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## **“We Thank God for You” How Thanksgiving Transforms Our Walk: A Study in the Theology of Colossians<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction—A Shared Experience**

Giving thanks is a complex social concept and construct. It is an expression of appreciation from someone who has received a benefit, to the giver of that benefit. It implicitly involves a power differential between the individuals, where one has a need which the other supplies. It is a recognition that the benefit was not only received, but valued by the recipient. The expression of gratitude modifies the relationship between the receiver of the benefit and the giver. It indicates that the benefit has created goodwill within the recipient toward the giver, a sense of friendship which the very expression of appreciation deepens. Giving thanks is as much a modification of outlook as it is an active expression.

On the theological level giving of thanks is even more complex. It involves thanking God for some benefit or experience through which the person has gone. Or it may involve thanking God for someone who is in some way special to the petitioner or has been the agent of God in helping the recipient. In this case a triad of relationships is involved. When we thank God for an individual, or in light of something they have done, we express to the Almighty our appreciation for His action in

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*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

bringing about the cause of the prayer. At the same time, if the person for whom we thank God in some way becomes aware of our prayer, it can create within them a deepened sense of relationship, friendship and gratitude for the person praying. The bond of friendship is deepened by the theological context in which it occurs. Both individuals have relationship to God and the thanksgiving indicates a shared theological understanding and relationship to the Almighty. This in turn deepens the ties between the individuals.<sup>2</sup>

**Paul's Use of Thanksgiving in Epistles**

It is no small matter, therefore, that the apostle Paul uses the concept of thanksgiving so often in the opening lines of his epistles.<sup>3</sup> He is in effect deepening his ties to his churches through the shared relationship to God.<sup>4</sup> He indicates that he appreciates in some way what the recipients

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<sup>2</sup> This is nicely illustrated in 2 Corinthians 9 where Paul describes blessings God gives that then become a source of giving to others who return thanks to God and pray for the human agents who gave the gifts. I call it the Circle of Blessing.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion and bibliography on Paul's use of thanksgiving in his epistolary openings see Jeffrey T. Reed, "Are Paul's Thanksgivings 'Epistolary'?", *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 61 (1996): 87-99. For a discussion of formulae relating to thanksgiving in introductions of letters in the ancient world see Peter Arzt, "The 'Epistolary Introductory Thanksgiving' in the Papyri and in Paul," *Novum Testamentum* 36 (1994:1): 29-46. Reed's article critiques Arzt's.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Raymond F. Collins, "A Significant Decade: The Trajectory of the Hellenistic Epistolary Thanksgiving," in *Paul and the Ancient Letter Form*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Sean A. Adams (Boston, MA: Brill, 2010), 159-184. On p. 180 he states, "Paul, his addressees, and God constitute the essential thematic elements of Paul's thanksgivings. . . . Paul thanks God for what God has effected among his addresses." On p. 172 Collins notes, "Paul's thanksgiving [in 1 Thessalonians] shares with the thanksgivings of the earlier papyri letters a similar function, that is, an appeal to the good will of the addressee(s). In the papyri letters and in Paul's thanksgiving the motivation for the thanksgiving is an experience of the addressees, an experience of (at least presumed) good health in the papyri letters, a religious experience in the case of Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians." David W. Pao in his article in the same book titled "Gospel within the Constraints of an Epistolary Form: Pauline Introductory Thanksgivings and Paul's Theology of Thanksgiving," 101-127, on p. 121 states, "... the Hellenistic *formula valetudinis* [health wish] aims at securing the relationship between the author and the recipient, thus providing the groundwork for the main point of the letter. In Paul's letters, however, the focus on God's work among the churches, as well as their responses to God, points to the fact that Paul is more concerned with the relationship between his audience and their God." Certainly, Paul is more concerned for the relationship between the recipients and God than to him, but the linkages are three way, with Paul bonded to the believers as well. That he is praying for them, and they know of his prayer,

## *SHEPHERD: A STUDY IN THE THEOLOGY OF COLOSSIANS*

of the letters mean to him.

