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## **PREACHING TO GOD, THE CHURCH, AND THE POWERS ACCORDING TO CHARLES L. CAMPBELL: AN IMPERIAL READING ON THE LETTERS OF COLOSSIAN AND EPHESIANS**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the issue of preaching to God, the Church, and the powers presented by Charles L. Campbell, where we learn that reading and interpreting Colossians and Ephesians (and indeed the whole New Testament) through the lens of Empire opens up the depths of interpretation and understanding which is not obvious, otherwise. What the New Testament writers penned spoke to the world around them, including the visual cues (art, temples, monuments, coins, festivals), values, politics, economics, faith (especially Emperor cult worship), and the realities of daily life within the Roman Empire. The New Testament writers understood the existence of the three powers (God, the Church, and the spirits or powers). Their daily lives were shaped by all kinds of forces that befall them, and the reality of these forces permeates their writing. The ultimate purpose is we are invited to examine (discern), enumerate, and speak loudly against the rulers, spirits in the air, and the governments of injustice that rule in this world with the power of the one ruler, the Way, which has another Kingdom overcoming the imperial Empire.

**Keywords:** Charles L. Campbell; Preaching; Church; Powers; Imperial Reading

### **INTRODUCTION**

How does an imperial reading of Colossians and Ephesians challenge us to address all three? Charles Campbell, a noted distinguished Professor of New Testament studies and Homiletics at Duke University, remarks that three entities preach every sermon: God, the Church, and the powers (Saunders

& Campbell, 2006, pp. 63–94). William Stringfellow contends, “One of the most generally agreed upon characteristics of the principalities and powers in the New Testament is their multiplicity” (Stringfellow, 2004, p. 77). Campbell further comments, “...the writers of the New Testament understood something of these powers. Their everyday lives

were shaped by all kinds of forces impinging upon them, and the realities of these powers permeate their writings” (Campbell, 2002, p. 10).

In *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire*, authors Walsh and Keesmaat introduce us to the term *targum*. By *targum*, they refer to Rabbis reading Torah and interpreting the text for their congregations, not as a literal word-for-word transmittal, but rather, ‘conceptualizing the text in a way the modern listener would understand’ (Walsh & Keesmaat, 2004, p. 38).

This requires solid exegetical work while leaving space for creativity in transmitting the message. Indeed, this is what all preachers do: (i) Take the living Word of God and do our due diligence to exegete what it says responsibly, (ii) utilize the text as a mirror to question how it speaks to our time and place and, (iii) creatively weave the historical context and present reality into a message that transmits something of value we feel God is saying to the church community today. Campbell would add that we "Preach as the counterspeech of the Word of God,

which is an important form of resistance. In preaching, we have the opportunity (and I might add, responsibility) to expose the powers and help people envision the alternative" (Saunders & Campbell, 2006, pp. 74–75).

Regarding addressing these three powers (God, the Church, and powers), we will see close at Paul's letters, the book of Colosse, and the book of Ephesians through the lens of imperial reading. The reason for proposing these letters is because they are similar in character. As David E. Aune said, “similarities between Colossians and Ephesians are much closer than between any other two letters in the Pauline corpus” (Aune, 2010, p. 492).

Furthermore, he states:

The nature of the close relationship between Colossians and Ephesians extends far beyond literary dependence to include significant overlaps in theological and ethical content. Colossians and Ephesians refer to the expansion and filling up of the universe with divinity. The notion of Christ as ruler of the cosmos becomes intertwined with the Pauline symbol of the body of Christ so that a new vision of the body emerges. It is also important to note that in these works, the body is explicitly called the Church, and Christ becomes the head of the body. (Aune, 2010, p. 538)

This research aims to analyze trichology in sermons from the

perspective of Charles L. Campbell from an imperial reading perspective to create peace in the life of the Church and society.

