

Colossians 1:21-24 And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Colossians 1:21-23 | Christ & You

John Calvin's life's work was, well, the city of Geneva. But this was supported by his written life's work *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. I've read about a quarter of it, I try and kind of live in it reading it in the background before bed a couple nights a week. One of my favorite living authors is a lady named Marilynne Robinson, she also teaches American literature and says that you can't really understand the conversation that is happening in American Literature without understanding John Calvin. And Calvin begins his Institutes with this remarkable insight:

Our wisdom, insofar as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other.

In this section of Colossians Paul's overflow of thanksgiving about what Christ has done, and who Christ is turns inevitably to the Colossians themselves. He has overflowed with who Christ is, the firstborn of creation and the firstborn from the dead. But in order for us to grow in this wisdom of who Christ is, we must see how this corresponds to who we are. Otherwise we have no true and solid wisdom.

You already know this because knowing Christ is like knowing a friend or a spouse. You know them in relation to you. This is the inherent risk in all relationships. As the other person is revealed you are also revealed, even to yourself. This is why relationships are frequently so surprising, because we think we know ourselves and then boom you don't. Because your wife wants to donate your kids old toys and for some reason that fills you with rage, and you realize I didn't expect myself to be like this. Now imagine knowing God. Its always self-knowledge and knowledge of him together. That is why Paul's description of who Christ is immediately dovetails with a critical "And you." If you've ever been interested in the question, "Who am I?" You counterintuitively have to start with God.

1. Alienation

Colossians 1:21 *And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,*

And you. This and you comes right off of who Christ is, but we must see what this means for us. But notice he begins with “and you who once.” Who once means this is not a description of the Colossians current position. Part of understanding ourselves in relation to Christ is seeing how he transforms us from something we were. Who once means we’re entering a story, not a static description. This is a clue as to what self-knowledge is really like. Often we try and pin ourselves down, as a way of finding ourselves, but we don’t mean arriving at a definition of ourselves. Rather we mean integrating ourselves into the story which we are living.

Here is where our story starts outside of Christ we are three things, alienated, hostile in mind, and doing evil deeds.

Alienated: Notice that the first word used to describe our pitiful state is a relational word. We are alienated and implicit in this phrase is that we are alienated from God. This is our initial state in sin. We are born into alienation.

In the opening chapter of *Brave New World* Huxley takes you into the *Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Center*. People no longer reproduce, being born into families but instead are created in labs, and then raised in *Neo Pavlovian Conditioning Centers*. It makes your skin turn inside out because we know that a child is meant to come into the world not alienated but connected. They come from their mother and father and their mother and father are meant to be present to receive them and bring them up into the world in love.

But outside of Christ, we are born into alienation. We look around for a loving face looking back at us and instead we gaze off into a void only to be conditioned by the world. This is the reality of sin. That the one who we ought to be closest to we are born disposed to be absent from. And without that key relationship you don’t get to know who you are.

Hostile in Mind: The conditioning of the world and our own alienated disposition results in our being hostile in mind toward God. We do not consider him as God who has graciously given us this life. We do not count him as worthy of our praise and honor. We are like addicts, seeking to bend the truth to receive an immediate gratification. Pretending to be in control when the reality is we are enslaved. When God approaches to set us free we flee from him as another tyrant. Clinging to our hostility. Unwilling to be saved.

Doing Evil Deeds: This mode of being results in a life whose fruit is evil. So the things we do result in further alienation and further hostility of mind for us and others. The way the sentence lays itself out is meant to show us a mutual reinforcement of our evil deeds further developing our hostile minds. We’re meant to see a downward spiral of alienation. As we are alienated from God, we become self defining, and in our self defining we use ourselves for wrong purposes. In making ourselves the center, we find ourselves alienated.

2. Reconciliation

Colossians 1:22 he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him,

But the story continues, this once upon a time, reaches up into the present life of the Colossians with a “he has now.” Notice the strange parallel. In the past our alienated condition was credited to us. It began with an “and you who once were.” But this transformational healing begins with a “he has now.” The good news of our transformation is about what Christ has done.

