
"Toward a renewed recognition of Colossians Through the lens of Augustine's de Trinitate"

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Abstract: As a *ressourcement* of ancient, authoritative readings, this paper interprets Colossians through the lens of Augustine's *De Trinitate* (c.400-420). Besides explicit citation of key verses of the epistle at major points of his argument, Augustine touches upon themes strikingly reminiscent of Paul's own polemics. These include the nature of the heretical worship of angels, the handwriting on the cross, and distinct categories of knowledge. Furthermore, Augustine makes explicit an underlying epistemological cosmology that informs both false and

true liturgical acts. As endorsed by Paul and Augustine, true worship of God entails contemplation of both Christ's incarnate solidarity in physical death and subsequent ascension into realms located above the mediatory power of angels, who can only offer deceptive spiritual visions. Only the transfer of true knowledge by Christ can transform the material experience of the human believer into images of divine glory.

Keywords: *De Trinitate*, Saint Paul, Saint Augustine, Colossians, Incarnation.

«Hacia un reconocimiento renovado de colosenses a través de la lente del de Trinitate de Agustín»

Resumen: Como recurso de lecturas antiguas y autorizadas, este artículo interpreta Colosenses a través de la lente del *De Trinitate* de Agustín (c.400-420). Además

de citar explícitamente versículos clave de la epístola durante los principales puntos de su argumentación, Agustín aborda temas que recuerdan sorprendentemente

a las polémicas del propio Pablo. Entre ellos, la naturaleza del culto herético a los ángeles, la escritura en la cruz y las distintas categorías de conocimiento. Además, Agustín hace explícita una cosmología epistemológica subyacente que informa tanto los actos litúrgicos falsos como los verdaderos. Según Pablo y Agustín, el verdadero culto a Dios implica la contemplación tanto de la solidaridad encarnada de Cristo en la muerte

física como de su posterior ascensión a reinos situados por encima del poder mediador de los ángeles, que sólo pueden ofrecer visiones espirituales engañosas. Sólo la transferencia del verdadero conocimiento por Cristo puede transformar la experiencia material del creyente humano en imágenes de la gloria divina.

Palabras clave: De Trinitate, San Pablo, San Agustín, Colosenses, Encarnación.

1. Prolegomenon

Faced with many hidden mysteries in Paul's letter to the Colossians,¹ modern commentators usually offer a speculative meta-theory to contextualize the situation at Colossae. However, these theories differ in detail, and we are still left searching for an overriding rubric.² Reexamination of historical textual fragments for reconstructions of the precise syntax behind various *hapax legomenon* can only make so much progress before we are tempted to despair of the great distance between New Testament times and ours. Thus, searching for an arbiter for these various claims as well as a ferry that will help us cross back into the shores of ancient contexts, one may wisely appeal to the authority of ancient interpreters. Ancient teachers of Scripture not only reside closer temporally to the social and philosophical context of 1st century Greco-Roman society, but they also employ a more synthesized approach toward biblical interpretation.

¹ I do assume Pauline authorship for Colossians and for all epistles that have his name as a heading. Cf. Marianne Meye Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon: (A Two Horizons Commentary)*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), Introduction, for a convincing scholarly summary of the arguments that favor Pauline authorship.

² I will primarily use the commentaries of Sumney, Wright, and Thompson as the modern foil to Augustine's ancient interpretations, as specified below. I am using the electronic version of Wright and Thompson, which unfortunately do not provide page numbers, so I will only be citing the most proximate section heading.

They still assumed the *prima facie* consistency of scriptural vocabulary and received the biblical canon as one illuminating whole.³

In addition, the ancients instinctively trusted in the Bible's ability to name and opine upon a commonly shared worldview. Such objectivity is also something that we moderns (or post-moderns) have lost. Specifically relevant to the context of Colossians is the following comment by a distinguished church historian, Diogenes Allen: "The idea of a hierarchical order both in the heavens and on earth, in nature and in social relations and politics, was taken for granted well into the sixteenth century."⁴ Thus, what modern biblical commentaries may easily miss is the relatively unified and shared view of cosmology, including its relation to anthropology as well as to theology.⁵ And if we assume that Paul's original audience participated in these shared assumptions, seemingly isolated references and claims in Colossians begin to fit into one complex yet consistent constellation.

For the purpose of recovering this cosmological backdrop, I will draw upon Augustine's work, *On the Trinity (De Trinitate)*. Besides receiving Augustine (354-430) as a preeminently qualified ancient reader of Scripture (based on the criteria above), I also find the issues explored in this *magnum opus* strikingly similar to those affecting the Colossae church. Furthermore, key verses from the Colossians epistle are used by Augustine as proof-text during important moments of his own discourse, which incidentally results in the parallel, thematic exegesis of the major themes in

³ E.g. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, Book II, VIII.7. Contrary to a hermeneutic of suspicion, Augustine relishes the challenge of interpretive difficulties as a providential exercise for the intellect and a reduction of one's pride. Upon becoming a Christian, he no longer doubts the inspiration of the canon but assumes it in order to spur on his exegetical enterprises.

⁴ Diogenes Allen and Eric O. Springsted, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, 2nd Ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster Knox Press, 2007), 121. Allen goes on to mention the human person as a microcosm of the cosmic hierarchy and connects this assumption with Genesis 1-3, especially portions that touch upon the Image of God. This has bearings on the use of *Imago Dei* language in Colossians 3 as well, as demonstrated below.

⁵ E.g. Dante's *Commedia*, where the rings of the Inferno, the circular mount of Purgatory, the revolution of the planets and stars, the Trinitarian eternal wheeling of God, and the *Imago Dei* within Dante's own person are all clearly resonant and reflective of one another (Paradiso, XXXIII).

Colossians, a sort of embebed sub-theme within Augustine's larger designs for this monumental work. Finally, Augustine relies upon similar passages found in other biblical writings to illuminate vague notions in Colossians, and his deft intertextual approach will surely even the modern exegete, with our frequent reliance on digital search engines and concordances.