A review of the openings of his epistles indicates that he most often uses the terminology “I thank God” (*εὐχαριστῶ τῷ θεῷ*) combined with a reference “for you” (*περὶ ὑμῶν*) and some reference to prayer.<sup>5</sup> Thus in the very opening address of his epistles, Paul cements his relationship with his churches through the thanksgiving link to God.<sup>6</sup>

Most of us do not write letters today following this pattern of thanksgiving to God or blessing Him, so we may be tempted to consider this as rather flowery, even superfluous religious language.<sup>7</sup> We may also

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cements the bond between Paul and the believers. Second Corinthians 9, again, illustrates this nicely where there is mutual good will created in the Circle of Blessing.

<sup>5</sup> In the 13 epistles, Romans through Philemon, 3 do not have thanksgiving or blessing, Galatians, 1 Timothy and Titus. Excluding these, of the other 10, 6 make mention of prayer, 8 make reference to thanksgiving, and 8 make reference to “you.” In Colossians *εὐχαριστέω* is in the plural since Paul and Timothy are listed as authors. The terms for prayer vary (*προσευχή, δέησις, προσεύχομαι*). There is great debate on how much of Paul’s thanksgivings in his letters follows any pattern in ancient Hellenistic letters, whether there is even such a pattern in Hellenistic letters of the period, and whether one can even speak of a pattern in Paul’s letters. Note Pao’s comment on Arzt’s and Reed’s articles, “. . . both Arzt and Reed conclude that one can no longer speak of the Hellenistic epistolary ‘introductory thanksgiving.’” Pao, “Epistolary Form,” 109. Reed, it seems to me, would disagree with this assessment, cf. Reed, “Paul’s Thanksgivings,” 90-94, but Pao critiques him well on pp. 108-109 of his own article.

<sup>6</sup> The glaring exception is Galatians where the apostle is so upset by the heresy sweeping the Galatian churches that he omits traditional friendly greetings to move directly to what shocks him. The lack of thanksgiving reduplicates in the reader Paul’s own alarm. In fact, one could almost call the opening of Galatians an “anti-thanksgiving” as Paul uses the terminology of shock and pronounces a double anathema (cf. the use of *θαυμάζω* “I marvel,” v. 6, and *ἀνάθεμα* “accursed,” v. 8-9). Cf. Peter Arzt-Grabner, “Paul’s Letter Thanksgiving,” in *Paul and the Ancient Letter Form*, 129-158. On p. 156 he notes, “When the relationship between Paul and a community is really bad, there is no reason at all for Paul—as for any other letter writer—to express thankfulness at the beginning of the letter body. On the contrary, Paul expresses his astonishment for the community’s bad behavior, which is the function of the *θαυμάζω* clause in Gal 1:6-7.”

<sup>7</sup> We are more influenced by our culture than we typically are willing to admit. Western society today has a secular worldview. The Greco-Roman culture had a sacral worldview. It was common in letters in the ancient world for people to give thanks to a god or the gods for the health of the person they were writing to or to thank the gods for helping them escape danger. See Collins’ delineation of examples, Collins, “A Significant Decade,” 160-162. Note also the parallel he draws to 2 Macc 1:10-12 on p. 167. It might be argued that Paul is simply using a typical form, therefore, that does not have great significance. But this would seem odd for such a careful writer like Paul, particularly since his thanksgivings are longer than in most ancient letters. Cf. Collins, “Significant Decade,” 172. Pao responds to the

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

be drawn to scan down the page to find where the “real theology” begins. But in this we would be quite mistaken. Pauline scholars have noted how the apostle typically introduces the major themes of his letters in the thanksgiving or blessing section that follows immediately on his epistolary introduction.<sup>8</sup> Thus the role of the thanksgiving section is twofold—to confirm and build the bond between Paul and his churches, and to introduce the themes of the letters.

