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The Christian Way of Life: The Paraenetic Material in Colossians 3:1-4:6

Dr Yates has been a valued contributor to THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY over many years. He has recently gained his doctorate at the University of Manchester for a thesis on 'Christ Triumphant: A Study of Colossians 2:13-15', and this essay is one of the products of his research.

It is characteristic of the Pauline epistles that they fall into two parts—doctrine and exhortation. It is wrong to press the division too far, since theology and ethics are inseparable. It is incorporation into Christ that makes faith and practice one. Colossians is no exception to this rule, having its paraenetic section which takes up almost one third of the epistle, but with clear links back to the teaching and doctrine expounded in the earlier part of the letter. We find traditional lists of vices and virtues, together with the household code, padded out with suitable proverbial sayings to form a block of moral instructions and exhortation. At first sight it may seem rather surprising to find so much paraenetic material, since the Colossians have just been asked, 'Why do you submit to regulations?'¹ Are they being asked to take on a new law, a Christian Torah? The way of life commended is based on the conviction that, as Christians, they have died with Christ and been raised to life with him, and is meant to follow from the fact that they are 'in the Lord'.²

It is now accepted that much of the paraenetic material in the epistles had been collected and used in the life of the early church before Paul and those of his school made use of it. The pioneer

¹ Col. 2:20.

² Col. 3:18.

work in this field was done by P. Carrington³ and E.G. Selwyn.⁴ The moral condition of the Gentile converts made it imperative that a form of ethical instruction should be devised to meet their needs. G.B. Caird⁵ suggests that the existence of such a form of ethical instruction is to be inferred from Rom. 6:17 and I Cor. 11:16. The Pauline Epistles, I Peter and James all contain paraenetic material, often written in a style in striking contrast to the normal style of the epistles in which they are set. There is a large measure of agreement in the subject dealt with, and even a small but distinctive vocabulary which is peculiar to this type of writing. It is claimed that these similarities are the result, not of literary dependence, but of each writer drawing on and developing this traditional material in his own way. 'This means that already at an early date the Hellenistic church . . . was regularly demanding from its converts a high ethical standard as the logical outcome of that inner change which they underwent at the time of their admission to the church.'⁶ In compiling such material use was made of suitable ideas to hand from Stoic teaching, Rabbinic sources, and the words of the Lord.⁷

There are three types of traditional catechetical and ethical material used in Col. 3:1-4:6—lists of vices and virtues, the household code, and proverbial ethical sayings known as 'topoi'. A good case can be made out for supposing that all these three types of traditional ethical material are pre-Pauline. Their meaning in the argument of Colossians will therefore depend on the context in which the author uses them.

I. Lists of vices and virtues

There are numerous lists of vices and virtues in the New Testament, especially in the Pauline epistles.⁸ Some have tried to

³ P. Carrington *The Primitive Christian Catechism* (Cambridge, CUP, 1940). He suggests that this material could be classified under four headings: 'Put off', 'submit', 'watch', and 'resist'. The four-fold pattern appears in full in Colossians, Ephesians and I Peter, with omissions in James.

⁴ E.G. Selwyn *The First Epistle of Peter* (London, Macmillan, 2nd. Edn. 1947) Appended Essay II, 363-466, where he compares the ethical sections of Romans, Colossians, Ephesians, I Peter and James.

⁵ G.B. Caird *The Apostolic Age* (London, Duckworth, 1955) 109.

⁶ G.B. Caird *The Apostolic Age* 113.

⁷ See A.M. Hunter *Paul and His Predecessors* (London, SCM, Revd. Edn. 1961) 52-57, 128-31.