## **METHOD**

This research uses a descriptive qualitative method with an imperial reading theology approach. I use the imperial reading approach to find the peaceful meaning of sermons in the context of the church community. The research procedure in this article is divided into three parts. In the first part, I will describe the imperial reading of Paul's writings for the Colossians. Second, I will present the imperial reading of Paul's writings for the Ephesians. In the third part, I will analyze the previous sections with Preaching to God, the Church, and the Powers.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **An Imperial Reading on Colossian 1:1-20, 3:8-14**

Colossae was religiously pluralistic - different Greco-Roman gods and Goddesses were worshiped there. Christians in these areas thus experienced a coalescing of ideas, beliefs, and philosophies. The Ephesians worshiped the Greco-

Roman Gods (such as in the case of Colossae), but they also worshiped the Emperor. The letter to the Ephesians is not addressed to a particular church with a specific socio-historical background. It is thought to be a circular letter addressed to churches near Ephesus. Both Colossians and Ephesians were written to people who were living in an environment where the Greco-Roman Gods were seen to be superior to humankind, ageless, deathless, not limited to physical restrictions, amoral, anthropomorphic with human traits, emotions, and intentions, which claimed deity and demanded worship. The people in these areas were expected to worship these Gods and the emperors and probably did so partly out of fear. They had to perform rituals to receive mercy, keep them happy, and live in peace under their control. It is against this religious background that the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians present a God with particular characteristics.

“Colossians’ chief concern is that its listeners did not abase themselves through religious devotion to cosmic powers, but that they understand themselves, through

their incorporation into the death and resurrection of Jesus, as co-rulers with Christ above all powers” (Maier, 2013, p. 65). While everything around them demanded worship of the Emperor and the Empire, promising peace, salvation, hope, and a ruler thought to be appointed by and working alongside a deity, Paul has an alternate message. Paul’s message declares this world to be temporary and Jesus to be the true God. In Paul’s message, Jesus is the true bearer of salvation, peace, and hope (not Caesar).

The letter opens in the standard form with greetings to the intended recipients with a blessing of grace and peace. While on the surface, these words seem simple, harmless enough, and simply Paul's standard greeting, it is essential to remember that peace was one of the great promises of living under the Roman Empire (*pax Romana*). Thus, for Paul to greet people with peace from God the Father was to declare that peace does not come from Caesar. As we look at our passage further, we discover that twice in verse 6, and once in verse 10, Paul refers to the gospel as 'bearing fruit.' The Emperor governed the

provision of food. It was believed that the "Emperor brought abundance, security, and fertility" (Walsh & Keesmaat, 2004, pp. 71–72). Images with a cornucopia alongside the Emperor were familiar to visually reinforce that it is the Emperor who provides all citizen's needs. Thus, Paul's use of 'bearing fruit' is a provocative language that counters the message of the Roman Empire, associating fruit (provision of our daily needs, fertility, and security) with the gospel of Jesus.

In verses 15-16, Paul proclaims Jesus to be "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him” To proclaim Jesus above 'all things visible and invisible was to say that the Emperor on the throne of power, thought to be placed there in alignment with the gods, was true, below Jesus. "He wants to convey in no uncertain terms that 'all things' are created in Christ. The phrase 'all things' recurs throughout the poem (vv.15-20). Moreover, to

make clear the sheer comprehensive and universal scope of what he is talking about, Paul invites his hearers to imagine all things 'in heaven and earth.' Then he adds to that 'visible and invisible'" (Walsh & Keesmaat, 2004, p. 91). Paul conveys a strong message of a ruler and kingdom of peace, justice, hope, and provision through Jesus—a ruler who rules by love rather than domination, through self-sacrifice rather than violence and war. Paul boldly proclaims a ruler and kingdom, starkly contrasting the world around them. To the most marginalized, this would be tremendously life-giving good news.

In Colossians 2:6-23 the people of Colossae are called to reject the false teachings. The theological rationale is to instead live in Christ. To persuade the readers to be obedient to the exhortation to live in Christ (Col 2:6-23), the author refers to God's incommunicable attributes, namely his power, as Colossian 2:12 says, "when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead." Christ is presented as God in human form as the head over every power and authority.