**The Surprise in Colossians**

However, Colossians goes beyond the typical pattern of thanksgiving in the opening section of the book and a reference here or there. Six times in this short epistle Paul uses the thanksgiving word group.<sup>9</sup> It is a striking departure and caught my attention.<sup>10</sup>

As is well known, the exact form of the heresy that Paul was fighting in Colossae is disputed.<sup>11</sup> We are at a disadvantage since we only have

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focus on form that has predominated in New Testament scholarship on this topic as follows, “More than half a century after Shubert’s study [Paul Schubert, *The Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgivings* (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1939)], many still feel the need to emphasize the form over the content of Paul’s letters. To do so, however, not only leads one to ignore the emphasis of the content of Paul’s letter openings, it also prevents one from noticing the significant connections between Paul’s act of thanksgiving and his own emphasis on thanksgiving in the body of his letters.” Pao, “Epistolary Form,” 119. This phenomenon of the interconnectedness of Paul’s thanksgivings is what we will note below regarding Colossians.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, Wayne A. Meeks, ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 184-186. A primary example is 1 Cor 1:4-9 where Paul uses words such as “knowledge, spiritual gift, revelation, fellowship,” all terms that will reappear later in the book.

<sup>9</sup> One can add a seventh occurrence in 3:16 with the use of the term χάρις typically translated “grace,” but in this context probably best translated as “gratitude.” In contrast to the many uses of words of thanksgiving in Colossians, in the much larger book of Romans, Paul only uses the word group 5 times, 7 times in 1 Corinthians, 4 times in 2 Corinthians, 3 times Ephesians, 2 times Philippians, 4 times 1 Thessalonians (a bit of a theme there as well), 2 times 2 Thessalonians, 1 time 1 Timothy, 2 times 2 Timothy, 1 time Philemon.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. James Dunn’s words, “This repeated emphasis [on thanksgiving] in Colossians makes it one of the most ‘thankful’ documents in the New Testament (1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:17; 4:2).” See James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 262.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance, Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians*, Anchor Yale Bible, vol. 34B (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 29-39 for a summary of options. They conclude that “the Colossian Religion [their name for the heresy described in Colossians] remains an unsolved puzzle,” 39.

## *SHEPHERD: A STUDY IN THE THEOLOGY OF COLOSSIANS*

half of the conversation as illustrated in the book of Colossians and do not have much other information as to what was going on. The reference to the Sabbath in Colossians 2:16 clearly illustrates that there was at least some aspect of Judaism (or a distortion of it) in the teaching that Paul counters, but other characteristics of the false teaching are confusing and suggest the possibility of a syncretic heresy.<sup>12</sup>

What comes across quite clearly in Paul's argumentation is the centrality and supremacy of Christ. The false teachers seemed to consider Jesus insufficient to meet the salvation needs of the congregation. So they added on manmade regulations to insure that their followers would succeed in their journey heavenward.<sup>13</sup> The problem is, when you add on to Jesus you actually subtract from Him.<sup>14</sup> You suggest He is insufficient, you need something more.

When I began to study this book I expected strong theological arguments dealing with the heresy, and they are there, particularly in Colossians 1-2 (the Christ hymn in chapter 1, and five wonderful pictures of redemption in 2:11-15 alone). So I was surprised when I came across so many references to thanksgiving. What does this have to do with the topic of heresy? It does not seem to be a theological argument so much as a liturgical one.<sup>15</sup> Thus I set forth to map Paul's theology of thanksgiving in Colossians.

### **Mapping Paul's Theology of Thanksgiving**

Working on Biblical theology requires that the categories of meaning arise from what the text says. In reading the text one can begin with rather open questions, but then allow the patterns there to steer the development of classifications. Mapping the thanksgiving words within their context in Colossians led to a division of the data into four descriptive categories of giver/recipient of thanksgiving, antecedents/causes of thanksgiving, contexts of thanksgiving, and

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. David W. Pao, *Colossians & Philemon*, ECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 30.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Col 2:18-23 with reference to worship of angels and asceticism which suggests a lining up with spiritual forces, doing what it takes to verify salvation. One might call it a type of "fire insurance," protection against being lost, just in case Jesus was not enough.