⁸ See the listings in G.E. Cannon *The Use of Traditional Materials in Colossians* (Macon, Mercer, 1983) 54-60; and in D.E. Aune *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Cambridge, Clarke, 1988) 194-196.

trace their origin to similar lists in Stoicism,⁹ and others to an early Jewish proselyte catechism.¹⁰ Undoubtedly in any missionary situation there would be a tendency to make up lists of vices and virtues which would reflect the social concerns of the time. Stoics, Hellenistic Jews, and the early Christians engaged in this activity to distinguish the faithful from those outside the faith. But the contents of these lists are so fluid that it is not possible to be certain if there was direct borrowing from either Stoicism or Hellenistic Judaism. In setting out characteristics not befitting the people of God they are nearer to the spirit of the 'Two Ways' teaching found in the *Didache*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, and in the *Manual of Discipline at Qumran*.¹¹ The New Testament lists are compiled from conventional material drawn from a variety of sources. Each author seems to have engaged in this activity with a freedom which suggests that there were no original catalogues from which they quoted. G.E. Cannon¹² suggests that the one feature they have in common is the inclination to make such lists.

In *Colossians* each list contains a series of five vices or five virtues, and each series seems to be related to a central theme. The vices listed in 3:5 are all associated with sexual sins, and call to mind the holiness code of *Leviticus 18*. They are the sins which belong to their pagan past, being vices for which the Jews especially reproached the Gentiles. The vices in the second list in 3:8 are centred on the attitudes and practices which are detrimental to personal relationships, and which could easily develop in the life of the Christian community. In anger, foul-talk or lies, the heathen sins which they had left behind in baptism were creeping in again. The virtues in the third list in 3:12 are those which show how Christians should behave in their dealings with others, and especially with fellow believers. Could they be associated with ways in which Christ was remembered in the Gospel tradition, as G.E. Cannon¹³ suggests? Despite the traditional character of the lists in *Colossians*, it is going too far to suggest that the exhortations do not have any reference to specific problems in the community.¹⁴ References and flash-backs to the theme of the whole letter are used to interpret this traditional

⁹ B.S. Easton 'New Testament Ethical Lists' *JBL* 51 (1932) 1-12; A. Vögtle *Die Tugend-; und Lasterkataloge im Neuen Testament* (Münster, Aschendorff, 1936).

¹⁰ P. Carrington *The Primitive Christian Catechism* 13-21.

¹¹ *Didache* 1-6; *Barnabas* 18-20; *IQS* 3: 13-4: 26.

¹² G.E. Cannon *The Use of Traditional Materials in Colossians* 58-59.

¹³ G.E. Cannon *The Use of Traditional Material in Colossians* 54.

¹⁴ A.M. Hunter *Paul and His Predecessors* 53-54.

exhortatory material. Indeed the freedom with which the author has drawn up the lists and the fact that there are few similarities between them and other ethical lists in the New Testament confirm this point. Of the links with the earlier part of the letter there are three of importance to be mentioned.

1. The lists are set in the context of the theology of dying and rising with Christ. Because believers have died with Christ in baptism,¹⁵ and the demand is laid upon them to put to death 'the earthly members' through which the vices mentioned find their expression. τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς could possibly mean 'members' of the body of Christ: 'You as members of the Body must mortify the things that are on earth.'¹⁶ But it seems better to treat the phrase, following C.F.D. Moule,¹⁷ as meaning 'your limbs as put to earthly purposes', 'the use of your limbs for sensuality'. The practices and attitudes of the old way of life are to be left behind because their dominion has been broken. There is a necessary tension here because, although the believer is dead to the world with Christ, he still lives in the world and is subject to its temptations. Hence the transition back and forth between the indicative and the imperative. The death of Christ is the event to which Colossians returns again and again. Thus νεκρώσατε of v.5 and ἀπεκδυσάμενοι of v.9 are reminiscent of the description of Christ's death in Col. 2:14-15. So close is the connection between the believer and Christ, that Christ's death and his resurrection becomes the believer's. The lists and their setting are part of the recall to the concrete and down-to-earth nature of Christian ethics, grounded in the theology of Christ's death. Could it be that there was a tendency to neglect these things in a context where too much emphasis was placed on angelic worship?

2. Another link with the earlier part of the letter is the use of ταπεινοφροσύνη in the list of virtues in 3:12. It is a well known fact that in secular Greek the word group is used to denote 'mean-spiritedness' or 'shameful lowliness'.¹⁸ ταπεινοφροσύνη itself

¹⁵ Col. 2: 12-13, 3:3.