In Colossians, the exhortation to live a holy life (Col 3:1-17) is augmented with a warning about the wrath of God (verse six). Unlike the wrath of the Roman Empire, this wrath of God should not be seen as God's capacity for violence but as his righteous indignation of moral evil. As the purpose of Colossians is, however, to proclaim Christ as the head of the Church, Jesus is described as head over every power; "and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority" (Col. 2:10). This language echoes the imperial language found in Colossians and Ephesians. This image of Jesus as head of the Church would be familiar language to the people at that time who saw the Emperor as the head of the Empire—the peace of Rome may have been brutal at times, but when these letters were written, the people of these cities had not seen war for a long time. The idea of Roman peace would have been all-pervasive, and so it would have been easy for the recipients of the letters to understand the reign of Christ in similar terms. The power of imperial Rome was an everyday reality for the people of the Empire, just as capitalism is for us today. It is

within this reality that a new reality in Christ is being presented.

The language of *pleroma* (fullness) that Paul applies to both Christ and the Church is central to the relationship the letter forges between Christology and ecclesiology - the fullness of God has taken up residence in Christ (Eberhard & Nestle, 2012, p. 614). These Christological assertions then relate the concept of fullness as it pertains to the Church. The term *pleroma* (fullness) first appears in the letter in Colossians 1:19; "For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell." The statement suggests the divine indwelling of Christ, but it also points to this fullness extending to the Church (Henderson, 2007). Again, the letters echo Roman imperial ideology and language. Already we have seen that the language of fullness extends both to Christ and to the Colossians: "for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him" (Col. 2:10).

The significance of Christ's victory over the "rulers and

authorities" and the resulting victory of the Church is significant. Several factors converge in the letter to associate the concept of fullness with God's more excellent plan: the renewal of the created order. To be captive to the powers of the world - the *στοιχεῖα* (*stoichea*), is to participate in schemes of division; to be filled by God is to participate in God's agenda of reconciliation. Here we see an alternative to the powers of Imperial Rome. As they look towards a new creation, Colossians is exhorting the people that they must not submit to powers below them; that is, earthly powers – while the letter is still talking of powers, it is replacing the power of Rome with the power of Christ.

If the fullness of the deity has taken up residence both in Christ and the Church, we can find in this letter a reminder that God graciously infuses us with a power that is not our own. However, as for the Colossians, perhaps the temptation for today's Church lies not so much in overestimating our powers as in our failure to embrace the spiritual authority with which God fills us. Like the Colossians, we often accept

the authority of earthly rulers and authorities without question, taking their standards of judgment and division for granted, assuming as given, or even necessary, the human commands and teachings that promote separation.

Finally, in Colossians 3:8-14, Paul speaks of “stripping off the old self with its practices and being clothed with a new self.” It would be easy to hear a reference to baptism, wherein we lay down an old nature and rise again in Christ. However, Paul’s language here is again tied to an empire. The imagery of the Emperor’s head and body, clothed in garments of victory, loomed large throughout the Empire on coins, statues, art, and monuments. Barbarians were portrayed shirtless with pants on and less muscular or *eidulliake* physiques. The body and clothing were symbolic of the person and social structure. The body was both an individual and a corporate metaphor for the social system (Canavan, 2012, pp. 116–122). In this light, Paul’s imperative to clothe yourself in the ways of Christ, breaking down all social barriers (v.11: no longer Greek or Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised...),

was to dismantle the power and identities of the Empire.

As we look at Colossians through the lens of the Empire, Paul was not only making a strong case for following Jesus but was doing so with the words and imagery of people’s experience in the Roman Empire at the time. Maier states, “Colossians draws from the visual culture and beliefs embedded in the social world of its audience to persuade listeners of Christ’s supreme authority and the benefits that have come from his victory” (Maier, 2016, p. 82). Paul was indeed proclaiming another ruler and kingdom which ran counter to the ways of the world of their experience, one worth putting their hope, faith, trust, and allegiance in, whatever the cost (because it cost Jesus and Paul their very lives).

