

# The Shadow and the Solid Reality

Geoffrey J. Paxton

Geoffrey J. Paxton is an Anglican clergyman and principal of the Queensland Bible Institute, Brisbane, Australia. His entire ministry since his ordination in 1966 has been spent in Brisbane diocese.

All who are acquainted with the epistle to the Colossians exult in its Christ-exalting tone and content. After his prayer of thanksgiving (1:3-12), Paul expatiates on the supremacy of the Son of God (1: 13-20), reconciliation through His death (1:21-23) and the glorious secret of God, "hidden for long ages and through many generations" (1:26, N.E.B.). "The secret is this: Christ in you, the hope of a glory to come" (1:27, N.E.B.; cf. also 2:3). Paul stresses the fact that he speaks to the Colossians about Christ Himself being the secret—the Christ in whom is hidden **all** (2:3)—to save them from being talked into error by specious arguments (2:4).

What was the danger against which the apostle was so earnestly warning the Colossians? The danger was nothing less than confusing the shadow with the reality! (2: 17, N.E.B.). The "shadow" in this instance was empirical piety—regulations concerning eating and drinking (2: 16), observances (2: 16), self-mortification, angel worship and private revelations (2:18)—and the "solid reality" was Christ (2:17), the Head (2: 19). To embrace an empirical, piety-centered religion is to embrace a shadow and to lose the solid reality. It is to give oneself to the perishable, the precepts of men, and to lose hold on the imperishable, the precept of God (2:22). To confuse the shadow with solid reality, to concentrate upon the rigoristic and self-mortifying activity, gives a great appearance of spirituality; but in actual fact it is stuck in the very ditch of legalism and futility (2:23).

To state the obvious, Paul does not repudiate practical morality and true piety (3:5-10; 3: 18-4:6). But he does, with all his apostolic zeal, repudiate a confusion of such with the reality of Christ as alien righteousness. This explains his avowed repudiation of piety in Colossians 2: 16-23 and his exhortation to piety in Colossians 3:5-10 and 3:18 to 4:6. The worldly deceivers (2:4,8) thought that such piety, such self-mortifying rigorism, is in actual fact that which pleases God, when all the time it is Christ Himself, and Christ alone, who is pleasing to the Father. The believer is pleasing because he is in Christ and Christ is his life (2:9, 10; 3:3, 4). The seemingly wise (2:23) were placing their confidence in and receiving their encouragement from things on the earth, whereas Paul exhorts the Colossians to look away to heaven because that is where Christ is! (3: 1, 2). The Colossian troublers were affixed to the **visible**, whereas Paul calls those in Christ to realize that their acceptability with God is a thing well and truly **hidden** (3:3). That righteousness which is the sole righteousness pleasing in God's sight can only be viewed by faith. Sight does not behold it until the time of the end (3:4).

Those caught away by the tradition of men (2:8) mistook their empirical piety for newness, whereas Paul exhorts the Colossians to good works on the basis of the fact that they have (already) put off the old man and have (already) put on the new man (3:9, 10). Paul would not have the Colossians tricked into think-

ing that the new man consists in not lying, etc. (3:9). When observable piety is the expression of faith in Christ as our alien righteousness, then such works are the fruit of the Spirit. If not, irrespective of how wise and spiritual and loving they appear, they are flesh!

### Christian Faith

What, then, are some consequences of this New Testament message? What should it teach the evangelical church of today about faith?

1. Faith is always faith in the alien righteousness of Jesus Christ. This righteousness must never be confused with the new obedience of the believer, for the righteousness of faith is Jesus Christ Himself. He, Jesus Christ, is *all* in all. Faith in Jesus Christ as alien righteousness is the peculiar creation of the Spirit.

Has not piety, or what we are accustomed to call "sanctification," replaced the alien righteousness of Jesus Christ? That which ought to be the byproduct fruit of gratitude for a new life in the person of Christ, has become that which we offer to God for our acceptance in His sight.

2. Faith is never centered in conversion or the new birth. Conversion-mentality and not Christ-mentality characterizes so much preaching and teaching today. We need constantly to be on our guard against the tendency to substitute psychological and sociological newness for the New Man, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is hidden except to faith, and faith (*fides*) is opposed to sense (*sensus*) and sight.

Hence we need to exercise great care in the use we make of the "changed life." Empirical piety may be ambiguous. It may not be empirically different whether it comes from the Spirit or the flesh. The exchanged life of Christ creates the changed life of the believer, but the changed life of the believer must never occupy the place of the exchanged life of Christ. The tendency to present our own righteousness to God in the place of the one true righteousness of Christ, is the constant leaning of the flesh.

### Christian Fulness

The Colossian message has much to say concerning the present-day emphasis upon fulness-and visible fulness at that. Colossians knows a fulness, and it may benefit us greatly to have a closer look at it.

1. The fulness is in Jesus Christ (2:9), and by virtue of their faith-union with Christ, believers already

possess that fulness (2: 10).

2. The fulness which the believer has in Jesus Christ is, of necessity, hidden with Christ (3:3) and will not be manifested until Christ is manifested (3:4).

3. This possession of fulness does not mean a cessation of the battle against those things which seek to pull us away from the Head. It is not always remembered that the positive statements concerning the possession of fulness, riches, etc., were made *of* a group that still needed to be told to mortify their earth-bound sensuality (3:5), to stop lying to each other (3:9) and to persevere in prayer! (4:2). Such richly-endowed believers were involved in the grind of daily existence!

4. This possession of fulness in Christ does not eradicate the hope of the believer (as does so much present-day fulness teaching) but rather is the basis and guarantee of such a hope! (1:27). Because he has put on the new man (3:9,10), the believer does not expect a here-and-now empirical completion but rather looks forward to, and indeed presses forward to, a final fulness and newness which will (then) mean the cessation of all further grind and battle!

Finally, anyone who reads the epistle to the Colossians thoughtfully must be struck by the silence concerning the Holy Spirit. Without any intention whatsoever to deprecate the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, there may be a real corrective here to so much Spirit-centered mentality. My own particular understanding here is that faith in Christ as our fulness and righteousness before God, and the believer's union with Christ, are but different ways of speaking of an important facet of the Spirit's work. A comparison of Colossians 3: 15-17 with Ephesians 5: 15-20 is quite instructive. The passages are very similar indeed. Could "Let the Holy Spirit fill you" (Eph. 5:18, N.E.B.) and "Let the message of Christ dwell among you in all its richness" (Col.3:16, N.E.B.) be the same reality? Is not the tendency (!) of our day to interpret the Ephesian passage in such a way that gives more place to *sensus* than to *fides*? How would the Holy Spirit fill the Ephesian congregation if it were not with the message of Christ? Perhaps Colossians is an exposition of what Ephesians 5:18 ought to mean in the life of every congregation.