<sup>14</sup> I credit my Colossians teacher, Ivan Blazen, with this catchy phrase.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Pao's description of the thanksgiving as worship, Pao, "Epistolary Form," 121-122.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

implications of thanksgiving. What follows is a brief delineation of the ideas in each of these categories that Paul teaches in Colossians.

*Giver and Recipient of Thanksgiving*

Paul uses the verb, noun and adjective for thanksgiving in Colossians. Since the adjective is only found here in the entire New Testament (Col 3:15), there is no other book that has this breadth of usage.<sup>16</sup> Whenever the apostle uses the verb he always notes that thanks is given to God and always designates Him as Father (1:3, 12; 3:17). This emphasis points to two aspects of Paul's theology of thanksgiving. First, God is the recipient of the thanks.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, He is the one who has given some benefit or gift to the believers, as we will see below. Second, if He is Father, then when we praise Him using this appellation we are calling on Him as His children and are a community of saints linked together in bonds of love (1:4).<sup>18</sup>

In the three uses of the verb “to give thanks” in Colossians the first in 1:3 has Paul and Timothy as the ones giving thanks for the believers in Colossae for what God has done in their lives. In the other uses in the book, the Colossian believers are the givers of thanks. Indeed, the second use of the verb (1:12) parallels the first with the Colossians themselves being called on to thank the Father who has qualified them for a share in the inheritance of the saints in light.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, the last usage in 4:2-3 serves as an inclusio with the first usage in 1:3. Whereas in 1:3 the apostle gives thanks for the Colossian believers, in 4:2-3, Paul asks the Colossians to pray for him

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<sup>16</sup> The verb is εὐχαριστέω (“I give thanks”), the noun εὐχαριστία (“thanksgiving”), and the adjective εὐχαριστός (“thankful”). As noted earlier, in 3:16, χάρις should probably be translated “gratitude,” adding a seventh usage in Colossians of words referring to thanksgiving.

<sup>17</sup> This is typical of Paul throughout his writings. See Pao, *Colossians*, 50.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the implication of calling God Father in the Lord's prayer with the concomitant responsibility to forgive those who sin against me, Matt 6:9-15. Cf. also Matt 18:15-18 and the father's plea in the story of the prodigal son, Luke 15:29-32 with “this brother of yours,” v. 32.

<sup>19</sup> Paul sets up the parallel via a second prayer starting in v. 9. This prayer, in place of being a prayer of thanksgiving as in 1:3-4, is a prayer of intercession, that the Colossian believers may walk (live) a life worthy of the Lord. Part of that worthy walk, it is clear from the series of participles in vv. 10-12, is with joy to give thanks to the Father who qualified them for a share in the inheritance of the saints in light. The communal sense of calling God Father is illustrated via the linkage to the idea of inheritance with the saints.

## *SHEPHERD: A STUDY IN THE THEOLOGY OF COLOSSIANS*

and Timothy so that a door may be opened for the Word of God, in order to speak the mystery of Christ.<sup>20</sup> These reciprocal details, emphasized via the inclusio, point toward a very communal sense of experience between Paul and this church, a communal sense of fellowship allied with thanksgiving.

### *Antecedents/Causes of Thanksgiving*

As we noted above, thanksgiving implies a power differential between the one giving thanks and the giver of the benefit. Some benefit has been received for which thanks is given. Allied with thanksgiving throughout Colossians is a profound emphasis on the gift of salvation. Over and over the apostle returns to this theme. He thanks God for the Colossians because he has heard of their faith in Christ and the love they have for all the saints (1:3-4) which is based on the hope laid up for them in the heavens (1:5). That hope is rooted in the gospel message they heard earlier which produces fruit within their lives (1:5-6).