¹⁶ N. Turner *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (Edinburgh, T. and T. Clark, 1965) 104-105 suggests that an adjectival phrase ('which are upon the earth') now changes into a noun phrase ('the things which . . .') and becomes the object of the imperative verb 'mortify', to read 'Members of my body, mortify the things which are on earth: fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection . . .' Cf. Rom. 6:13, 7:23 where 'your members' means 'the self under the aspect of its natural capacities' C.E.B. Cranfield *The Epistles to the Romans* (Edinburgh, T. and T. Clark, 1975) Vol. I 318.

¹⁷ C.F.D. Moule *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge, CUP, 1957) 115.

¹⁸ W. Grundmann *TDNT* VIII 1-5.

occurs only infrequently, but as so often the early Christians enhanced a word of diminished meaning to the rank of a new virtue.¹⁹ The sense of 'unselfishness' or 'lowliness of heart and mind' springs from the example of Jesus.²⁰ In Colossians the word is sandwiched in between four virtues which relate to conduct towards others, and which are a result of belonging to the New Covenant as God's 'chosen, holy and beloved' people.

ταπεινοφροσύνη does not appear in any other New Testament ethical list, so it would seem reasonable to suppose that it has been placed here by the author to counter the kind of self-abasement involved as a necessary prelude to receiving heavenly visions. F.O. Francis²¹ suggests that in 2:18 and 2:23 it has the wider meaning of 'rigours of devotion', and that these ascetic practices were a kind of 'humility technique' used to induce visions of the heavenly mysteries. Although such techniques might foster a reputation for 'wisdom', the author of Colossians makes it clear that 'they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh'.²² Obviously such techniques had led to an overlooking of basic ethical questions, and to an inflated pride which was the exact opposite of the virtue of true lowliness, after the example of Christ. Thus we find that ταπεινοφροσύνη is used in a technical sense by the advocates of the philosophy, and that the author of Colossians, by using it in the lists of virtues, attempts to draw attention to the only humility which has any value. It describes the reality of the new man as he has appeared in Jesus Christ, and is not to be used as a means to another end.

3. Thirdly there is the link with baptism. As we have seen, the ethical lists in the New Testament have close links with Stoic and Jewish-Hellenistic catechetical material, but it is the setting of the lists in Colossians which provides the link with the theology of baptism expounded in the earlier part of the letter.²³ In particular the metaphor of the 'putting off' and the 'putting on' of clothing has links with baptism and initiation. The Colossians are exhorted to discard the old habits of their pre-Christian life as one would discard a set of worn-out clothes. The metaphor was

¹⁹ N. Turner *Christian Words* (Edinburgh, T. and T. Clark, 1980) 216-218. In the N.T. the word is only used in Colossians in a derogatory sense (2:18, 2:23). Elsewhere it is a virtue (Acts 20:19; Eph. 4:2; Phil. 2:3; Col. 3:12; I Pet. 5:5).

²⁰ Matt. 11:29. Cf. Phil. 2:3-8.

²¹ F.O. Francis 'Humility and Angelic Worship in Col. 2:18' in F.O. Francis and W.A. Meeks *Conflict at Colossae* (Montana, Scholars, 1975) 163-194.

²² Col. 2:23.

²³ Col. 2: 11-12.

widespread in the ancient world. It was used in the mystery religions to interpret an aspect of initiation,²⁴ and in the Hebrew tradition of an inward and spiritual change.²⁵

It is generally supposed that the exhortation to 'put off' and 'put on', together with the terms 'old nature' and 'new nature', fit well into the dramatised theology of adult baptism. The literal stripping off of clothes before entry into the water, and the putting on of new white robes after baptism, is traced by G.R. Beasley-Murray²⁶ to an early date. But, he insists, 'The important feature is that the baptized stripped off an old life and put on a new one.' The baptismal associations of the epistle are beyond doubt, but it is too simplistic and romantic a view to associate the 'putting off' and 'putting on' of Col. 3:9-12 with the divesting and re-vesting before and after entry into the water at baptism. The vocabulary of 'putting off' and 'putting on' has links with the putting off of the body in death,²⁷ and the putting on of the resurrection body.²⁸ ἀπεκδύομαι is the verb used, not only of the putting off of undesirable vices, but also of Christ's putting off of flesh in his death.²⁹ The cognate noun ἀπέκδυσις is used of the Christian's 'putting off of the body of flesh' when he is incorporated through baptism into the death of Christ.³⁰ The Christian way of life follows from the change of lordship involved in being baptized into his death. Thus the emphasis is not on divesting before entering the water, but on associations with the saving and transforming death of Christ. Furthermore the terms 'old man'

