

Colossians 3:16
The Gospel-Driven Church

By Chip M Anderson
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Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

Many preachers use Paul's admonition *Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you* to encourage and admonish their congregations to study their Bible, to have their devotions, to join a bible study, to "come out on Wednesday nights," attend Sunday School, and memorize Scripture. As spiritual and as good as these are, such application misses Paul's intent in Colossians 3:16, and thus, the Church fails to hear a specific call to obedience.

What a text *can* mean

I have observed over the years that many preachers and Bible study leaders, including Sunday School teachers, jump right from the English words of a text to application. In order to determine the significance of a passage or text, and make appropriate application to us, one must first exegete the text in order to hear what the first audience heard.

One very good rule of interpretation needs to be resurrected:

A text cannot mean what it could not have meant to the original author or his readers.

There is no better authority on this matter than Gordon Fee who reminds us that "a text cannot mean here and now what it never could have meant there and then." The proper control of and limits for a text's meaning is the original intended meaning. (See Fee & Stuart's *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*.) In fact Fee states:

We cannot make [the text] mean anything that pleases us, and then give the Holy Spirit "credit" for it (p 26).

A text should not be made to bear an interpretation that would have been foreign to its original, intended audience. When someone offers an interpretation you know very well could not have been possible at the time of its writing, you know it is not a word from God—no matter how spiritual it might sound.

Missing a call to obedience

This Rough Cut concerns a text typically misinterpreted and as a result misapplied. Colossians 3:16 carries a phrase that is more often than not wrongly understood and too often made to carry a contemporary meaning than could not have been possible for Paul, nor his audience. The phrase comes to us in Paul's admonition:

Let the **word of Christ** richly dwell within you

I am referring to Paul's phrase *word of Christ*. Many popular interpretations, including numerous popular commentaries, infer that Paul is commanding that the Bible ought to dwell richly in the believer.

Now, please understand, I agree, we should get to know our Scriptures, memorization is good, and studying the Bible is an excellent pursuit. We should read, memorize, and seek to have the Bible dwell in our minds and hearts. Nonetheless, this is not what Paul meant, and as a result, we are missing a very important call to obedience.

Bibles didn't exist in Paul's day

It would have been impossible for the average reader of Colossians to understand that Paul was speaking of the Bible as we know it. At least the Bible can be so easily purchased at any nearby Bible bookstore or online Christian website. Bibles as we know them, experience them, and hold them were simply not available at the time Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians. There were high illiteracy rates at that time as well, and manuscripts were not printed and bound for those who were able to read.

Thus, we need to look elsewhere for, first, a proper interpretation and, second, a more appropriate response (or application) to this admonition. So what was Paul admonishing the Colossian believers to do, and what is the significance of that meaning for the for-all-time church?

Return to the immediate context and the NT context the verse has

In order to understand better what Paul meant and what the original readers most likely understood, we need to return to some basic interpretive rules of exegesis:

- 1) Compare other New Testament usage (i.e., the NT context) of similar and like phrases in other words, is there already an established meaning for the phrase *word of Christ* in the context of the New Testament?
- 2) Stick the verse back into its context—in other words, let Paul's own context feed our interpretation and understanding of Colossians 3:16.

An already established meaning

There is an already established denotation that gives the phrase *word of Christ* meaning. Throughout the New Testament the word *word* is synonymous with the gospel.

Word = preaching Christ and defending the gospel

Philippians 1:14—and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.

There is little doubt Paul refers here to speaking the gospel message. Paul is in prison for the cause of Christ, namely the gospel (v 13). And the following verses affirm that the speaking is about Christ: *preaching Christ, the defense of the gospel, proclaim Christ.*

Word = gospel

Acts 4:31—And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.

Acts 6: 2—So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.”

Acts 6:7—The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

Acts 8:14—Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John...

Acts 11:1—Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

Acts 12: 24—But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.

Acts 13:44—The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord.

Acts 13:46—Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.

Acts 17:13—But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there as well, agitating and stirring up the crowds.