Of course, it must also be stated clearly at the outset that *De Trinitate* does not primarily aim to exegete Colossians. We may therefore critically distance ourselves from certain interpretations posed by Augustine while still resourcing his text for its general cosmological backdrop. For example, Augustine's forays into a Trinitarian Image of God need not directly concern an interpreter of Colossians, but his teachings on Christ as Image and Mediator certainly should, given his appeal to identical terms used in Colossians 2 and 3. Of course, we also acknowledge the possibility that Augustine may not ultimately share the exact set of cosmological or theological assumptions as Paul's, and nor is Augustine's Latin text (or its English translation) a guaranteed replica of the original Letter to the Colossians. Nevertheless, if Augustine already lives with some distance from Paul, these limitations only put into starker light the even greater temporal gap between the Colossae church and modern-day Christianity.

Having recognized the possibility for disagreement or obscurity on a semantic level, I still maintain that Augustine's reading of Colossians holds value on the conceptual level. The value lies not in so much in presenting the Augustinian cosmological worldview on its own right but in conjunction with his attempt to be a faithful reader of Paul. As a result, Augustine makes moves similar to Paul's rhetoric in Colossians, revealing comparable nodes whereby themes are strung and interweave throughout Colossians. Most significantly, both authors address a certain kind of false worship that inadequately mediates and images God, and both present Christ as the chief mediator of the invisible God and the supreme head over the cosmos.

Thus, my reading suggests that what lurks in the background of Colossians may very well be the same "heresy" that Augustine brings to the foreground. Platonic and pagan assumptions regarding visual epistemology, angelic mediation, corporal materiality, and contemplative progress make up a comprehensive nexus which is shared by Paul, the false teaching addressed in Colossians, and Augustine's own cultural milieu. However, instead of simply confirming these set of assumptions, Paul highlights

the need for a Christ who is both a bodily redeemer and a spiritual mediator back to God, which Augustine then makes explicit. As the true image of God, the Christ of Colossians overcomes all false mediation and presents the true path of embodied contemplation toward a transformative recognition of God.

2. Treasures of Hypostatic Knowledge and Wisdom in Christ

We begin with a consideration of *De Trinitate*'s own context and purpose. Like Paul's concerns for the Colossae church (Col 2:8), Augustine's pastoral heart denounces those who attempt spiritual and epistemic access to God without the mediation of Christ. In customarily systematic fashion, Augustine describes three types of false approach. There are those who automatically impose their observations of earthly phenomena onto a description of God's nature, and there are others who transfer human moods and tempers to God in a literal fashion. From the opposite angle, others strive to overcome the created world altogether by trying to gaze upon the invisible God, but "so top-heavy are they with the load of their mortality" that they only offer presumptuous, erroneous opinions.⁶ We may already hear echoes of Paul's critique in Col 2:23: for all the outward appearances of ascending mortality, the false teachings do not actually help with the indulgences of the flesh.

While Augustine does not cite the latter portion of Colossians 2, he does cite Colossians 2:3 in his opening remarks of *De Trinitate* as a gesture toward a better, Christian position. Only through faith, specifically in Christ Jesus, can one find proper access to knowledge of God, for "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ."⁷ In this way, Augustine establishes an area of possible overlap with Colossians. The general contour of the false teachings mentioned in both cases involves claims of spiritual transcendence which shun the material world but to mortal epistemic limitations.

⁶ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, ed. and trans. Edmund Hill, (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2015), I.1, 65.

⁷ Ibid, I.3, citing Col.2:3. All scriptural citations from Augustine will be quoted in its form as translated by Edmund Hill from the Latin. Due diligence will be given to Augustine's translations in comparison to modern ones when significant differences arise.

Developing his interpretation of Col 2:3, Augustine eventually finds in this key verse an epistemological and contemplative solution to the false approaches listed above. Whereas some confuse the bodily with the spiritual and others completely shun the materiality of the cosmos, Christ is both the means of material knowledge and spiritual wisdom:

“Our knowledge therefore is Christ, and our wisdom is the same Christ. It is he who plants faith in us about temporal things, he who presents us with the truth about eternal things. Through him we go straight toward him, through knowledge toward wisdom, without ever turning aside from one and the same Christ, ‘in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.’”⁸

By this later point in the work, Augustine has already reviewed the conciliar, creedal confessions of faith which forged and refined the hypostatic nature of Christ as both human and divine. These statements also inform his use of Col 2:3, which presents a similarly hypostatic path from the material to the spiritual in the same person of Christ. That is, “temporal things” is equated with faith-based knowledge while “eternal things” are equated with truth-revealing wisdom.

This unique equation of terms moves us to consider whether a similar definition may be found in Paul’s letters. For his own part, Augustine defends his interpretation through an intertextual resourcing of Paul’s corpus, specifically citing the list of spiritual gifts mentioned in 1st Corinthians 12. Augustine reasons that if Paul distinguishes between a “word of wisdom” as separate from the “word of knowledge” gift (1 Cor 12:8), then the two terms must describe different modes of comprehension.⁹ Although Augustine also admits the two terms’ interchangeable usage in common parlance, interchangeably in common parlance, it remains semantically obvious that Paul and the charismatic church at Corinth clearly distinguished between the two terms on some level.

Had Augustine searched solely from Colossians for support of his claim of a progression from knowledge to wisdom, he would have also

⁸ Ibid, XIII.24, 367.

⁹ Ibid, 366.

found signs of a similar distinction. In Col 1:8, the adjective, “spiritual (πνευματικῇ),” may be read not only as modifying “understanding” but also “wisdom (σοφία).”¹⁰ Furthermore, the heretical position listed in Colossians likewise endorse their practices with a certain “wisdom” that shun the physical (2:23). Finally, “wisdom” receives positive association with religious or spiritual perfection, spiritual songs located in the heart, and with ethical conduct.¹¹ In summary, we find Paul alongside his rhetorical opponents mainly associating wisdom in Colossians with spiritual (non-physical) growth.