It is the Father who has empowered them to share in the inheritance of the saints (1:12). He redeemed them from darkness and transferred them into the kingdom of His beloved Son (1:13). They were taught the gospel and now are rooted, built and established on Christ (2:7). They have taken off the old person with its pagan practices and have put on the new person as the chosen of God, holy, beloved, full of the virtues of Christian character including thanksgiving (3:5-15).

Paul is crystal clear in describing the change that has taken place in the lives of these people. They were in darkness and pagan wicked practices, and were redeemed from all these vices and evil by the power of God. The power differential, therefore, is soteriological in nature – from darkness to light (1:12-13), from uncircumcision to the circumcision of Christ (2:11), dead in trespasses, brought back to life with Christ with trespasses forgiven, the debt of sin erased, and the powers of darkness defeated (2:12-15).

Thanksgiving in Colossians is based on a power transaction of redemption where the person has moved from the wicked world to the kingdom of God's beloved Son in whom the believers have redemption,

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Dunn, *Colossians*, 261.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

the forgiveness of sins (1:13-14).<sup>21</sup> Thus, it is no surprise that the book of Colossians emphasizes the power of Christ and His victory over the forces of evil (1:15-20, 2:11-15). It is participation in Christ's victory that calls forth thanksgiving from the believers as they acknowledge what God has done for them and in their lives.

*Contexts of Thanksgiving*

Whereas salvation is the antecedent of thanksgiving it is a large part of the context surrounding the idea of giving thanks to God in Colossians. Paul describes that salvation experience as a past event, something God has already done in the lives of the believers. However, there are current realities, both positive and negative, that are also linked with the experience of giving thanks.

On the positive side, the believers have faith in Christ and love for all the saints in their lives (1:4). It was this that came to Paul's attention and called forth his prayer of thanksgiving (1:3-4). The word of truth in the gospel also resides with these people and bears fruit in their lives (1:5-6).

Much of what Paul says about thanksgiving is couched in words of intercessory prayer (1:9-12) or in exhortations to live in accordance with Christian ideals (2:6-7; 3:12-15; 4:2-3). These calls to action imply a situation where such typical Christian behavior is under threat from outside sources. Paul focuses attention on the positive to counter the negative. He speaks of the worthy walk (1:9-11; 2:6-7) in which the believer is rooted and built on Christ and established in the faith.

But the negative is not absent from his discourse. Threat arises from without and within. In chapter 2 it is the false teachers who threaten the church with their "add on to Jesus" type of philosophy in which much activity is intended to align the person with the angels and elemental spirits of the universe (2:8, 16-23).<sup>22</sup> The false teachers disseminate a doctrine of strict asceticism probably with the idea of preparing their

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Pao's words concerning Paul's introductory thanksgiving formulae in general, "In the Pauline introductory paragraphs, Paul repeatedly points back to Christ's redemptive act on the cross as the grounds of thanksgiving: . . ." Pao, "Epistolary Form," 122.

<sup>22</sup> See Pao, *Colossians*, 160-161 for a helpful discussion of the στοιχεῖα, the elemental spirits of the heavenly realm. Paul teaches that all rulers, powers and authorities are in subjection to Christ (1:15-20; 2:15).

### *SHEPHERD: A STUDY IN THE THEOLOGY OF COLOSSIANS*

adherents for meeting the angels (2:18, 20-23).<sup>23</sup> It is a harsh lifestyle meant to gain one access to heavenly or spiritual realities.

It sounds like anything but thanksgiving. Paul counters all this false teaching with the overwhelmingly positive and joyous message of salvation in Christ and the thanksgiving that flows from believers in recognition of that gift. Thus thanksgiving is an antidote to heresy.<sup>24</sup> And not surprisingly so, since thanksgiving focuses the attention on God and the fullness and completeness we have in Christ (2:9-10). If you are worshiping God in thankfulness and are full of Christ, there is no room for false teaching to slip in.