Throughout the Book of Acts Luke uses *word* as a synonym for the gospel. They spoke *the word* (i.e., the gospel) boldly. They preached *the word of God* (i.e., the gospel). Other's received *the word* (i.e., the gospel). And, at points *the word of God* or *the word* continued to increase and spread, meaning the gospel was spreading further and further throughout the Roman Empire (“even to the remotest part of the earth” 1:8).

Some texts are obvious; word = the gospel

Ephesians 1:13—In Him, you also, after listening to *the message of truth*, the gospel of your salvation--having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise...

Colossians 1:5—because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in *the word of truth*, the gospel...

Colossians 1:25— Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out *the preaching of the word of God*...

Romans 10:17— So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by *the word of Christ*.

Colossians 4:3—praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for *the word*, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned...

It is apparent, especially for Paul and the writer of Acts, that *word*, λογος, means the gospel. Romans 10:7 and Colossians 4:3 also indicate that *the word of Christ* as a phrase is another pattern of words that mean **the gospel**. And as it has been noted already, Paul's prior context in Colossians 1, verses 5 and 25 already establish that *the word* means *the gospel* in the Letter.

Of Christ = word about Christ, i.e., the Gospel

The *of Christ* in Greek is *Christou* (Χριστου) and can be understood as a subjective genitive (the word preached or delivered by Christ) or an objective genitive (the word about Christ.) Although sometimes we are splitting hairs over the nuances of Greek grammar, there really doesn't seem to be a qualitative difference, for the word Christ delivered is the word preached by the apostles. Nonetheless, I prefer in this case the objective sense, that is, the word about Christ. Given how the New Testament uses word (λογος) to denote the gospel and the context in Colossians, it seems reasonable to understand Paul's command here to be:

Let the gospel about Christ richly dwell in you.

Christ the issue

Throughout Colossians Paul has been exalting Christ. On the other hand, he cautions against false teachers who had come to Colossae with man-made traditions, faulty religious rules, and uninspired man-centered philosophies (2:8). Most likely Paul uses *of Christ* in Colossians 3:16 because of the issue Paul is addressing in Colossians. Large portions of the Colossian Letter are to clarify the proper understanding of the nature of Christ and His relationship to our salvation. For example there is Col 1:13-20:

For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness

of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

The problem with personalizing the *you* in Col 3:16

Granted all the commands in Colossians must be owned and applied individually, however the context of the application is what counts. The *you* in Col 3:16 is plural, suggesting that a corporate setting is implied as does the whole context and series of commands in vv 1-17.

When we inappropriately personalize the command—"Let the word of Christ richly dwell in Chip...that is, in me"—we can miss how this text should be applied.

The *yous* are plural and the commands imply a corporate a setting

The plural or corporate context implied in the series of commands and admonitions in vv 1-17 present interpretive and application guidelines for us. The series of commands in vv 1-17 is a call to obedience for the church in Colossae. This text needs to be read—and understood—corporately. This can be seen in the context:

- Do not lie to one another (v 9)
- bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you (v 13).
- Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful (v 15).
- teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God (v 16).

It should also be noted that the second half of the sentence (v 16b), the half following the command, is an obvious reference to a gathered setting, probably a worship setting. In other words, the way they are to have this word of Christ dwell in them or the means to accomplish the dwelling is to reinforce the word through the Church's gathered and worship experience.

Col 3:16b—teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

Along with the verses highlighted above (vv 9, 13, 15, 16), it should be noted that in vv 1-17 the *yous* are plural and the verbs are 2nd person plural.

Setting your *mind* should be understood corporately (v 2)

In fact verse 2 doesn't command, "Set your minds on things above," which would indicate that individual minds are in Paul's view. But, it says, "Set your mind..." indicating that the Colossian believers as a church—as a whole—should set its (collective) mind on things above. We use *mind* to suggest a corporate body's disposition even in our own language, so this shouldn't surprise us as a possibility. Paul does as well in Philippians:

Phil 1:27—Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, **with one mind** striving together for the faith of the gospel...