Furthermore, besides the one use of “knowledge” as γνῶσεως in Colossians 2:3, all other translations (into English) of “knowledge” in the epistle is in fact buttressed by the prefix ἐπι, which suggests a higher or truer form of knowledge.¹² Thus, whether wisdom is equated or distinct from “epi-gnosis,” it is clear that Paul does make distinctions which suggest a latent hierarchy of epistemological terms.

Unfortunately, modern commentators do not thoroughly consider this distinction. Jerry Sumney states, “the writer [of Colossians] is probably not drawing a distinction between knowledge and wisdom. Instead, the repetition creates an impression of the fullness that is found in Christ.”¹³ Thompson and Wright are similarly reticent. While all three modern exegetes bring forth the essence of Paul’s statement – treasures of wisdom and knowledge in Christ serves as a boundary marker against false heresies – they do not adequately address the unique occurrence of γνῶσεως in

¹⁰ Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2008), 46, supports my reading here. Besides the citations of Scripture found in the Augustine text, translations of Colossians come from Constantine Campbell, *Colossians and Philemon: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, (Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2013).

¹¹ Col 1:28, 3:16, 4:5, respectively. I am grateful to the Englishman’s Concordance for these references, accessed via Biblehub. https://biblehub.com/greek/strongs_4678.htm (accessed April 26, 2021).

¹² Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition, (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), Vol. 1, p. 335.

¹³ Sumney, 117. Sumney does not consider how “knowledge” and “wisdom” may specifically contribute to a fullness that spans both temporal and eternal realms of epistemology.

contrast to *ἐπὶ γνῶσις* or the repeated use of *σοφία* found in the epistle. It is Augustine who at least provides a commendable definition that not only finds intertextual support in 1st Corinthians but also explains the precise use of the two terms in relation to Christ. Against heresies that either conflate the material with the spiritual or try to escape physical knowledge without due diligence to one's own flesh, Christ becomes the only path mediating between the visible and invisible world (Col 1:16).

3. Worship of Angels as Mediators of Knowledge

Having presented Christ's unique method of epistemological mediation in his opening thesis, Augustine must then defend its supremacy over other forms of mediated knowledge. Likewise, in Colossians 2:6-23 Paul must rehearse at greater length the false teachings which compete for the allegiance of the Colossian church. In trying to identify the nature of the so-called Colossian heresy, modern scholarship debates the relative degrees of influences from Judaism (Col 2:16 on sabbath, new moon, and festivals) against possible apocalyptic or pagan components (Col 2:18 on visions, worship of angels).¹⁴ Yet no one to my knowledge offers a thorough treatment of the Platonic assumptions behind the pagan influences, especially regarding notions of contemplation and ascent. This is not to say the Jewish and apocalyptic components are unimportant, but we must probe how underlying Hellenistic cosmological assumptions can possibly synthesize the other seemingly disparate components into one syncretized worldview.¹⁵

In his own polemics within *De Trinitate*, Augustine rehearses the cosmic hierarchy which mediated knowledge before Christ's incarnation, which could help us piece together the seemingly disparate components of the Colossian heresy. Before Christ, there operated "a regime of symbols [*similitudines*] administered by the angelic sovereignties and authorities and powers."¹⁶ The three offices should bring to mind similar titles found in Col 1:16 and 2:15, not to mention the "worship of angels" mentioned in

¹⁴ Cf. Wright on 2:15; Sumney, 155ff.

¹⁵ Thompson, 2:16-23, notes the "hodge-podge of practices" that blend Jewish laws and the Colossians' pagan past, which suggests a lack of underlying unity in worldview..

¹⁶ Ibid, I.16, 80.

2:18. Contrary to Wright's speculations,¹⁷ Augustine's reading of the powers and principalities clearly take on a spiritual role and therefore must not be reduced to only temporal, human structures of power.

Instead of ruling over troops or towns, this angelic hierarchy rules over various kinds of mediated knowledge, or what Augustine has termed "the regime of symbols." When translated as "likenesses" instead of "symbols," the Latin word, "similitudines," even suggests a similarity between this angelic mediation and the Genesis 1 and Colossian 3 references to the "Image and Likeness of God."¹⁸ We will elaborate on this connection between mediated symbols and *Imago Dei* language in a later section, but the astute reader may already begin to discern how one set of shared epistemological assumptions could inform both heresy and orthodoxy in Colossians.

Augustine then clarifies that the angelic hierarchy mediates between the physical elements and God's singular will. Significantly, Augustine locates both God's theophanies to Old Testament Israel and demonic revelations informing pagan practices along the same hierarchical plane, using Hellenistic yet Jewish texts like *Wisdom of Solomon* to support his claims.¹⁹ Both angels faithful to God and rebel evil forces perform the role of knowledge mediation, but the rebellious ones, as irrational creatures, serve under those who remain faithful and obedient to God's rational will.²⁰ In this way, God as Creator works through these various spiritual second causes, which include regular operations like the solar system or more irregular ones such as weather patterns.

¹⁷ Wright, *Commentary on 2:10, 2:15*. Wright reads the powers as those claims toward the state religion, involving both piety to the ruling authorities and respectful adherence to ethnic ties of kinship. While these temporal elements may not be absent from Paul's concerns (e.g. 3:11), Augustine's presentation of mediated knowledge suggests that the ideals behind the temporal values are spiritual in nature.

¹⁸ Augustine, I.16, 80. Edmund Hill writes insightfully in ft.46, "Our being made in the image and likeness of God, and our having to realize or activate this image by being converted to God in Christ is a constitutive part of the drama [of salvation toward a perfect vision of God]. That is the point of [Augustine's] reference to the angelic regime of symbols...it is only through such likenesses that under the present [Pre-Christian] dispensation we have access to God."

