

Colossians Remixed - Book Review

Colossians Remixed looks at Postmodernism, Empire and Earth Stewardship through the prism of Paul's letter to the Colossians. A brief letter, divided into 4 short chapters, Colossians nevertheless provided Sylvia Keesmat and Brian Walsh, the wife-and-husband team who authored the book, with a fertile ground for inspiring imaginative parallels between the Roman Empire of the 1st Century, and the global Empire we live in today, propagated by advertising, communication, the global economy and trade. However, one important difference between the time in which Paul was writing and today is the concept of Postmodernism, a concept which is intrinsically linked to the rise of the global Empire.

Postmodernism rejects the Enlightenment notion that there is such a thing as Absolute Truth; objective fact, which can ultimately be proved by science. Instead it embraces relativism – truth depends upon your perspective; there is no such thing as objective truth, it all depends on who, where and when you are. This idea might seem to fly in the face of the Christian conviction that the Bible represents the true word of God. However, Sylvia and Brian square this in an intriguing and provocative way.

Worship Jesus not Caesar... Worship Jesus not TV...?

This seems to me to be the essential parallel the authors draw between Paul's message to the people of Colossae living under the rule of the Roman Empire, and his message to us today. At the time of writing his letter, Paul was saying to the Colossians 'worship Jesus, not Caesar' – whose image at the time would have been omnipresent. To us today he is saying 'worship Jesus, not TV'. The only difference between Caesar and TV is Postmodernism.

Postmodernism represents choice – it allows for the possibility of taking a variety of different positions on a subject – culturally conditioned at first, but less so as consciousness of choice creeps in. Likewise TV, and its counterpart the Internet, represent choice: thousands of different perspectives all available to us at the touch of a button; reams of information available on every subject under the sun at the click of a mouse. This is a very different adversary to Caesar. TV doesn't need to raise an army and march on our towns like Caesar would have had to do. It's already in our homes. It has already quietly conquered us, induced hypnosis through information overload, and surreptitiously squeezed out Jesus, in a more disturbing way than if we had suffered a violent onslaught, because it happened without us knowing. This, to me, seems to be the message of the book: the enemy is ubiquitous! Wake up and claim your lives back!

The book focuses for the most part on trying to explain this reading of Paul's letter to the Colossians, because it's not a reading that would be immediately apparent. The authors' essential struggle seems to be trying to square the 1st century context with the contexts in which we read Paul's letter today. To this end we are offered several 'targums': imaginative re-workings of parts of the original text to reflect the religious, cultural and socio-economic context in which we live. These targums are a lot longer than the original extracts from Paul's letter, precisely because the enemy today is so much harder to pin down than just Caesar – The Emperor. They refer to corporations such as Disney, AT&T, Nike, Microsoft etc., however, the list could be endless. The implication is that the choice to reject TV and worship Jesus is going to be a lot harder than the choice to reject Caesar, because we are so immersed in this conquering global culture. Certainly being a Christian doesn't lead to the death penalty so much nowadays as it did in the 1st century, but the fact that we are bombarded by so much choice and information is a form of attack more subtle than straightforward violence, but ultimately just as deadly.

The book introduces to us three archetypes of the affected postmodern generation, of which I identified most deeply with a girl named Alana. A real-life student who the authors had known, she represents the child of post-modernism who feels they have to defer to everybody else's opinion (of which in our TV-Internet society there are always manifold forthcoming), and so feels lost as to her own position or opinion on everything. The postmodern child asks the question 'how can everyone be right? Answer: They can't: therefore truth must be relative. However this stance does tend to leave one in a position of sometimes desperate insecurity.

What I believe the authors are saying is that the way of Jesus, the way of the Cross, transcends even the postmodern concept of the multifariousness of truth. What Jesus is offering us is a choice beyond 'worship Caesar or die!' or 'which channel to choose'. They argue that Paul is saying that the choice to follow Jesus is not in the same league as the choice to bow to the Empire for the sake of your own survival, whether it is survival in terms of physically staying alive or being able to compete in stakes of knowledge. They are asserting that the choice to follow Jesus is a choice you make with your heart and not with your head.

The Partnership has a copy of the book to borrow if you're interested. Please contact Mark to reserve it.