Think, how different it would be if Paul had said, “And you were once alienated and hostile in mind, but then you heeded Christ’s advice and the Lord welcomed you back again.” Many of us think this is the true shape of the gospel. But it isn’t. In fact this is a denial of the gospel in two respects, first it is a denial of our initial state. We could not reconcile ourselves to God, our minds were too hostile our deeds too wicked and each of these reinforced one another in a way which makes alienated definitionally true of our status. Second it is a denial of our means of rescue, that God himself sought us, not the other way around, he accomplished the reconciliation.

What is the means of his reconciling us to himself? The text says that he reconciled us *in his body of flesh by his death*. That’s some weird words with a lot of backstory built in so let’s explore a bit. Everybody knows that Christ died for our sins, but what does that mean? First of all let’s look at the means that Paul is highlighting here, it is Christ’s body of flesh. Body and flesh are in one sense redundant because *σῶμα* and *σὰρξ* both mean body but they are technical terms for Paul. Our body is our physicality which deteriorates and dies, but our flesh is that part of ourselves which is corrupted by sin.

Our sin results in our alienation from God because it is a breaking of the conditions of our relating. Oh that’s so harsh! No that is something you know and take for granted every day. All of your relations are governed by conditions, you only have sex with your spouse, you remain friends because you in my case... eventually text back. The sweetness of your relationships is found in your mutual adherence to some sorts of boundaries. Our Boundaries with the Lord are absolute because he is the absolute. But I understand your concern, God is so absolute that how could any of us possibly relate to him? How could anyone be held to such a standard as his perfection and once violated how could anyone plead our petty case to the glorious creator of all things. Job cries out:

Job 9:32-33 For he is not a man, as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together. ³³ There is no arbiter between us, who might lay his hand on us both.

And don't you see the glory of the way Christ has reconciled us to himself! It was in his body of flesh by his death. We could not and never will take on God's absoluteness so that we might lay our hands on God. But God in his great mercy, and because of the great love with which he loved us took on our flesh so that he might lay his hand on us. Who can stand in middle and arbitrate, so that his hand might lay on both of us. Don't you see this deepest cry from the depths of the most pained human heart finds its answer in Christ himself. Who reaches out his hand, not metaphorical hand but real hand, to rescue us.

Why does Christ do this:

Colossians 1:22b in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him,

Christ restores both sides of the relationship on our behalf by completely identifying with us, taking on our punishment for sin and then granting to us freely his holiness and righteousness. We are holy, like our God. Set apart as saints. Blameless as our sin is washed away. And Above reproach, don't you see this means that God has nothing bad to say about you. Your reputation with God is one of holiness and righteousness. He sees you as blameless in Christ. I know it's a lot to take in. How do we receive this reconciliation?

3. Hope

Colossians 1:23a if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard,

This newly ordered relationship becomes the pattern for how we live. We are to continue in faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel. Just as our identity used to be formed by alienation, now our identity is to be formed by trust in our reconciliation. You know this if you have ever sinned against your spouse and been forgiven. Part of your receiving that forgiveness is walking in the trust that they have actually forgiven you. You are not strangely compensating for your past wrong. This feels manipulative within the relationship and prevents authentic connection. Instead you trust them with the forgiveness they have offered.

How much can we trust Christ with the forgiveness he has offered. We remember that he has already done the hardest thing. He has paid the price of death. He has taken on our alienation so that in him we might be reconciled. We remain in this relationship by trusting him and his work. This is not to say we will be sinless, but that when we sin we turn to him as one we are confident will receive us, because he has now given us his holiness.

Paul will spend the rest of this letter, describing to us how to embody this restored relationship. For today, I commend you to look to Christ. No longer look to yourself to earn your position before him, but look to the one who can place his hand on you and God.