### **An Imperial Reading on Ephesian 6:10-20**

Ephesians 6:10-20 prepares the believer for spiritual warfare with an admonishment to ‘put on the whole armor of God’ (v.11) and the clarification in verse 12 that this battle is ‘not against flesh and blood (read: empire) but against the rulers, authorities and cosmic powers of the

present darkness.' To stay strong in the faith in a world of competing forces requires attentiveness and courage, keeping the sword of the Spirit (God's Word) always close at hand (v.17).

Margaret Y. MacDonald makes a case for imperial theology as a critical lens to read the text in *The Politics of Identity in Ephesians*. "The persistent interest in the identity of the *ekklesia* in Ephesians can only be understood in light of the political perspective of the author of Ephesians and the points of contact of the text (in the form of both appropriation and rejection) with imperial ideology" (MacDonald, 2004, p. 422).

Ephesians 6, for example, opens with the household code and the relationship of slaves and masters being brought under God's dominion before leading into the passage above encouraging believers to 'put on the whole armor of God'. . Paul reminds the Christ-following community that there are powers at work in the world and that Jesus is above them all.

In Ephesians, the universal *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklesia*) exists because of what God has accomplished in Christ and, as God's creation, it has the

power to make God's wisdom known to the spiritual forces in the heavenly places, "so that through the church the wisdom of God in its wide variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."

The purpose of Ephesians is to encourage Gentile Christians to appreciate the dignity of their calling, and it is the attributes of God that speak to this encouragement. The idea of the Church attaining cosmic proportions is reinforced by how the theme of unity occurs throughout Ephesians. Unity comes to us through God and ranges from unity amongst family units to unity in the universal *ἐκκλησία*. Here, the letters are creating a world (a world in Christ) even as they reflect a world of Empire – the powers of Christ are being spoken of in terms that citizens of the Empire would readily understand. The importance of the Church is due to the Church being the place where the blood of the cross accomplishes peace: "But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Eph. 3:10), "For he is our peace; in his flesh, he has made both groups

into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (Eph. 2:13-14).

The author of Ephesians presents God as being in total control of the universe, willing to be humanity's Father and to equip them with wisdom, strength, gifts, and blessings. He also exhorts them to trust this God and imitate Him in their behavior. To look at the exhortations in Ephesians, we need to also look at the religious culture and imperial cult that was at play in Ephesus at that time, which was alluded to earlier. The environment in which Christians in Ephesus had to live was haunted by demons, troubled by magic, and controlled by idolatry. Ephesians worshiped not only the Gods but also

the Emperor. Worship of the Gods and the Emperor was a prominent feature of life in Ephesus. Against this socio-historical background, we see God's actions within the community at Ephesus. Elma M. Cornelius contends:

The characteristic of having power, exercising control, and making choices is something that one can also find in humans. However, God's kind of power and control, and will are high above humankind's abilities. Therefore, this attribute is still classified under a Godly attribute because God's power is an ability that is proverbially impossible for humankind to equal. (Cornelius, 2021).

Against this backdrop of imperial power and God/Goddess worship, we see the attributes of God that are spoken of in Ephesians:

