of reconciliation and victory are core ideas found within the ministry of Jesus. Weaver in particular has shown that the earthly ministry and death of Jesus resulted in cosmic, spiritual, results.

How should Colossians be understood in salvific terms? First of all, the idea of reconciliation must be properly understood as being the result of a period of alienation followed by the work of God in Christ. Reconciliation is, however, not without a consequence, namely the living of a holy and upright life. The idea of reconciliation must continue to be understood as merely the beginning of a larger process of salvation that is tied inexorably to the concept of victory. The idea of the victory of God through Christ is a concept that must once again be recaptured in the modern church. In particular because the view one holds concerning the victory of Christ, in large part determines the view one will hold regarding the hope for life. Followers of Jesus now have hope that although evil (powers and authorities) may still roam the earth, evil is wounded and will one day die completely. This hope is not a hope in a better life in the hereafter, but is a hope that has real practical implications for temporal existence.[[93]](#footnote-94) Through the resurrection Christ had defeated death (1 Cor. 15) and believers do not have to be in fear of dying without hope. Christ's victory represents more than simply a sly defeat of Satan, it represents a complete and total liberation of all creation that will be fully realized at the parousia when “creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). It is this concept that gives the Christian hope that history is progressively moving to the grand finale when Christ is revealed, creation is restored, and the kingdom of God is at last brought into being upon the earth.

Colossians is not simply a letter to a first century Church in Asia Minor. Colossians is a letter with deep and lasting theological implications for the twenty-first century reader as well. The idea of soteriology, in particular, proves to be a very important concept for the contemporary Christian. Soteriology in Colossians would not be complete without an analysis of how atonement theory is related to the ideas presented in the text of the letter. It is only through a careful analysis of the relevant texts and a larger understanding of atonement theory that one is able to recognize that the ideas in Colossians go far beyond the pen of Paul to include the larger New Testament and particularly the ministry of Jesus. Such far ranging ideas should not be ignored but should be celebrated and proclaimed, because in those ideas the truth and everlasting nature of the gospel is found. It is only through the proclamation of the victory of Christ and the reconciliation of mankind that true hope can be brought to a dark and desolate world.

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1. The undisputed letters (Romans in particular) are often seen as the key to Pauline Theology, while the disputed letters are often relegated to footnotes in theological discussion. This paper will take the position that Colossians represents the ideas of Paul, either written during his lifetime by an amanuensis or written shortly following his own death by a follower of Paul. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* Vol. 44 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1982), CD-ROM. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Coloosians and to Philemon, Hermeneia*, trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 42.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. James D.G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text, The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Ibid.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. E.K. Simpson and F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Ibid.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon,* 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, The Anchor Bible*, trans. Astrid B. Beck (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Simpson and Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians*, 193.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon,* 42.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Ibid. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Dunn, *Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon,* 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon,* 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 40.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. F.F. Bruce, “Colossian Problems Part 4: Christ as Conqueror and Reconciler,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 (October-December 1984), 292. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Ibid., 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Dunn, *Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon,* 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 3, s.v. “Reconciliation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon,* 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. I, s.v. “avpokatalla,ssw.” [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon,* 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Simpson and Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians*, 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon,* 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. Ibid., 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Dunn, *Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon,* 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Ibid., 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. Dunn, *Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon,* 151. This is a connection between 2:9 and 1:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Francis W. Beare, “Introduction and Exegesis,” *The Epistle to the Colossians, The Interpreter’s Bible,* Vol. XI., (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1955), 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature,* 3rd ed. s.v. “ceiro,grafon.”  
     [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. Dunn, *Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon,* 164. The usage of the word in the LXX is equally unhelpful. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon,* 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. Roy Yates, “Colossians 2:14: Metaphor of Forgiveness,” *Biblia* 77 (1990): 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. Ibid., 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. Ibid., 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. Simpson and Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians*, 238. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. Yates, “Metaphor of Forgiveness,” 253. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. Ibid., 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. Dunn, *Epistles* *to the Colossians and to Philemon,* 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. Ibid., 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon,* CD-ROM. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
54. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
55. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon,* 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
56. Beare, “Introduction and Exegesis,” *The Epistle to the Colossians, The Interpreter’s Bible,* 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
57. Harry O. Maier, “A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27 (March 2005): 323, This entire article seeks to unpack the political overtones of Paul’s language in Colossians. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
58. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
59. Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement,* trans. A.G. Hebert (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
60. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 340-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
61. Ibid. 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
62. Ibid., 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
63. Ibid., 342-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
64. Ibid., 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
65. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
66. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
67. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
68. Gregory Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
69. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God,* 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
70. Ibid. 344. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
71. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
72. Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
73. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God,* 340. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
74. Ibid.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
75. Ibid., 341. A full treatment of the dynamic theory of atonement is impossible in this setting largely the result of the complexity and the variety of language that is used by proponents of this view. See Paul S. Fiddes *Past Even and Present Salvation* as well as Gustaf Aulen’s work *Christus Victor*. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
76. Aulen, *Christus Victor*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
77. Ted Peters*, God—The World's Future: Systematic Theology for a Postmodern Era* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
78. Boyd and Eddy, *Across the Spectrum*, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
79. Dunn, *Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon,* 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
80. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
81. Edgar V. McKnight, *Jesus Christ in History and Scripture: A Poetic and Sectarian Perspective* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1999), 236. McKnight offers an expert analysis of the way in which Jesus has been understood in contemporary scholarship, particularly through the variety of “quests” for the historical Jesus. His assertion that Wright is much like Schweitzer is made in analysis of the “Third Quest for the Historical Jesus” and the comparison of Wright to other scholars such as John Dominc Crossan. See pp. 203-209; 230-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
82. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 2; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 576. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
83. Ibid. 576-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
84. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
85. Ibid., 577, 609. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
86. Ibid., 610. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
87. Ibid*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
88. J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
89. Ibid., 14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
90. Ibid. Referring to Jesus, as a pawn does not mean that he had no control over his own destiny or that he was at the mercy of forces larger than himself, it merely means that in the larger cosmic battle between God and the forces of Satan, Jesus serves as a decisive figure in achieving victory. The image of a chess match, which the pawn imagery recalls, could also be used as an image to illustrate how the lowly appearing pawn (Jesus) actually checkmated the opponent's king (Satan). The image is not perfect but can be used to prove a point. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
91. Ibid., 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
92. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
93. Wright, *Jesus and* *The Victory of God*, 659 A fuller study of this concept of Christian hope can be found in N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-94)