²⁴ Initiation into the Isis-mysteries is described by Apuleius in his *Metamorphoses* XI 23f. See A.J.M. Wedderburn *Baptism and Resurrection: Studies in Pauline Theology Against Its Graeco-Roman Background* (Tübingen, Mohr, 1987) 334-335.

²⁵ Is. 61:10; Zech. 3:3-4. W.L. Knox *St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles* (Cambridge, CUP, 1939) 138. Although the mysteries used the figure of a change of garments for a change of spiritual status, Knox considers that the whole use of metaphors of clothing was so familiar in the conventional language of Judaism that it could be adopted without any thought of its origin.

²⁶ G.R. Beasley-Murray *Baptism in the New Testament* (Exeter, Paternoster, 1972) 148-149. He cites references in Cyril of Jerusalem, Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia; and also makes the point that in Jewish proselyte baptism it was essential that every part of the body should be touched by water. Also see W.A. Meeks *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1983) 150-157.

²⁷ II Cor. 5:4; col. 2:15.

²⁸ I Cor. 15:53-54; II Cor. 5: 2-4.

²⁹ Col. 2:15.

³⁰ Col. 2:11.

and 'new man' in 2: 9-10, with their corporate associations, are part of the presentation of the gospel in terms of the two Adams, or the two creations. The dying and rising, the putting off and putting on, and the baptism into the death of Christ, are part of incorporation into the new creation in Christ, the second Adam.

There is an important grammatical problem in the use of the aorist particles ἀπεκδυσόμενος and ἐνδυσόμενος in this context. Are they to be understood as true participles which describe the past event of baptism in which the readers have already put off the old nature and put on the new³¹ or is it possible to understand them in an imperative sense as continuing a series of imperative admonitions?³² J.H. Moulton³³ argues that the use of the participle for the imperative was a genuinely Hellenistic development. D. Daube³⁴ has pointed out that this usage in the New Testament is limited to the ethical rules governing the social behaviour of Christians in the community and in their families. He suggests that this grammatical peculiarity has links with Jewish and Rabbinic sources. Certainly the imperative is to be preferred. It shows that the Colossians have to begin to work out the ethical implications of being baptized into the new covenant in Christ's death. These benefits are available to all Christians, and not just to a spiritual elite.

Thus in the theology of dying and rising with Christ associated with the ethical lists; in the viewing of baptism as a death rather than as a washing; and in the putting on of the particular grace of humility after the example of Christ, we have links with the earlier part of the letter.

The household code

In Col. 3:18-4:1 we find rules for the orderly conduct of the Christian household, sometimes referred to as the 'Haustafel'.³⁵ It

³¹ P.T. O'Brien *Colossians, Philemon* (Waco, Word Books, 1982); G.E. Cannon *The Use of Traditional Material in Colossians* 72.

³² J.B. Lightfoot *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London, Macmillan, 2nd. Edn. 1876) 214-215; E. Lohse *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1971) 141.

³³ J.H. Moulton *A Grammar of New Testament Greek. Vol. I. Prolegomena* (Edinburgh, T. and T. Clark, 1906) 180-183.

³⁴ D. Daube 'Participle and Imperative in I Peter' Appended Note in E.G. Selwyn *The First Epistle of Peter* 467-488.

³⁵ From the name given to it by Martin Luther. In the N.T. the form can be found in Col. 3: 18-4; 1; Eph. 5: 21-66: 9; I Pet. 17-3: 9; with echoes in I Tim. 2: 8-15, 6: 1-10; Tit. 2: 1-10.

sets out the reciprocal obligations of wives and husbands, children and fathers, slaves and masters, in what amounts to a self-contained paraenetic unit. Certainly the section could be lifted from the context without making an awkward break. The style, with its terse, easy-to-remember lines, is that of catechesis. Also there is a high incidence of hapax legomena in the code. All this makes it likely that we are dealing with a code which existed before Colossians was written, rather than one formed on the spur of the moment in response to Colossian disorders.

