THE "PRACTICAL" ACHIEVEMENT OF COLOSSIANS: A THEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

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The epistle to the Colossians, though rather short by Pauline standards, conveys a compelling and visionary message, one that has been an abundant source of theological reflection for the church over the centuries. Christology has probably been the most thoroughly analyzed aspect of its thought, though the text also makes important contributions to our understanding of early Christian theology in areas such as soteriology, anthropology, eschatology, and ethics. Naturally, the options available to modern readers for organizing an assessment of the nature and significance of this theological message vary widely. In what follows, the subject for discussion is not the epistle's theology per se or any of the specific theological categories just mentioned. Instead, I want to reflect on some of these interpretive options for reading Colossians and to suggest how we might learn from them in a manner that more effectively informs the interests of contemporary theological inquiry.

In addressing this task, I specifically want to take as a point of departure the procedures, perspectives, and results of historically-guided research on the epistle. The aim is not to provide a Forschungsbericht, but to review those prominent exegetical issues whose investigation seems to hold out the most promise for evaluating the letter's theology. With this in mind, we can readily identify a number of discrete topics or areas of research in the contemporary literature on Colossians. Consideration of these various topics or areas and the way that scholars investigate them suggests that concomitant with each is a particular interpretive approach or "model," by which I mean simply a working set of critical presuppositions, questions, and methods that direct one's study of the epistle. Each model assumes the appropriateness of a certain line of inquiry or point of view for examining the theology of Colossians, implicating along the way certain priorities for theological assessment in contemporary settings. The subject for this assessment is referred to here as
the letter’s theological “achievement” because I take its theology to constitute a type of goal-oriented activity; that is, it intends to achieve certain objectives in terms of the readers’ Christian existence.

The interpretive approaches to be reviewed are four in number. It should be emphasized up front that the four are not mutually exclusive in terms of criteria, interests, or relevant data. The first three I take to be important, each in its own way, though the fourth does a better job of including the results of the others, even as it focuses our attention on issues relevant to the text’s “practical” nature, a term whose historical and theological meaning will become clearer below.

**Colossians as Pauline Theology**

The first model for interpretation evaluates the theology of Colossians within the context of Pauline theology. The starting point here is the obvious assertion that Colossians presents a message that is thoroughly recognizable within the context of Paul’s mission and writings. The epistle simply takes for granted his style and system of beliefs, as well as an audience receptive to the apostle’s opinions. According to this approach, the theology of Colossians would seem to be determined principally in terms of who did the writing. If Paul, then the text’s theology needs to be evaluated as a late and somewhat unexpected development of the thought of the apostle himself. If someone other than Paul, then its theology is evaluated as a creative adaptation of his thought in the postapostolic era. Either way, the letter’s theological achievement depends upon the way in which it articulates the Pauline gospel. Consequently, the business of this approach is to compare and contrast Colossians with the apostle’s other works. To be sure, such comparison is quite useful, especially in isolating the distinctive theological positions staked out in the letter and the special contribution it makes to our understanding of Pauline theology.2

Many critics, after reviewing the pertinent data, have concluded that the degree and nature of differences between the theology of Colossians and that of the undisputed letters are substantial enough to reject its claim of Pauline authorship. According to this interpretation, the theology of Colossians lies largely in the tension that exists between its claims and whatever underlying pattern or structure or center for the apostle’s