¹⁹ E.g. *Ibid.*, III.6, 130, which cites *Wis* 16:24 and *Wis* 8:1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, III.9, 132.

Augustine makes an emphatic and astute point that even Old Testament accounts of God's visible appearances and audible speech were all mediated by angels.²¹ What emerges is a worldview in which all knowledge spatially and spiritually above the terrestrial level of earthly existence all filter through the medium of angelic embodiment. As an immediate corollary, such a hierarchy of epistemology would then also grant legitimacy to a locative or spatial reading of Paul's frequent use of "ἐν αὐτῷ" in Colossians that could then ripple out into adjacent epistles like Ephesians or Philippians. His purpose in this locative reading would emphasize the superior epistemological space that Christ inhabits and in which believers may participate, which transcends angelic mediation.

4. Clothing Metaphor as Liturgical Act in Both False and True Worship

As Augustine considers the question of how angels mediate between the invisible and visible realm, we find an interesting parallel with the clothing metaphor used at major junctions in Colossians. Augustine ponders one hypothetical possibility:

"Do angels work through the constant and stable spiritual quality of their own bodies to take and fit to themselves some grosser matter from the lower elements, which they can change and turn rather like clothes into any physical manifestation they please, even into true ones, as our Lord turned true water into true wine?"²²

²¹ Ibid, III.10-27, 132-146. We do not have the space to explore Augustine's exegesis of various Old Testament theophanies. His basic hermeneutic move first limits demonic powers, like Pharaoh's magicians, in the face of God's superior power before then differentiating all angelic powers of mediation from God, who is sole creator of being, whether form or matter. Thus, at a risk of belaboring his point, angels are only mediators who carry out or govern various operations in nature or the supernatural world. They most emphatically do not create the knowledge or initiate its revelation without some level of divine assent.

²² Ibid, III.5-6, 129-130.

Augustine ultimately does not choose an interpretation from the above giving other options, but this description alone suggests a deeper significance to Paul's use of the clothing metaphor in Colossians. If angel worship is somehow related to the reception of visionary knowledge (Col 2:18), and if angels mediate knowledge by putting on various physical elements like clothes, then this exegetical key first explains how the criticized ascetical rituals relate to transcendental contemplation.

Modern commentators contend with the possibility that worship of angels is synonymous with initiation, through abstinence, either into the spiritual realm that angels enjoy or into direct access with the angels' own worship of God.²³ However, if we accept the principle that one becomes what one worships,²⁴ then we may imagine rituals in which humans actually try to imitate or "put on" the spiritual quality of angels. These false religions not only praise angels for spiritual mastery over the physical elements, but by abstaining from certain earthly elements and perhaps embodying others, the practitioners imitate angels in the hopes of adopting their spiritual, disembodied qualities.

Of course, in Paul's hands this clothing metaphor receives its own redemptive makeover. We cannot ignore the direct transfusion of Christ's own "putting off" action in 2:11 onto Paul's subsequent ethical command. The Colossian church should "put off" the old self of falsehood and "put on" the new self of truth in Christ (3:9-10). I am by no means the first to make this connection, but we miss the power of Paul's remark if we do not see a hidden clothing metaphor operating in the false religious practices. If the Colossians were already tempted (or already practicing) a religious ritual that tries to take off the physical in order to put on the spiritual,

²³ Cf. Thompson, Wright, and Sumney on 2:18. Wright, unsurprisingly, favors the interpretation that takes 2:18 as another instance of hyperbole on Paul's part, intending really to critique a worship of the Old Testament law. He is not completely without basis from the Augustinian view if we recall angelic, symbolic mediation of the Old Testament theophanies, including at Mt. Sinai (*Trinitate*, II.23-32). Nevertheless, Thompson and Sumney are closer to the pagan context by citing initiation practices and apocalyptic sources. None of the three interpreters considers my following proposal in the body of the text.

²⁴ This principle will be formalized in the subsequent section on Col 3:9-10, where knowledge/recognition of God transforms one into God's likeness. Thus, there is good reason that such a principle also undergirds the false worship prohibited by Paul, who offers a corrective path that does not negate the underlying principle.

then it behooves Paul's rhetorical genius to then turn the metaphor on its head into a sharp, ironic critique. The Colossians should actually put off the false method of abstaining from earthly elements and operate on the higher level of putting on ethical virtues in Christ (3:11ff). Such a metaphor of dying to the false practices (2:20) is then itself an oblique intensification of how Christ puts off his flesh in death (2:11-12).

5. Paradise Lost through Deceptive Spiritual Epistemology

In fact, the connection between the rejection of false religion and Christ's death builds upon a more foundational principle. It is the ethical application of Christ's victory over a cosmic deception. Relying once again upon Augustine, we receive further insight on how original sin and subsequent fall are also issues of epistemology. We recall from Genesis 3 that Adam and Eve partook of the fruit of the *knowledge* of good and evil. Furthermore, it was the cunning Devil as dragon/serpent who deceptively mediated this exchange of sin and death as divine knowledge.²⁵ With this context in mind, Augustine treats the human Fall in *De Trinitate* as essentially the result of mediated false knowledge, pointing to the need for a mediator of life and truth.

Accordingly, the deception of the Devil lies not only in enticingly presenting a physical element that brings spiritual death as alienation from God, but he also functions as an irresponsible mediator, unwilling to participate in the full experience of the knowledge he shares, which is death.²⁶ While the Devil certainly brought about his own spiritual downfall through such godlessness, resulting in a spiritual death, the embodied

²⁵ Augustine does appear to automatically assume the equivalence of the Serpent of Genesis with the Devil, no doubt relying on traditional, canonical readings, like Rev 12:9. Upon applying the clothing metaphor to this spiritual Diablos, a possible explanation would be the Devil "putting on" the mortal element of the serpent as a sort of pseudo-incarnation. Furthermore, coming immediately after his exposition of the angelic hierarchy of knowledge, Augustine's present discussion should be viewed as a narrative that explains how the hierarchy of mediated knowledge went awry under the Devil and was reconciled once again by Christ.

