

# A NOTE ON COLOSSIANS 1: 24

by ROY YATES

**I**N Mr. Yates, of Wesley House, Cambridge, we greet another new contributor, and welcome his treatment of a well-known and important exegetical problem in the Pauline writings—the problem presented by Paul's reference to his "filling up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ".

**C**OLOSSIANS 1: 24 is a *crux interpretum* expressing ideas for which there seems at a first examination to be little parallel in the New Testament, with the possible exception of Ephesians 1: 23. Armitage Robinson<sup>1</sup> is of the opinion that both verses are closely associated in Paul's thought of the Church as the complement of Christ. The general idea is that if the Church and Christ are one, then the sufferings of the Church and Christ are also one; that Christ has not suffered all he is destined to suffer, but goes on suffering in the Church; and that Paul is filling up part of the sufferings that are to be completed. Robinson maintains that this thought helps to show how, to Paul's mind, Christ in a sense waited for completion, and would find that completion only in the Church. The use of one verse of dubious interpretation to help to clarify the meaning of another *crux interpretum* is not a wise move, but Robinson's insight that both verses express similar ideas about Christ and His Church still stands.

The problem of Colossians 1: 24 is to decide what is meant by "filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ"—a difficulty which is magnified by the obscurity of the language and ideas of the verse. We mention four major difficulties before outlining the interpretations of the verse that have been proposed, and our own conclusions:

(a) In what sense are Paul's sufferings ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν—for the Colossians, a Church which, according to the evidence available to us, he had neither evangelized nor visited?

(b) ἀνταναπληρῶ. The word is *hapax legomenon* in the LXX and in the New Testament. Arndt and Gingrich give as its mean-

<sup>1</sup> *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: Macmillan, 2nd edn., 1904), p. 44.

ing, "to fill up, complete for someone else".<sup>2</sup> The main difficulty is to give meaning to the prefix ἀντι-. The force of the compound word cannot be explained merely as the supply of that which corresponds in extent to the deficiency. This interpretation deprives the prefix of its meaning; ἀναπληροῦν could convey that idea quite adequately. J. B. Lightfoot<sup>3</sup> claims that the point of Paul's boast is that Christ should have left something for him to suffer, and that the ἀντι- describes the antithesis of the personal agents (i.e. Christ and Paul). But C. F. D. Moule holds that the prefix is only a redundant repetition of the ὑπέρ which precedes it, to become part of the idea that the sufferings of a Christian are a contribution on behalf of the whole body.<sup>4</sup>

(c) ὑστέρημα occurs nine times in the New Testament<sup>5</sup> in the sense of "need, want, deficiency", in contrast to abundance (2 Cor. 8: 14); "to supply the need" (2 Cor. 9: 12; 11: 9); "to make up for or represent a person in his absence" (1 Cor. 16: 17; Phil. 2: 30); or of "a lack or shortcoming" (1 Thess. 3: 10). In the instance of Col. 1: 24 the same general idea of "lack or deficiency" is implied, but the unique and further step is taken or using ὑστέρημα in association with Christ. The word may have been used in a technical sense by the false teachers at Colossae, as seems to be the case with πλήρωμα, and then taken up by Paul. But if this is the case the technical sense is not present in our context; the word is used in the same sense as in the rest of the New Testament instances, but with the additional development of application to Christ.

(d) θλίψις is nowhere in the New Testament used of the actual sufferings of Jesus either on the cross or in his ministry.<sup>6</sup>

We now outline the main interpretations of the verse that have been offered:

(1) What is wanting in Christ's afflictions has been understood to mean deficiencies in those sufferings He endured for the redemption of His people. This position is very close to the Roman Catholic idea of a treasury of the sufferings of the saints which

<sup>2</sup> *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London: Macmillan, 3rd edn., 1879), p. 163.

<sup>4</sup> *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1957), p. 78; *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1953), p. 71 on ἀντί.

<sup>5</sup> See Arndt and Gingrich, *op. cit.*, p. 857.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 362. Also Moule's commentary on Colossians, p. 77.

can supplement the sufferings of Christ, and is totally unsupported by the verse in its context. It implies that Christ's sufferings are insufficient and therefore require supplementing; a position very similar to that of the Colossian heretics themselves in that it robs Christ of His unique position.