But Paul does not naively describe the group of faithful believers as one homogeneous group without internal challenges. From within the apostle notes the threat of strife that can arise in the community of faith (3:12-15). He calls for patience and forgiveness if someone has a complaint they bring. Complaining is the opposite of thanksgiving. Paul reminds the believers that God has forgiven them, so they must follow His example and forgive others (3:13). They are to wear these gracious attributes like a garment, topped by love, the bond of perfection (3:14), with the peace of Christ reigning in their hearts (3:15).

It is in this context that Paul indicates that the believers are to “be thankful” (3:15).<sup>25</sup> Thankfulness is not to be simply something Christians express from time to time. It is so to permeate their character that it can withstand the blows of trials and troubles that arise in any congregation or community.<sup>26</sup>

Paul goes on to express that the word of Christ is to dwell richly in their lives, in teaching, singing in the heart to God (3:16). The permeation of the Christian’s life with thanksgiving is expressed in the

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Ibid., 194-195.

<sup>24</sup> Thanksgiving is part of the group boundary formation or at least a marker of that boundary. Paul thanks God for the believers, not the false teachers.

<sup>25</sup> This is the one use of the adjective εὐχαριστός in the New Testament, allied with the verb γίνομαι (“to be, to become”), used frequently, as here, to express a state of being.

<sup>26</sup> The use of γίνομαι (“to be, to become”), in place of εἰμί (“to be”) may simply be stylistic variation. But O’Brien indicates that it points toward a constant striving toward the goal of “becoming” that thankful person. This concept expresses the active nature of such thanksgiving. See Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, WBC, vol. 44 (Waco: Word Books, 1982), 206. Cf. Dunn, *Colossians*, 235, “We could translate ‘Be thankful people,’ those who are characterized by their thankfulness, or indeed, ‘keep being or becoming (γίνεσθε) thankful,’ the verb indicating an ongoing responsibility . . .”

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

capstone statement of 3:17, “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.”<sup>27</sup>

One more interesting note in this section is the flavor or manner in which Paul calls for thanksgiving. When he opens his description of thanksgiving in 1:3, he notes that he gives thanks “always” (*πάντοτε*) in his prayers. In 1:11-12, the thanksgiving is to be given to the Father “with joy” (*χαρά*). In 2:7, the believers are called on to be “abounding” (*περισσεύω*) in thanksgiving. And as we noted above, in 3:17, it is in “whatever you do in word or deed” that they are to thank God the Father.<sup>28</sup> It is a rather exuberant, dynamic, extensive view of thanksgiving. It suggests a powerful force bubbling forth from the person’s life.<sup>29</sup> No wonder it is part of the antidote to heresy.

*Implications of Thanksgiving*

Interestingly, Paul presents one more view of the theology of thanksgiving in 4:2 as he comes to the end of his discourse. As noted above, the call to prayer and thanksgiving in 4:2 is an inclusio with the prayer of thanksgiving in 1:3. In 1:3 Paul and Timothy pray for the Colossian believers. In 4:2 the saints are called on to pray for Paul and Timothy. The interconnection of the community is reiterated, but with a striking addition.<sup>30</sup> In this closing section Paul calls on the believers to persist in prayer.<sup>31</sup> He emphasizes this idea of persistence by use of the term “watching” which he ties to thanksgiving “watching in it with thanksgiving.” The Greek verb for “watching” is *γρηγορέω* which means

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<sup>27</sup> My translation.

<sup>28</sup> The phraseology includes the concept of “all” – *καὶ πᾶν ὅ τι ἔὰν ποιήτε* “all, whatever you do.”

<sup>29</sup> Contra Dunn who sees the emphasis on “always” praying for you (1:3) and “abounding” in thanksgiving (2:7) as mere “Pauline flourishes.” Dunn, *Colossians*, 56, 142. The evidence against Dunn’s perspective is the way that Paul rather consistently modifies the concept of thanksgiving with a variety of terms like “always” “with joy” “all that you do” throughout the book. It is as though Paul is building a consistent wall of joyful thanksgiving against false teaching.