²⁶ Ibid, IV.13, 166.

serpent did not experience death in the flesh. And yet, he caused a double death for humanity, both corporeal decay and spiritual alienation from God.²⁷ As a result, the rebellious angelic spirits remain one step higher than humans in the spiritual hierarchy, being only spiritually alienated from God, yet humanity must deal with both spiritual separation and physical death. Since physical death is still in the future while spiritual alienation is the “new normal” for humans, fear of physical death dominates and distracts humanity from the plight of spiritual death, i.e. present separation from God.

Augustine then connects this consequential fear of physical death as an important explanation for the practices of pagan ritual. Blinded humanity believes in a need for salvation from physical death, and they automatically intuitively worship anything that appears to be above or in control of the material world, including false spirits. Like the acrobatics and magic tricks performed in circuses that aim to impress an audience, the “Devil and his angels with their airy bodies do things with the physical elements that astonish mere flesh.”²⁸ Having seen the apparent power over the world displayed by the deceptive demons, the human viewer will then desire the help of these powers for overcoming the entrapments of the physical world, as described above. However, “blasphemous symbols and godless curiosities and magical consecrations are no use at all for purifying the soul and reconciling it to God; for the false mediator does not draw one to higher things.”²⁹

Whether the physical element or the wicked airy spirit behind it, neither are satisfactory mediators toward reconciliation with God, the actual Giver of physical and spiritual life. Instead, the distracting mysteries and false rites only inspire their followers with “proud and hence malignant desires” but do not actually “strengthen wings of virtue.”³⁰ The reader may imagine puffed up spiritual wings failing to bear the load of vice and un-

²⁷ Ibid, IV.15, 168.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Augustine, IV.3.15, 167. See ft.49 for Edmund Hill’s description of the “mystic” “rites of initiation” around a cult of Isis or Mithras. Ft. 50 notably connects “curiosities” as Augustine’s scornful word for *arcana* or “mysteries.”

³⁰ Ibid.

satisfied desire, leading to a disastrous crash. In other words, those who try to reach deities behind the physical realm pursue a path of pride that ironically creates a greater burden of sin and physical mortality.

Here one hears another familiar echo of Col 2:18, where a religion of false humility masking puffed-up pride plagues the Colossian context as well. Angelic spirits and visions also captivate those who adhere to false practices, including probable association with related elemental entities.³¹ This underlying a principle may explain why Paul portrays the principalities and powers in a negative light.³² The angelic hierarchy that mediates knowledge has become divided and chaotic after the entrance of sin, where some mediate true knowledge and others falsehood. This divided situation, derived from Genesis 3, then becomes amplified into the division between true and spiritual teaching, casting new light on the reason for Paul's focus on true teaching before right praxis in 2:5-6. False teaching propels what the Serpent began in the Garden of Eden, only by Paul's time the deception has become an invisible hierarchy that imposes systemic deception upon human desires for transcendent, transformative knowledge.

Furthermore, by examining Augustine's development of false mediation, we better see the thrust of Paul's critique in Col 2:23. The false teachers of Colossians have the right general idea regarding the need for purification from the indulgences of the flesh, but their vain attempts are still false paths that do not deal with the ultimate issue of physical death. Even if the spirits worshipped really do have some power and responsibility over certain cosmic elements, they do not have the proper authority to overcome death. The similar issue of pride masked as false humility is one more sign that the common symptoms mentioned by Paul and Augustine may point to a common disease. As Thompson notes, Paul contrasts what is essentially "self-manufactured (ἐθελοθησκία)," wishful religion with the true faith founded upon the cosmic redemption achieved by Christ,³³ and as we will see below, so too does Augustine.

³¹ Cf. Col. 2:18 for angels and visions and Col. 2:8, 20 for elemental entities.

³² Cf. Col 1:16; 2:8, 15.

³³ Thompson on 2:18.

6. Creation Regained through Humble Incarnate Epistemology

Having raised the general issue of a gap between the temporal and the spiritual as well as the false path of angelic mediation, Augustine may now present the superiority of Christ's mediation. Only a Savior who is both human and divine has the right and the power to mediate life back to humanity. Opposite from the proud Devil, the "humble King" does not lead His followers on a path that disregards material creation.³⁴ On the contrary, Christ recognizes yet willingly enters the space of a fallen existence in order to reconcile us back to God:

"Into the place where the mediator of death transported us without accompanying us there himself, that is into the death of the flesh, there the Lord our God by the hidden and wholly mysterious decree of his high divine justice introduced the healing means of our amendment, which he did not himself deserve."³⁵

The willingness to actually dwell among sinful flesh already shows the superior merit and love of Christ's mediation as compared to a gloating Diablos who distances himself from humanity's plight of physical death. But because God's plan for redemption was hidden from the Devil, the latter ironically helps humanity's rescue through his own attempts to hurt the Savior. Seeing that he could not cause Jesus's spiritual downfall through temptations at the wilderness, the Devil decides to procure the "death of that mortal element which the living mediator had received from us."³⁶ By trying to kill Jesus physically, the Devil actually contributes to the life of humanity.

It is at this point that Augustine cites Colossians 2:14-15 to develop his atonement theory. Reading *ἀπεκδυόμενος* as reflexive,³⁷ Augustine emphasizes Christ's own agency, who willingly strips *himself* of his

³⁴ Augustine, IV.3.15, 167.

³⁵ Ibid, 168.

³⁶ Ibid, IV.3.16, 169.