The form of the code as we have it in Colossians is the earliest surviving example of this sort of teaching in its Christian form. There are scattered injunctions in earlier epistles, but they are addressed to specific problems rather than to the relationships of everyday life. Pagan prototypes were already current, but the outstanding Christian innovation was the stress on the fully reciprocal nature of the duties. M. Dibelius³⁶ made the first detailed study of the New Testament household codes and their possible antecedents. His thesis is that they are Christianized versions of the ethical instructions found in Hellenistic and Stoic philosophy. He was supported in his search for a Stoic origin to the codes by his pupil, K. Weidinger.³⁷ Their views carried scholarly opinion for a generation, although E. Lohmeyer³⁸ had doubts and preferred a Jewish background. There are similarities with Stoic rules, but there are also differences, especially the reciprocal nature of the duties, which confirms Lohmeyer's suggestion of a Jewish-Hellenistic background.³⁹

In his extensive study of the Colossian household code J.E. Crouch⁴⁰ suggests its Sitz im Leben could lie in the sense of liberation involved in the belief that Christians were agents of the Spirit, and living in the last days. The code made a relatively late appearance in the development of Christian paraenetic material, so it cannot be regarded as a part of a primitive Christian

³⁶ M. Dibelius *An die Kolosser, Epheser an Philemon* (Tübingen, Mohr, Revd. Edn. 1953) 48-50.

³⁷ K. Weidinger *Die Haustafeln: Ein Stück urchristlicher Paränese* (Leipzig, Hinrichs, 1928).

³⁸ E. Lohmeyer *Die Briefe an die Philipper, Kolosser und an Philemon* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck Reprecht, 13th Edn. 1964) 153-155.

³⁹ J.E. Crouch *The Origin and Intention of the Colossian Haustafel* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1972); G. Hinson 'The Christian Household in Colossians 3: 18-4: 1' *Review and Expositor* 70 (1973) 495-507; K. Rengstorff 'Die Neutestamentliche Mahnungen an die Frau, sich dem Manne unterzuordnen' in *Verbum Dei in Aeternum: Festschrift für O. Schmitz* Ed. W. Foerster (Witten, Luther, 1953) 131-145.

⁴⁰ J.E. Crouch *The Origin and Intention of the Colossian Haustafel* 120-145.

catechism. Crouch thinks there must have been a general situation within the Hellenistic churches which gave rise to the specifically Christian form of the household code. One of the special features of the Colossian code is that it places the major emphasis on the duties of the subordinate members of the family and on the duties of slaves. As Christians they are to play the role which society expects of them.

The situation that developed in the life of the church at Corinth is presented as an example of one in which the Christian form of the household code might develop. In the fellowship of the church the social distinctions between slaves and masters began to lose its meaning,⁴¹ and women found a new liberation.⁴² Freedom in the Spirit could lead to a desire for freedom in every respect. Such enthusiastic activity on the part of women and slaves, along with the conservative reaction they provoked, was not merely a localised or specifically Christian phenomenon. Crouch traces it to a tension between the two religious attitudes represented by Hellenism and the Jewish synagogue. He proposes that the form of the code in Colossians originated in the conservative reaction of a Jewish type of morality to the pneumatic excesses of Hellenistic religiosity. Such excesses threatened the stability of the Pauline churches. The exhortations to the subordinate members are primary, so it is probable that the original concern of the code was with the excesses of women and slaves. As instructions to these groups became more formalised they were expanded to include children. At the same time the Jewish practice of emphasising the reciprocal nature of these social duties was incorporated in the form of instructions to husbands, fathers, and masters.

Works on the sociological background to the New Testament tend to suggest that what we have here in the household code is an expression of the conservative reaction to the freedom of the Spirit in a subsequent generation of Christian leaders, and the attempt to impose a more patriarchal order patterned on traditional Graeco-Roman (and Jewish) family life.⁴³ However, the Corinthian situation shows that the tension between the freedom of the Spirit and a more conventional pattern of life was present in the first generation of Christians. If it can be reasonably

⁴¹ I. Cor. 7: 20–24.