<sup>30</sup> We will see below that actually the “addition” in 4:2 has a parallel in 1:3-5. But Paul uses more terms in chapter 4 than chapter 1, and allies them more closely with thanksgiving in chapter 4.

<sup>31</sup> The verb is *προσκαρτερέω*, which means “to persist obstinately in, adhere firmly to, devote oneself to.”

### *SHEPHERD: A STUDY IN THE THEOLOGY OF COLOSSIANS*

“to stay awake.” It is a term that appears on the lips of Jesus when He refers to readiness for the Eschaton (Matt 24:42-43; 25:13; Mark 13:34-37; Luke 12:37). And Paul uses the term the same way in 1 Thessalonians 5:6 where he allies the term with sobriety.<sup>32</sup>

These contexts suggest that thanksgiving in Colossians also has an eschatological perspective. Because of its focus on God, as we have noted above, it is not surprising to see thanksgiving include this eschatological nature. That is to say, facing towards God, the Christian is facing towards the eschatological fulfillment of the salvation hope embodied in the present experience of the kingdom of God (1:5, 13).<sup>33</sup> Thanksgiving helps the Christian stay awake to the promise of Christ’s soon return.

This aspect of 4:2 also contributes to the inclusio with 1:3-5. In 1:3-5 Paul thanks God for the Christians because he has heard of their faith in Christ and their love for one another. But he goes on to say that these traits are based on the hope laid up for the Christians in heaven.<sup>34</sup> Thus in both contexts thanksgiving is set within an eschatological context.

#### *Summary*

We notice therefore the impressive depth of Paul’s theology of thanksgiving. It is communal, linking saints to one another through their bond to God the Father and Jesus Christ. At the same time, as a boundary marker it separates them from the false teachers. It is deeply rooted in the experience of salvation brought in Christ. Nothing can be added to His

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. 1 Peter 5:8; Revelation 3:2; 16:15. Cf. also Jesus’ words to His disciples to stay awake and watch in Gethsemane with Him (Matt 26:38-40; Mark 14:34-38). Cf. also the other eschatological phrase in 4:5 “redeeming the time” ( $\tauὸν καιρὸν ἔσωσται$ ). Dunn notes, “That  $\kaiρός$  often has the sense of significant time, in the New Testament eschatological time (as in Matt. 8:29; Mark 1:15; 13:33; Luke 21:8; Rom. 3:26; 8:18; 13:11; 1 Cor. 4:5; 7:29; 2 Cor. 6:2; 8:14; Gal. 6:10; 1 Pet. 1:5), also helps focus the thought on the present time as a unique climactic period in which every minute is precious . . .”. Dunn, *Colossians*, 266. Dunn also notes other phrases in 4:2-6 that suggest an eschatological perspective, “the mystery of Christ,” “that I might reveal it” and  $\delta\epsilon$  “it is necessary,” in Dunn’s expression, “the divinely ordained necessity.” See Dunn, *Colossians*, 262.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Pao’s words, “. . . for Paul thanksgiving can be forward-looking as it represents a call to respond to God’s future act as if it is already an accomplished reality.” Pao, *Colossians*, 291.

<sup>34</sup> Note the typical Pauline triad, faith, love, hope. Cf. 1 Cor 13:13 and 1 Thess 1:3 and 5:8.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

work of redemption and thus the Christian's thanksgiving is devoid of any personal merit. But in that complete dependence on the Lord Jesus, thanksgiving is also allied with the call to a holy and stable life of walking in the same way in which the Christian received Christ.

Thanksgiving is very practical in nature, facing both the joys and difficulties of the present. It is exuberant and dynamic in character. It so fills the life that heresy finds it difficult to enter. The Christian imbued with thanksgiving reaches out to others in the community with whom some complaint resides and seeks forgiveness and reconciliation.