³⁷ For corroboration of the reflexive reading by other patristic writers, see Peter J. Gorday, ed., *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, (Downers Grove, IL: 2000), 35-36.

flesh (v.15). In order to count as a true sacrifice and in order to prove his own innocence, Christ's crucifixion and death must be freely offered by His choice.³⁸ This act of free sacrifice is what makes an "example of the principalities and powers, confidently triumphing over them in himself."³⁹ The cause for triumph makes a spectacle of the Devil's own deception, wrought by his own pride. At first thinking himself to be superior to the Son of God whom he has slain, the Devil then experiences an ego-shattering epiphany at Christ's Resurrection.

In addition, though the Devil had previously "acquired full property rights" over a humanity who had yielded to his seduction, he lost such a right when he killed an innocent human on the cross. Augustine declares that Christ's blood "purged, abolished, and destroyed whatever there was of guilt," and "cancelled the I.O.U." which the evil powers previously held as claim.⁴⁰ Such a triumph both shames the wicked forces hiding behind principles of justice and liberates captive humanity to new life. This rather colloquial rendering of "I.O.U." is of course the work of the translator, Edmund Hill, from Latin to English, but it effectively indicates how Augustine interprets the *cheirographon* in Colossians as a bond of debt held by wicked forces and not as the Mosaic Law or any related sense of a legal code.⁴¹ Augustine's interpretation implies that it is the bond or demand for payment of sin which is wiped away, thereby freeing humanity from a life of penal subservience. Recalling the mediating hierarchy of knowledge, we may further interpret the "handwriting" as a term synonymous with a mediated knowledge of guilt. Even if the original text, Colossians 2:14, does not cite the Devil explicitly but a general spiritual hierarchy,

³⁸ i.e. Christ's agency proves his death was not a punishment by a higher authority for blasphemy or any other sin. Augustine, 168-169.

³⁹ Ibid, 169, citing Col 2:15. Even the "ἐν αὐτῷ" at the end of the verse is reflexive in Augustine's text, which can be explained by taking the subject of the clause as Christ and not the Father. Augustine's text may simply be different from ours, but as mentioned in ft.34 above, Augustine is not alone in this reading.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 170. To be clear, the master in this case is not a tyrannical God but the Devil as mediator and "owner" of humanity who has abdicated their own position as mediator between creation and God and are then shackled by guilt. This is more clearly articulated in City of God, XIV.

⁴¹ Contra Wright, commentary on 2:14. To be sure, "I.O.U." is a common English colloquial term synonymous with the the phrase, "I owe you."

Augustine's overall move retains its force. The accusation of sin, producing guilt and shame, whether explicitly stated or veiled through a legal code, is itself a kind of bondage that nevertheless appears to be true knowledge.⁴²

Sumney does not describe in detail the relation of the *cheirographon* to the larger issue of angelically mediated knowledge, but he does offer a helpful possible interpretation, in which angels keep this record of sins in a book. Synthesizing this description with Augustine's caricature of a deceived Devil purposely trying to kill Jesus, we may imagine evil forces trying to condemn God as either responsible for the sins of the world or simply the person of Jesus being guilty of blasphemy. As they nail this list of accusations to the cross and Christ dies, Col 2:14-15 relays the subsequent irony in which Christ's blood smears and literally blots out the handwriting held against humanity. This precisely unintended consequence also works should one read ἀπεκδυόμενος as "disarming."⁴³ When applied to Christ, the weapon used against humanity is rendered impotent by Christ's blood, and as a result the powers antagonistic to humanity no longer have a claim. The blood of Christ has reconciled humanity back to God and established peace analogous to the Pax Romana (Col 1:20, 22). There may still exist outside accusers, but they cannot invade the newly created realm of the those in the Kingdom of the Son (1:13).⁴⁴

As the *Postcolonial Commentary* makes clear, we need not read reconciliation as a pacification of evil but as the recognition of a universal truth of redemption.⁴⁵ The work remains for agents of power and human knowers to actively recognize and live according to such knowledge. Only as the Colossae Christians recognize the power of

⁴² Sumney, 144-145, concurs, citing a host of apocalyptic resources as evidence. .

⁴³ Campbell, 41.

⁴⁴ Augustine also cites this passage, but his atonement theory here has Christ paying the blood to the Devil who is then bound by it. We should not necessarily view the Devil as the ultimate holder of the debt of justice but only the bond keeper, and we should remember that the Devil is bloodthirsty for Christ's physical death, my decision to focus on the explicit work of the blood mentioned in Col 2:14 aims to remain within the scope of the Pauline text.

⁴⁵ Gordon Zerbe and Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, "The Letter to the Colossians," eds. Fernando F. Segovia and R.S. Sugirtharajah, *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, (NY: Bloomsbury, 2009), 300-301.

the blood to overcome guilt will they begin to overcome their fear of accusatory powers. Thus, it must be remembered that Paul is presenting his atonement theory to Christians, that is, those who already have some foundation of faith and a certain level of hope of reconciliation with God and the reception of life (1:5-6). How could they be possibly ensnared to false teaching and deception again?

Augustine even provides us with explanations for why evil still persists after Christ's decisive death, which again sheds light on Paul's argument map and the enduring temptation of false teaching. Despite the victory of Christ on the cross, the Devil continues his hoodwinking ploy by attempting to downplay the import of Christ's sacrifice. The predominantly Platonic culture mocks a God who would undergo His own physical death. Furthermore, Christians are mocked for living by faith while "philosophers" believe they are superior and worthy guides because they have direct vision of "eternal ideas."⁴⁶ Augustine must reprove these so-called visionaries and intellectuals who believe they are farther along and closer to the divine realities than Christians. The platonic forms may be upheld as divine and eternal, but the Platonic philosophers are not reconciled to God and certainly not subordinate to a Logos who would take flesh and dwell among humanity.⁴⁷ Similar to Paul's rebuttal in 2:23, Augustine replies with an equally stinging remark, questioning the actual value of such hard-won platonic knowledge. "What good does it do a man who is so proud that he is ashamed to climb aboard the wood, what good does it do him to gaze from afar on the home country across the sea?"⁴⁸

Through a creative synthesis of the ark with the cross, Augustine raises the value of faith in Christ to that of a secure and trustworthy vessel. Even if the Christian passenger cannot see eternal truths as clearly as the proud philosophers, the believer is still a passenger on a reliable ship headed to the heavenly realm. The proud one may have purified the

⁴⁶ Ibid, IV.21, 173.