⁴² I Cor. 7: 10–16, 11: 6–16, 14: 33–36.

⁴³ J. Stambaugh and D. Balch *The Social World of the First Christians* (London, SPCK, 1986) 55; D.L. Balch 'Household Codes' in *Graeco-Roman Literature and the New Testament* Ed. D.E. Aune (Atlanta, Scholars, 1988) 25–50.

supposed that the household code existed before the writing of Colossians, its main impact for our purpose would then lie in its use in the epistle. Is there any evidence in Colossians that the purpose of the code was to maintain order in a situation where pneumatic enthusiasm and the desire for freedom threatened church order? Col. 2:18 suggests that some of the congregation were over-concerned with visions, angelic worship, and other extraordinary activities, all of which led to an inflated pride and a neglect of mundane ethical issues. The household code is used to recall them to the simple duties of family life and correct social behaviour.

There is no parallel to the Colossian code outside the New Testament. It is therefore legitimate to speak of the code in a limited and relative sense as a Christian creation. It reached this final form, and was incorporated into the Epistle to the Colossians to earth the enthusiasm of visionary experience in the moral demands of everyday life.

III. Topoi

A third form of paraenetic material to be found in Colossians, identified by D.G. Bradley⁴⁴ as 'topoi', are those brief and pithy admonitions which deal with a variety of subjects. They surround the ethical lists and the household code, locating them in the context of general church life in worship and society. They are self-contained units of teaching which have only a loose and sometimes arbitrary connection with the context. They are strung together, sometimes by means of a catch-word, and often without any apparent connection with adjacent topoi. They deal with a variety of general subjects related to daily life, and give practical advice on matters of thought and action which have general applicability. In Colossians they consist of instructions on peace,⁴⁵ teaching one another,⁴⁶ thanksgiving,⁴⁷ prayer⁴⁸ and conduct towards the outsider.⁴⁹ All of them are related to the general subject of church life, and bear the marks of stereotyped admonitions dealing with common and recurring themes. They

⁴⁴ D.F. Bradley 'The TOPOI as a Form in Pauline Paraenesis' *JBL* 72 (1953) 238-246.

⁴⁵ Col. 3:15.

⁴⁶ Col. 3:16.

⁴⁷ Col. 3:17.

⁴⁸ Col. 4:2-4.

⁴⁹ Col. 4: 5-8.

appear to have existed before the epistle was written, and were incorporated because they were useful to the author in insisting on a firm ethical foundation to Christian life. D.G. Bradley⁵⁰ traces the background to a similar usage in Hellenistic ethical literature outside the New Testament, and in Jewish literature of the Hellenistic period. In its Christian form the *topoi* developed in the hands of teachers and preachers who built up a set of stock answers to recurring questions. Their importance in Colossians lies in setting the ethical lists and the household code in a context of worship and everyday life.

Conclusions

In Colossians we find that the paraenetic material, consisting of ethical lists, the household code, and the *topoi*, has antecedents in Hellenistic and Jewish religious life. Here the material is used in its distinctively Christian form. For our purpose the setting is almost more important than the context of the paraenetic material. The setting is the theology of dying and rising with Christ. This involves the putting off and putting on, not only of vices and virtues and a way of life, but also of the whole personality, of the old man and the new man in Christ. Far from being an appendix to the main argument of the epistle, in the paraenetic material of Col. 3:1–4:6 we are brought right to the heart of the meaning of atonement and the significance of the person of Christ dealt with earlier in chapters 1 and 2. The Christian way of life presented here is meant to be an effective counter to those who would neglect the reality of Christ's death for the more glamorous interest in 'visionary experience'. Gnosticism is not actually in view here, but ideas and terms that would be taken up and used in a Gnostic sense by a later generation are present. A true view of atonement roots the Christian life in the ethics of everyday living.

⁵⁰ D.G. Bradley 'The TOPOI as a Form in Pauline Paraenesis', 241–243.