

## **Eighth meeting on Colossians: MATURITY PRACTISED (1. Personal holiness)**

### **Preliminary remarks concerning the structure of the passage.**

In 2:6 – 2:19 we read how Paul promotes and protects the process of growth into maturity of the Colossian Christians. It has become clear that they do not need new teachings, practises or experiences. Rather, they must continue in the faith and watch that they are not deluded.

When I made the division of the letter to the Colossians, I intended to include to this passage 2:20 – 3:4. For practical reasons I stopped at 2:19 – the passage already contains so much, it would become too much to grasp. However, it is clear that 2:20 – 3:4 goes on with the same theme. For instance, when Paul asks why the Colossian Christians tend to submit to regulations (vs. 20), this is still to protect them. And the phrases 'If with Christ you died' (vs. 20) and 'If then you have been raised with Christ' (3:1), elaborate what we read in 2:12 ('having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith...') Maturity is promoted not by new teachings, but by realising that the Christ, with whom the believers have died and raised again, is seated at God's right hand and will appear in glory; so growing mature has to do with preparing ourselves as a fellowship on that moment. So, we can well defend that 2:6 – 3:4 form one textual unit.

However, tracing how the structure in Paul's letters exactly works is sometimes a bit complicated. For at the same time, 2:20 – 3:4 also forms a passage that links and connects the first half and the second half of the letter in an ingenious way. As we will see the second half of the letter will make things very practical. It is extremely important to understand HOW we should read and interpret the practical part of the letter. When Paul starts to make things very practical in 3:5 the word 'therefore' is not to be overlooked. When you miss this word in your interpretation from what follows you will miss the empowering reasons and resources to live 'the life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work' (1:10). (To make sure we won't miss it, Paul recurs in verses 9 and 10 ('have put off, have put on') how growth in the new life works. It is not about improving our (old) selves. It is about having received new life. About putting on fitting 'clothes' (patterns of behaviour).

Now, although we see that 2:20 – 3:4 is a bridging passage between two parts of the letters, we might at the same time take 2:20-23 as the passage that concludes the passage that begun with 2:6. In short: the religion, promoted by some at Colossae, that appears to be wise and urges you to submit to certain regulation, will not turn out to be helpful to grow mature into a holy life. Then the question arises: then, Paul, please tell us more about the true mature Christian life. And then we might take 3:1 as the beginning of the passage that will make things more practical. With the first step: that we – together, as a community – will seek first the Kingdom of God, will set our minds on things above (which doesn't mean: don't think of earthly things, but: your approach of earthly things must be according the way we learnt to look at them by our Lord Jesus, Who is now seated at God's right hand [see also Psalm 110]). Then 3:1 opens the second half of the letter: the mature Christian life is about the new life hidden in Christ; it is all about preparing for His coming. Remember that He saved us, in order to present us holy and blameless (1:22).

A last remark concerning the structure: in the church service, we read until 3:11. I thought this was a good choice, because 3:5-11 seems to be about things you put to death / put away / put off. And then 3:12 begins with things you put on. However, I would choose now to make another division.

Namely 3:5-8 is about personal holiness. Then 3:9-17 goes on with fellowship holiness. These, of course, closely cohere. Instead of dirty passions, we need true mutual love for all the saints. In stead of obscene talk, the word of Christ should dwell in us richly and songs of praise should come from our lips.

### **Remarks concerning the content of verses 5 and 8**

In the sermon I said that these verses are about 'worship & words', but I failed to explain what I meant with that. Here follows a short explanation: I take verse 5 to be about wrong worship and verse 8 to be about wrong words.

In verse 5, Paul mentions 5 words of things that must be put to death. The first three or four all have to do with impurity related to a wrong approach to sexuality. By the way, this does not at all imply that Paul or the Bible would be negative about human sexuality – to the contrary! When Paul mentions the fifth word (in the NIV translated with greed, in the ESV as 'covetousness'), I take this word as summarising the previous four words. Paul says: in fact, these are all examples of transgression of the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment: thou shall not covet. Why is covetousness sin? Because it is a too strong passion for something. As if that something will offer you the satisfaction, the excitement, the beauty, the tenderness (and so on), that only God provides. Therefore, Paul concludes: 'which is idolatry'. And idolatry is about the first of the 10 commandments: to have no other gods.

In other words: now that the Colossians have seen the greatness of Jesus, they must realise that their past behaviour was idolatrous. Their obscene behaviour expressed (idolatrous) worship (see Romans 1:24-27 on the same theme, also in relation to 'wrath of God'!). Now we can also understand why Paul's words are not negative on sexuality. In fact, Paul's words are severe against the corruption of sexuality. Sexuality is good – as a means for husband and wife to give themselves completely to each other, in order to express their unity, joy and love in and for each other. But sexuality is not 'god'. When it is 'god' it must offer something only God can give. And we know that when things that are good, are made to god, things go wrong. Take for instance wine (I think the Bible is not negative about drinking wine). When you start to use wine to give you things only God can give, you will want more, more and more of it. You use it as a means of worship. And the results will be damaging. This is true for sexuality as well. In the context of the Roman world, people were often married. But especially men searched for sexuality outside marriage – this was considered as unavoidable. Imagine what this meant for the married women! Now you can see how what Paul writes here, is not negative about sexuality. To the contrary! When a man begins to realise that he has searched in his passions what he should have searched and received from God, he will find rest and will find motivation to learn self-control. And in marriages, this will lead to a great increase of joy, concerning sexuality. No wonder that Christianity and Christian ideas concerning marriage and sexuality soon became very popular in the first centuries in the Roman world and especially also among women!

The next five words (anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk from your mouth) I take to cohere with all that comes forth from our mouth. The things that come forth from our mouth spring from what takes place in our hearts; and while by the new birth we have received a new heart, old words are no longer fitting (and new words to be learnt – see 3:16). Anyway, a relationship between these old words and idolatry must not be overlooked. Talk filled with anger and wrath, or talk slandering and gossiping (and so: judging) others, expresses a heart-conviction that our 'self' is worshipped as god, as the one who is in the position to judge, punish etcetera. When we discover our sin, we are humbled. And even when we see sin in others, we will remind ourselves

that these others need the same grace as we need. So rather than feeling ourselves above them, we might pray for them or try to help and serve them.

### **Input for the meeting**

- **Pray.** Give thanks for Gods Word and for what you have learnt together thus far. Thank God for the Holy Spirit and ask the Holy Spirit to teach and lead you, to nourish you with God's Word and to grow you mature.
- **Read** Colossians 2:20 – 3:8 twice
- **Structure:** is it clear how the passage works and is structured? What did you learn concerning the structure of the passage (and does structure matter?)
- **Focus your discussion on:**
  - a) **3:1-4** What do you learn here?
  - b) **3:5-7** What do you learn here?
  - c) **3:8** What do you learn here?
- Try to be open and practical on what you read here. Is, what you read here, understandable, applicable, practical to you? When you wrestle with these, what could help in order to grow the coming time? Try to make it very practical!
- End the meeting with enough time for **prayer** for each other.