⁴⁷ Edmund Hill makes it clear in ft.69 that the "aeternae rationes" (platonic forms) should not be equated with seminales rationes, which are seeds of the Logos that are more like divine blueprints for creation's own development and growth.

⁴⁸ Augustine, IV.20, 172.

self in order to see high and lofty things, but his intellectual vision does not help the problems of embodied creaturehood. Paul is surely dealing with a comparable issue in Colossians, reminding Christians that they are already on a safe and sure course to God if they walk in the faith. The potential detours will only hinder them in prideful, vain worship of cosmic forces already overcome by Christ and thereby inferior to Him.

Augustine closes this particular discussion with a basic comparison between faith and truth that accords with the earlier distinction of knowledge and wisdom. One day faith will turn to true sight for the Christian who has died and resurrected. True purification will not be achieved until mortal flesh is fully removed. Until then, the “rational mind” will “give faith to temporal things” as a training for the eventual contemplation of “eternal things.”⁴⁹ This appropriation of the Platonic language finds a better path that recognizes both temporal limitations but trusts in eventual glorification. Augustine even cites Col 3:3 as consolation toward hope, “when Christ your life is manifested, then shall you too be manifested with him in glory.”⁵⁰

Against those who mistakenly see a fully realized eschatology in Colossians, Augustine convincingly interprets the importance of still unrealized components in Paul’s Colossian eschatology. Paul neither dismisses the hope of glory nor bypasses the need for temporal faith. This clear demarcation allows faith to become aligned with hope (1:5-6), for the object of both cohere as the one Person of Christ. Paul’s injunction to “walk in [Christ]... established in the faith” (2:6-7) may be read in a similar vein as Augustine’s metaphor of sailing on the wood of the cross. Paul is reminding the Colossians of the most secure and trustworthy place by which they will one day fully realize their hope for truth and transcendence. The death and subsequent ascension of Christ into heaven (3:1) is promise enough for those who remain in the realm of the Kingdom. They will only temporarily live by faith before eternally sharing in Christ’s visible glory.

⁴⁹ Ibid, IV.24, 175.

⁵⁰ Ibid, I.16, 80.

7. A Program of Transformative Contemplation upon the Image of God

Just as Paul does not end his letter with a heavenly promise, neither does Augustine end with only a bifurcation between faith-knowledge of the temporal sphere and hope for eventual wisdom in heaven. Both teachers also offer a positive, encouraging account of transformation and progress that occurs in this embodied state, and Augustine notably relies upon Colossians 3:10 as his own scriptural foundation. In doing so, he aptly reveals the proper path toward transcending the cosmic hierarchy of knowledge. At the end of Book XIII, Augustine makes clear that faith in the mechanisms of Christ's atonement alone will not ultimately suffice as the eternal object of the human mind. Because human souls are created for immortality, an eternal image of contemplation will not just focus on the contents of the salvific economy of faith, for faith will be turned to sight. Furthermore, Augustine operates with the assumption that the object seen will shape the person seeing, and only in God does our sight behold what our own identity should become as *Imago Dei*. Augustine uses Colossians 3:10 as a key prooftext, yet his version states, "Put on the new man who is being renewed in the recognition of God according to the image of him who created him."⁵¹ The novelties of his citation include translating ἐπίγνωσιν as "recognition," adding "God" to clarify the intended object of the verb, and some extra uses of the genitive third person pronoun that actually muddy the intended antecedent rather than clarify. Of these linguistic differences, the issue of knowledge versus recognition deserves our final attention.

We have already noted the one occurrence of "knowledge (γνώσεως)" compared to the more frequent use of ἐπίγνωσις in the entire epistle of Colossians. Translators who notice the difference usually distinguish the latter as a type of truer or deeper knowledge. For example, Wright does describe such knowledge as "full recognition of truth about God and about oneself,"⁵² but it is not clear whether Wright makes a distinction between quantity (truths about God) to quality (truer knowledge of God) in these

⁵¹ Ibid, XIV.22, 390.

⁵² Wright, 2:15. Thompson does not notice the difference, and Sumney simply translates the term as "fuller knowledge," even making a counter-claim that the object of such knowledge is unclear (202).

two different types of knowledge. By comparison, Augustine presses the words for their full flavor. Instead of knowledge about God, Augustine successfully turns true knowledge into knowing God, a fullness that overcomes the mediation of creedal formulations and faithful views of Christ's atoning sacrifice. After all, Paul himself lifts the Colossians gaze from the Christ of the cross (2:14-15) to the Christ seated on at the right hand of God (3:1). It is as if Paul has taken the end of the Christ Hymn (1:20) with its focus on the cross and cycled back to the beginning for a renewed look at Christ the supreme Image of God (1:15).