**Table 1:** Incommunicable Attributes of God

<b>Incommunicable Attributes of God Communicating God's Greatness and Power</b>		
<b>Attributes of God</b>	<b>Featured in the Letter</b>	<b>Used in Persuasion</b>
<b>Power and Control</b>	Right through the letter - from the letter opener to the letter body	Stated and referred to as a fact to supply the readers with a sense of security, hope, and a reason to believe. This attribute of God is the foundation for every command in the letter.
<b>The Source of Peace</b>	In the greeting, the author wishes his readers peace coming from God. Then in the letter body opening in the argument on peace and unity,	Paul wishes his readers peace from God - a fact used to persuade them of Paul's caring relationship with them. In the

	it is stated that Christ is the giver and preacher of peace.	letter body opening, it is part of logical reasoning.
<b>Redeemer and Saviour</b>	The letter mentions God's redemption in Christ and the Holy Spirit. In the argument on the husbands and wives, Christ is mentioned as Saviour and as the One who gave Himself up for the Church.	God's redemption in Christ and Christ being the Saviour who gave Himself up are facts mentioned to affect the readers emotionally to have hope and faith.
<b>The Head And Cornerstone Of The Church</b>	Christ is mentioned as being appointed as the head of everything, of the household, and of the Church in the letter opening, body opening, and middle.	He was stated as a fact.
<b>Father of all</b>	Twice in this letter, a reference is made to God as Father of all - once in the letter body opening and once in the letter body middle.	The fact of God's fatherhood to all provides the reader with a sense of security.
<b>Father of Christ</b>	In the letter's opening, God is called the Father of Christ in the doxology and thanksgiving.	This is mentioned as a fact.
<b>Giver of Blessings and Gifts</b>	Only in the letter opener in the doxology, God is mentioned as the giver of blessings. In one argument in the letter body, Christ is mentioned to be the giver of gifts.	He is mentioned as a fact about God the Father and Christ.
<b>Giver of Wisdom</b>	In the letter opener in the thanksgiving	The fact of God's giving of wisdom is mentioned.

How do the attributes of God in this letter compare to the characteristics of the Roman Gods and the Emperor whom the people in Ephesus served? Although the Greco-Roman Gods were superior to humankind and did have some

differences from human beings, they were anthropomorphic. Although they were Gods, they had human traits and demanded worship. The gentiles conducted rituals to receive mercy from the Gods and emperors, to keep them happy, and to live in

peace under their control. Sacrifices to these powers and other ceremonies purified the people: "sacrifice was an exchange' with the idea of 'I give so that you may give to me'" (Cornelius, 2021). In this context, the Ephesian author presents his God to his readers. Paul shows his readers that their God is in total control of the universe. The Ephesians letter offers security and hopes not found amongst the Greco-Roman Gods.

#### **Preaching to God, the Church & the Powers**

We are back to what Campbell said regarding preaching to God, the Church, and the power. Campbell states that forces are associated with human institutions in the New Testament and that there is little emphasis on the spiritual dimension. However, if we look at an imperial reading of Colossians and Ephesians, we can see that the powers are very much alive in the spiritual dimension. As Campbell talks of his preaching, he says that he talks of the spiritual forces as they work in the material system of our world. He says these powers comprise all social, political, and

corporate reality in visible and invisible manifestations.

One example that Campbell uses when he speaks of powers is the beatitudes, where he talks of colonized people. He states that "a colonized people who internalize the image of themselves presented by the colonizers become a docile people. These are "the poor in spirit" Jesus speaks of - the colonizing powers no longer require force to have control, the colonized have become captives of their spirit. An imperial reading of Colossians and Ephesians sees a similar pattern when considering Empire, but a new picture is presented when speaking of Christ.

Thus, when Campbell declares that we are 'preaching to God, the church and the powers,' I deem that to mean: we take God's Word (Word) and read it aloud to the Church. We are quoting God's Word back to God and drawing on the power and promises of that Word. We preach in the presence of God to a congregation, the Church, and the body of Christ in the world. Those gathered in the flesh before we hear these ancient words, along with insights into what it may have

meant in its' original place and time and what it might say to our world today. Moreover, we preach to the powers (by naming or describing them in absolute terms). We name the forces at work that run counter to God's ways. We do this because,

"People are veritably besieged, on all sides, by these claims and strivings of the various powers, each seeking to dominate, usurp or take a person's time, attention, abilities, effort; each grasping at life itself; each demanding idolatrous service and loyalty. In such tumult, it becomes complicated for a human being even to identify the idols which would possess him or her" (Campbell, 2002, p. 13)

