

Ask Questions
Colossians 3:1-4:6
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I had lunch with Jim Ogden a week and a half ago. It was long overdue and good chance for us to get to know each other better. At one point our conversation turned to this sermon series on Colossians and our denomination's approach to scripture and faith. Jim said that he believes we have a "sacred responsibility" not to simply accept what we are taught but to think about it for ourselves and to make up our own minds. I really liked that phrase "sacred responsibility." One thing I value about this church and our denomination is that we by-and-large trust people with this sacred responsibility.

Which we can put to practice with today's passage. Most of us, hearing these words about women and slaves are troubled. It is difficult after hearing such words to say "The word of God," as we do every week. Can we make any sense of what bothers us in this passage? Or not? Can we make any use of it in our own context? Or should we just reject it altogether? Those are important questions. Let me first say something about the thrust of this entire chapter.

In light of the resurrection and our commitment to the way of Jesus, how should we live? This is the question facing the author of this letter. He is concerned with more than doctrinal or spiritual discussions, but with everyday issues of life. Household relationships. Conversations with those who believe differently than we do. Sexual behaviors. Economic behaviors. Practicing forgiveness and gratitude. How we treat each other and talk to one another. He wants us to avoid anger, slander, abusive language, and lying. He wants us to embody the virtues of kindness, humility, and patience. To encourage one another with wisdom and song. And to love one another.

Lists of vices and virtues are common in the New Testament and in ancient literature. They themselves are not unique to Christianity. But our author does believe they have a unique authority and relationship once they are rooted in the story of Jesus and his understanding of God and humanity.

And we like everything in this passage about love, thanksgiving, and kindness. What troubles us are those verses about household ethics, especially what this letter says about the role of women and the obedience of slaves.

Attitudes toward this passage, and similar ones in the New Testament, are diverse. There are, clearly, those denominations who believe that these household arrangements remain the authoritative, God-inspired vision binding upon current families. While others reject this text altogether. For instance, Thomas Bohache in his commentary from a queer perspective writes:

It is unhealthy for queer people to view Colossians as God's revealed word to humanity, then or now. Any 'scripture' whose message is 'keep on being passive!' is not only dangerously anti-human; it is also seriously anti-divine, since it perverts the image of God contained in each of us.

Even among those who don't reject the letter outright, many approach it with skepticism and suspicion. Most mainstream scholars do not believe Colossians is written by Paul, but was instead written in the second generation and that the letter, much more than any undisputed letter of Paul's, affirms patriarchal authority within the household. This could be the result of a more radical Christian message being watered down in the next generation. Or it could have been a survival strategy.

Some scholars still look for redeeming features, despite the patriarchy. They contend that the author of the letter couldn't have publicly called for the freeing of slaves or full equality of women without risking his life and the life of everyone hearing the letter read. They point out how the letter actually mitigates social norms by calling for better treatment of women, children, and slaves and removing the patriarch's ultimate authority by investing it in Jesus Christ. Others remind us that even if the goal was to mitigate the worst abuses of the time, the result of the letter was to inscribe the slave relationship into the relationship with God [Dale Martin].

We reject the idea that the Bible is an answer book where we can turn to find clear advice for every one of the problems we face in our daily lives. This is because the Bible was written in a very different historical era and cultural context. The prophet Isaiah doesn't directly tell us whether or not we should invest in fossil fuel companies in light of global climate change. St. Paul never wrote a letter giving us instructions on the Christian use of Facebook. The gospels don't address that one thing you and your spouse have been arguing about every time you've argued year in and year out. Revelation does not reveal whether you should accept that job offer or not. This is not the best way to use the Bible.

Sitting in a church committee meeting more than a year ago, we were discussing the identity of our congregation and our approach to the Bible came up. Someone said, "The Bible is just the beginning of the conversation. It doesn't end it." I really liked that idea and think it is a great way to identify our approach. We think it is okay to ask questions. We even prefer it. We like learning something new and hearing a different perspective. We even believe that the path to spiritual growth and maturity, to being our best selves, is opened up to us when we ask our questions.

The Bible roots us in a shared story – the story of God with us in the life of Israel, Jesus, and the early church. It bonds us to a community of other people who commit to the same way of life. And it engages us in conversation which leads to new insights and spiritual growth.

Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat, in their commentary on Colossians, write that "If we are to faithfully live out the biblical drama, then we will need to develop the imaginative skills necessary to improvise." They describe this skill as "a dance between innovation and consistency."

Our serious reading of scripture must be characterized by fidelity to the thrust of the

narrative and thus provide our life with a consistency and stability, a rootedness. At the same time, however, the Bible as an unfinished drama gives us freedom for . . . innovation and thus a creative and imaginative flexibility in our . . . responses.

I like this approach, because it invites us to engage the Bible in an imaginative activity, dancing between fidelity and innovation.

So, I cannot accept this letter's views on women and slaves. I must reject them. I do so not because of any disregard for the Bible, but precisely because the on-going conversation of which the Bible is a part has taught us that slavery is wrong and that women must be treated with full equality.

But this conclusion also doesn't lead me to reject the Letter to the Colossians and never read it again. Because while I do not admire the answers given, I do admire that this author was attempting to give practical, everyday advice to this congregation in an effort to help them lead better, more faithful lives.

We should also be courageous enough to engage the political, economic, cultural, and household issues of our time, offering practical options for how to lead better, more faithful lives. And, you know what, our efforts to deal with all those issues will, just like this author's, be conditioned by our own context and dominated by cultural influences we are unaware of. Will later generations view our efforts to live faithfully as shortsighted or lacking in significant ways? Probably.

I am proud that this summer, at General Synod, the United Church of Christ engaged in robust discussions of important topics – immigration reform, climate change, voting rights, marriage equality, bullying, and more. Did the resolutions we passed answer authoritatively these issues for all time? Likely not. Did we get some things wrong? Probably so. Did we even fail to see an important issue or an ethical failing that will become apparent later? Very likely.

Despite those limitations, what we did do was extraordinary. We believed that a group of people rooted in this Biblical story could take what we had learned here and apply it to the concerns of our time. Asking those questions is an incredible act of faith.

The theme which our church selected as a motivating, focusing, and united message is "Open Doors Wide." The screen doors on the chancel the last month or so have been a visually suggestive representation of that message, and it has been my goal in this series to explore more deeply the meaning of the phrase "Open Doors Wide." And, so, I hope our time in Colossians has been profitable, encouraging you to open yourself in new ways, so that you might grow spiritually and move closer to becoming your best self.

Open doors to conversation. Invite people in. Invite light in. Gain confidence. Grow roots. Live free. Open doors within yourself. Extend yourself. Think about the big picture. Ask questions. Be open to possibilities. Welcome new ideas. Push the envelope. Grow. And keep growing.

For we are a spiritual family with open hearts, rich traditions, and curious minds.