Thus, we realize that the *Imago Dei* of Col 3:10 becomes the centerpiece for understanding how the Colossians actually grow and mature in knowledge and wisdom toward a recognition of God in Christ as well as a becoming like God. In other words, if we read Col 3:10-11 first as a recognition of God that then leads to an embodied reflection of the divine image, we see an intimate connection to the pivotal call of an upward gaze in 3:1. From this heavenly vantage point, the program then culminates into a return to a temporal gaze upon creation, where Christ is "all in all" (3:11).⁵³ In this way, our spiritual gaze upward eventually moves from those spiritual things so lusted after by the false teachings and returns to a healed view of materiality. Unlike the sensuous mind that has been deceived into believing it sees the things of God (2:18), the mind gazing upon Christ in heaven will begin a true purification process that first discerns the falsehoods, whose visible fruit are the vices and which do not accord with the temporal or eternal life of Christ (3:5-9). Once purified, the mind is renewed into a recognition of God, a deeper knowledge of Christ as the *Imago Dei* in creation and a wide-ranging vision of Christ's body that transcends prejudiced societal distinctions. In this way, Colossians 3:1-11 begins its contemplative program with a locative description of Christ's heavenly headship before distinguishing false pathways away from the true realm of Christ's body.

⁵³ Wright does ultimately arrive at a similar application when exegeting 3:11, seeing Christ in all ethnicities. The overall point is therefore present, but there exists no textual reason to define such knowledge as "about God" in 3:10. By this point in the letter, Paul is surely emphasizing a deeper, transformative culmination of knowledge about God into a knowing recognition of Christ in love.

Only then does Paul give the positive list of virtues at 3:12, which are the visible signs that mediate truly eternal knowledge as lived-out actualization of Christ's body on earth. These positive virtues and instructions from 3:12 until the end of the chapter then become means of recognizing and reflecting God in this temporal existence.⁵⁴ Of course, part of a Christian's gaze should always remain in heaven as the continual power source renewing knowledge into action. Within the context of the entire epistle of Colossians, this expanded contemplative program even parallels Paul's initial praise of the heavenly hope and temporal faith (1:5-6) with a newfound appreciation of temporal love (3:14, 1:5). Far surpassing the ineffective and destructive pathways listed in Col 2:16-23 while still redeeming a contemplative mode of knowledge, as illumined for us by Augustine, Paul provides a comprehensive and restorative Colossian program for true spiritual contemplation from faith through love to glory.

8. Conclusion

Having surveyed Augustine's reading of Colossians in *De Trinitate*, we have in a sense renewed our own knowledge of the principles underlying the false teaching combated by Paul and gained wisdom regarding a truly transformative program of contemplation and virtue in Christ. One may, of course, disagree with the details of Augustine's reading, but it is clear that Augustine seeks to faithfully interpret Colossians. His explorations enable us to find a more wholistic vision of an often-undervalued Pauline epistle. By considering a cosmology in which spiritual forces mediate visible knowledge, we enter once again into an ancient world and its

⁵⁴ Indeed, I am including the household codes in this program despite all their abuse and misinterpretation in subsequent eras. If we combine the elaborated description of the master/slave dynamic in Christ and the similarly elaborate description of the husband/wife relationship in Eph. 5:22-28 (not to mention the frequent use of Father and Sonship language in all of Paul's letters to inform Christian identity), the result is a synthesized view in which Christ as "all in all" applies even to messy, intimate household relationships. The prior virtues listed by Paul, oriented around love and informed by contemplation of Christ should, rightly interpreted, reduce abuse instead of exacerbating it and offer instruction instead of provoking resentment.

struggle for meaning and transcendence. Augustine teaches us how and why pagans and apocalyptic Jews might turn toward a worship of these intermediate mediators, deceived by these false paths toward spiritual ascendancy and perhaps also motivated by fear of moral authorities' condemning power or physical death itself.

Yet the solution is found in the God who condescended to take on flesh, entering into deeper solidarity with a death-bent humanity than these other distant spiritual forces. Through His sacrifice that blots out the diabolically mediated knowledge of guilt and an ascension that provides the true path of transcendence from the material to the spiritual, Christ enables a renewed life on earth that links spiritual contemplation with visible, ethical action. By growing in the Image of God through a consideration of heavenly realities in Christ, we gain a redemptive view of physical creation and human relationships, learning to behold Christ as "all in all" and living a life that transfers heavenly forms of love and virtue into earthly practices.

The import of such a renewed vision of Colossians are manifold. One may think of the many contemplative options which currently compete for attention in our world, some more harmful than others. Within the Church as well as for the larger world, Colossians becomes a means of discerning between true and false claims of accessing God. Furthermore, its adoption of an upward gaze that both recognizes a hope beyond this world while invigorating us toward a glimpse of God in this world will surely inform those seeking a Christian vision of the environment, ethics, human identity, and simple guidance for a life in tune with God.

Finally, Augustine's own deep drilling into the text has also surfaced a treasure of creative epistemology. As someone primarily working in sacred music, I offer Paul's explication of the Christ Hymn as an *Imago Dei* for the Christian artist and exegete. If the basic metaphysical principle highlighted by Augustine is correct, then the object of our attention will undoubtedly form our being and act. We may choose to focus on false and destructive pseudo-knowledge, or we may reflect on true knowledge in Christ. In the case of Colossians, Paul's encouragement in 3:16 to sing hymns and songs "in all wisdom" surely alludes to his own use of the Christ Hymn (1:15-20). Thus, by singing, contemplating, and living out the truth claims of the Christ Hymn, those struggling under the powers (whether

visible or invisible) will be renewed into the image of Christ described in the hymn. That is, they will follow Christ as firstborn from the dead and reign with Christ on high.

Moreover, because the Christ Hymn combines the contents for theological understanding with the poetic form of doxological love, it actually reflects a Trinitarian Imago Dei under Augustine's rubric that combines Father-like being with a Logos-like generation of words and a Spirit-like procession of love.⁵⁵ In fact, we may imagine Paul singing this hymn, renewing his Trinitarian Imago Dei, and then participating in God as Creator by crafting his own Letter to the Colossians, which then inspires Augustine's own deeply contemplative, epistemological treatise with its own ethical implications. Thus, the Colossians 3 contemplative program may be viewed as an invitation to a truly creative life, which invites participation of Triune-image-bearing Christians to become co-creators with their Triune God.

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⁵⁵ Cf. Augustine, XIV-XV.

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