Phil 2:3—Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of **mind** regard one another as more important than yourselves

Mankind has a depraved mind:

Romans 1:28—And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved **mind**, to do those things which are not proper,

The church in Corinth should have the same mind as Paul:

1 Corinthians 1:10—Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same **mind** and in the same judgment.

In you or among you?

The original reads, *en humin* (ἐν ὑμῖν), often simply left translated *in you*, implying in English an individual and location. Usually when ἐν ὑμῖν is translated in you, the reader adds words to make it make sense: dwell in you...in your heart...inside of you...in your life. The ἐν ὑμῖν (where the *you* is plural) should almost always be understood as sphere; in other words, *among you* is the intent. This makes (more) sense, especially in light of Paul's (consistent) corporate context throughout vv 1-17. We can, therefore, read the text:

Let the word of Christ, the gospel richly dwell among you...

A note on *dwell*

The word for *dwell* (*enoikeo*, ἐνοικέω) is used a number of times, particularly by the apostle Paul. The word is, normally, used a metaphorical sense.

- Sin dwells in Paul (in us) (Rom 7:17)
- The Spirit dwells in us (Rom 8:11; 2 Tim 1:14)
- God dwells among His people (2 Cor 6:16)
- Faith dwells in a person (2 Tim 1:5)

The verb is actually a compound word: *en* (εν) and *oikeo* (οικεω). The *en* (εν), a preposition, being attached to stress “in” or “among.” The main part of the verb is *oikeo*, which is simply ***I dwell*** (both literally and metaphorically), but its noun form, *oikos*, (οικος) stems from ***house***. Paul might have picked this word because it is associated with the church as a whole in a community, i.e., the household of God (cf. Eph 2:19-22).

Hearing the corporate call to obedience in the text

I would suggest Paul is giving meaning to and defining the Colossian Church throughout the whole paragraph (1-17), indicating

- 1) who they are in Christ
- 2) what defines them as a people
- 3) and, what should occupy their attention as a people whose mind is set on things above.

Our predisposition to individualize every text can drive us away from more probable interpretations of texts. This can hinder our hearing of texts and, thus, rob us of application fit for a congregation as a whole.

Allow me to offer a corporate reading of the Colossians 3:1-17:

Therefore if you, the congregation, have been raised up with Christ, as a heavenly (Eph 1:3) sociological unit, a people, a church, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Together, as God’s people in town, set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you, the congregation, have died and the life given to you as a people, is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you, the people of God in town, will also be revealed with Him in glory. But now you, as a congregation, also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you, as a congregation, laid aside the old self (i.e., no longer defined by adamic, this worldly, fleshly values) with its evil practices, and have put on the new self (i.e., defined by Christ, His death, and His resurrection) who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him—a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all. So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule among your hearts as a congregation, to which indeed you, as a group, were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ, the Gospel, richly dwell among you, the congregation, that is Christ’s people in town, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you, as Christ’s people in town, do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

Conclusion: The gospel-drive congregation

I was reading the evangelicaloutpost.com website when I was drawn to a comment about Rick Warren's books, *The Purpose-Drive Church* and *The Purpose-Drive Life*. One blogger, Arthor Sido, asked, "Whatever happened to the gospel-driven church?" That hit home, so to speak. I had already begun this Rough Cut on Colossians 3:16 and thought:

"Now, that's exactly what Paul is driving at—the gospel-driven church, with all its implications, counter-cultural living, Christ-centered, cross-centered, self-less lifestyles."

Allow me to offer a new spin that conveys the original meaning of "Let the word of Christ richly dwell in you." Hear verses 16 and 17 together:

Be a gospel-driven church, express this existence through wise living, that is doing God's will (cf. Col 1:9); let your teaching and admonishing of one another, especially during your gathered worship, inform you of this gospel-driven life. Whatever you, as Christ's people in town, do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, that is, let the gospel define who you are, giving thanks through Him to God the Father

Paul begins chapter 3 by reminding us that, as a church, our mind—corporately—ought to be on things above, that is our existence and meaning comes from the authority of the risen Christ. At the end of the paragraph, Paul admonishes the Church—our Church, your Church—to be a gospel-driven church.

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