Finally, while thanksgiving is rooted in the salvation provided by Christ in the past, and helps the Christian face the present, it is, nevertheless, forward facing, looking for the fulfillment of the hope God has set before the believer.<sup>35</sup> As such it is an antidote to the temptation to settle down and lose the vision of the soon return of Jesus Christ.

**Applications**

I want to take just a few moments to suggest how this profound theology in Colossians addresses us as biblical and theological scholars of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 2014. I am sure you can think of other applications.

*Community Reconciliation*

We live in a time when tensions exist among us over various theological issues. We study diligently and produce thoughtful papers addressing the different facets of the topics. The recent Theology of Women's Ordination studies are a case in point where three positions were the end product. Having friends in each of the three groups respectively, I am aware that there are strongly held positions in each case and that strong words have been spoken in some cases.

When we disagree sharply in a community of faith, I believe it can hamper our worship. It is time for reflection and reconciliation. This does not mean giving in on truth, but I believe it is possible to be thankful for

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Pao's concluding words in his article, ". . . the form of these introductory paragraphs [in Paul's letters] is inextricably tied with their content when thanksgiving is considered as an act that draws one's attention to God. This focus on God would then explain Paul's emphasis on what God had done in the past and what he would do in the future for his own people. God's people are in turn called to be faithful to him in the present age." Pao, "Epistolary Form," 127.

### *SHEPHERD: A STUDY IN THE THEOLOGY OF COLOSSIANS*

the contributions of others, particularly those who differ from me. None of us sees all the truth. We need someone else pointing out other aspects of a teaching in order to arrive at a better grasp of where God is leading us. For this we can be thankful and even find bridges for understanding each other. I am struck with the number of words emphasizing peace, forgiveness, reconciliation and worship that occur in Colossians 3:12-17, with that capstone of thankfulness to God.

#### *The Flavor of Our Scholarship*

As scholars we pride ourselves in being objective in our research. If the postmodern critique has taught us anything it is that we each come at our work from a perspective, from a background that colors how we see data and report it. It is important for us to recognize this fact (we might say the “contextual perspective”).

But I believe we need to move beyond a recognition of our background that influences our investigations and actively pursue thanksgiving as a pattern of thought within which to do research. As thanksgiving, according to Paul, is rooted in soteriology it is devoid of personal merit. The scholar imbued with this principle of thanksgiving can set aside personal glory to pursue studies that create networks of understanding and growth.

We also know that research is more than the ideas and the publications. It is about the network of colleagues and collaborators that we build in actively pursuing a subject. Thanksgiving opens the door of connection and mutual respect which fosters deeper ties, better collaboration and richer studies.

Thanksgiving does not remove realism. We cannot thank God for falsehood or wickedness, error or evil, death or destruction. But Colossians teaches us that these forces were defeated at the cross (2:15). As a conquering general, Christ brings even these maleficent powers under His sway.<sup>36</sup> Thus in our research we need not fear the forces arrayed against us. Light dispels darkness.

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<sup>36</sup> The colorful verb Paul uses to create this word picture in 2:15 is θριαμβεύω which means “to triumph over.” It was used to describe a conquering general returning from a successful battle, bringing the trophies of war with him. In Col 2:15 the ironic picture is of the cross as Christ’s victory chariot with the demon forces dragged behind Him in open shame.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

*Thanksgiving—Our Eschatological Roots*

Finally, I believe we must allow Paul’s theology of thanksgiving to revitalize our eschatological expectation and imbue our scholarship with forward-looking anticipation. Thanksgiving is an expression of trust and hope in what God is still going to do. Paul calls on us to “redeem the time” (4:5). It is the καιρός, the “opportune time” in which we live. We have the privilege of researching, teaching, mentoring, publishing at the End of time, letting God work out His plan through us. May God use our talents to His glory. I thank God for you today.

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