Reading scripture surrounded by the gritty reality of life in the world from the perspective of those most outcast by the system of Empire sheds fresh light on Biblical texts. *The Word on the Street* invites us to read the scripture outside the confines and comfort of the Church and academic circles and to go out on the street. "Homeless people in our society embody the way of the cross; through their public suffering, they remove the scales from our eyes and expose the lies of the powers that promise us life but lure us into the ways of death" (Saunders & Campbell, 2006, p. 84). In the article, the students went to a

bank in the heart of downtown, but the homeless are everywhere, so we need only walk out our door. As I read this passage, I recalled Jesus recorded as saying, "The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me" (Matt. 26:11, Mark 14:7, John 12:8). I wondered if Jesus was not acknowledging the powers of this world in this statement and commenting subversively about this very point, that seeing the homeless brings us face to face with the ills of the world and moves our heart to respond (to the homeless and the Lord).

Meanwhile, in *The Word Before the Powers*, Campbell offers 9 Strategies the powers use which preachers would be wise to acknowledge in their preaching: (1) Threatening people with negative sanctions if they do not conform, (2) rewards and promises which seduce people, (3) isolation and division amongst people, (4) demoralization (the problem is so huge, why bother), (5) diverting people from noticing (ex: busyness), (6) public rituals, (7) surveillance which keeps people in conformity to the powers, (8) language and image (babel

trivializing Christian symbols and language), (9) secrecy (ex: pay close attention to areas where silence is required and open acknowledgment is denied) (Campbell, 2002, pp. 33–43). Thus, when we preach, we have a unique opportunity to speak truth to the powers of this world, that their schemes are not invisible, and that Jesus offers an alternate ordering of our priorities, attention, and the world. We take back the language of the oppressive Empire and, instead, find ways to preach a liberating word. We preach to God in worship, adoration, and claiming the promises written in the ancient world. We preach to the congregation gathered to remind them that as long as we are on earth, we are engaged in a battle for our attention and loyalty between competing kingdoms, encouraging people to choose The Way of Jesus. Furthermore, we preach to the powers as we acknowledge their presence and dismantle their hold over us. We proclaim the time of the powers' reign on earth is limited, death has been conquered, the victory has been won, and it is not by succumbing to this world system and being, by some worldly definition, 'successful,' but through the paradoxical ways of Jesus

humility, servanthood, care for the least of these, and self-sacrificing death on a cross. In so doing, we chip away at the world's powers and empower the Christ-followers to move about as 'salt and light' in the world. "the Bible not only names and exposes the principalities that hold people captive, but also provides the memories of God's faithfulness and the promise of Jesus' resurrection, which gives people hope" (Saunders & Campbell, 2006). Moreover, as Karl Barth said, "We preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other." In this way, scripture reflects the world, and the world removes the veil from our eyes to interpret scripture at deeper levels.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Ephesians today are significant in reconciling and creating peace between native peoples and colonizers. In its original context, it can be applied to native and immigrant Christians. The passage speaks directly to the tension between gentile and Jewish Christians within the Church of Ephesus. The writer also recognizes that such tensions can

occur between non-Christian natives and foreign nationals.

In contrast, as provided by imperial Rome, reconciliation and peace were provided at the point of a sword. It is here that we see a clash of powers. The message of the power of God, however, is an eschatological one that points towards a new reality rather than the control and domination of a colonizing power such as Rome. Colossians and Ephesians represent the Church as the body of Christ. Furthermore, when referring to the powers or spirits operating in our world today, we, as a church with a new identity and a belief in God's power in Christ, are depicted with various attributes described in the table above. We have complete confidence in our preaching against those powers. In this, we see a similarity between the Roman Emperor is the head of his Empire. The powers, the Church, and God are as alive in sermons today as they would have been in Paul's Imperial Rome.

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