(2) J. B. Lightfoot<sup>7</sup> is aware of this difficulty, but believes that it is still legitimate to speak of Christ's sufferings as incomplete, and therefore capable of being supplemented, by making a distinction in the sufferings of Christ between those that are *satisfactoriae* and those that are *aedificatoriae*. The former represent the Passion as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world, in which sense there could be no ὑπέρημα in the sufferings of Christ. The latter represent those sufferings endured for the building up of the Church and for the confirmation of believers in the faith; in this sense the work of Christ is continued in the sufferings of His people. In criticism of Lightfoot's view it can be said that there is no such distinction in the sufferings of Christ to be found in scripture.

(3) A further position, held by St. Chrysostom,<sup>8</sup> Calvin,<sup>9</sup> L. B. Radford,<sup>10</sup> and L. S. Thornton,<sup>11</sup> interprets the verse as an illustration of the mystical union of Christians with Christ. The same criticism can be made that this idea gives away all Paul's case to the Colossian heretics by admitting a deficiency in the sufferings of Christ. Also we ask how could Paul's sufferings be for the sake of the Colossians in this sense?

(4) E. Best<sup>12</sup> indicates that any satisfactory explanation of the verse must take ὑπέρημα seriously without suggesting that Christ's sufferings were in any way insufficient to redeem; explaining why Paul's sufferings are the sufferings of the Messiah, and why he

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 164.

<sup>8</sup> *Homilies on Colossians*, No. 4. *A Library of the Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church: The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to Philipians, Colossians and Thessalonians* (Oxford: Parker, London: Rivington's, 1843), pp. 227f.

<sup>9</sup> *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philipians, Colossians and Thessalonians*. Tr. J. Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1851), pp. 163-7.

<sup>10</sup> *The Epistle to the Colossians and the Epistle to Philemon* (London: Methuen, 1931), pp. 198-201.

<sup>11</sup> *The Common Life in the Body of Christ* (London: A. and C. Black, 4th edn., 1963), pp. 34-7, 305. Thornton is followed by J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body* (London: S.C.M., 1952), p. 70.

<sup>12</sup> *One Body in Christ* (London: S.P.C.K., 1955), p. 136.

should rejoice in them for the sake of the Colossians whom he did not know. Best's solution is to regard "the sufferings of the Messiah" as the Messianic birth-pangs or woes, the measure of which had to be completed before Christ would return in glory. In this sense Paul's sufferings could also be said to be those of the Messiah. They were for the sake of the Colossians because they brought nearer the day of their glory. This interpretation is good as far as it goes, but does not do full justice to the meaning of the verse because it only presents one line of interpretation.

(5) C. F. D. Moule<sup>13</sup> thinks that there are two important aspects of the verse that are to be combined if an adequate interpretation is to be arrived at. These are:

- (a) that Christ's sufferings are necessarily shared by Christians; that their union with Him involves their participation in His sufferings;
- (b) that there is a "quota" of sufferings which "the corporate Christ", the Church, is destined to undergo before the purposes of God are complete.

Moule gives prominence to the latter, but we believe that both are present with equal force. If either alternative is to be stressed we would give prominence to the former.

In presenting our own interpretation of the verse, having considered the above alternatives, we would agree that it would be unlikely that Paul meant that there was any deficiency in Christ's sufferings as far as His work of atonement is concerned; this would give away all Paul's case to the Colossian heretics. Nevertheless if we are to take ὑπέρημα and the ἄντι- of the compound verb ἀντανάπληρῶ seriously the verse must be taken as referring to something more than an illustration of the "mystical" union between the believer and Christ, or even "the Messianic birth-pangs or woes" to be endured before the "end". We follow Moule in his stress on the idea of the "Corporate Christ" in connection with the verse.<sup>14</sup> F. F. Bruce thinks the same, and actually says that the verse "can best be understood if we remember the oscillation in Hebrew thought between individual and corporate personality".<sup>15</sup> We believe that the idea of the inclusion of Christians in the "more than individual personality" of their Lord provides the key to the interpretation of the verse. If we can think of Christians as being incorporated into Christ by their baptism

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 76.

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 76.

<sup>15</sup> *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1957), p. 215.

into Him, as Paul undoubtedly did, then it is but a small step to the idea that the sufferings of the corporate body of Christians, the Church, and the sufferings of Christ are one; that Christ goes on suffering in the Church; and that Paul shares in those sufferings, which he endures not only for Colossians, but for the whole body. Thus we confirm the interpretation offered by Armitage Robinson; overcoming the difficulty of implying a deficiency in Christ's work of atonement by interpreting the verse in terms of the Church as the "Corporate Christ". We conclude with Robinson's words: "The Church, the completion of the Christ, is destined to complete His sufferings; and St. Paul rejoices that as a member of the Church he is allowed by God to do a large share of this in his own person on the Church's behalf."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 44.