

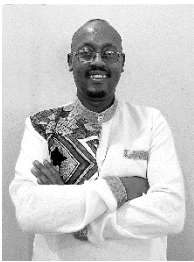
Paul's Theology of Peace and Worship: "Let the Peace of Christ Rule in Your Hearts, Be Thankful" (Colossians 3:15)

Samuel Deressa

Introduction

For the apostle Paul, there is one major challenge to the mission of Christ to the world, and that is the penetration of the normative values of the Roman Empire (e.g., self-advancement and self-promotion) into the life of the congregations. These values of the Empire produced strife, dissension, and quarrels among the early Christians.¹ Against such challenges, Paul urges Christians to follow Christ and to worship Him with gentleness, by living in peace and harmony with each other, and by looking "to the interest of others" (Phil 2:4). This article focuses on the connection between Paul's theology of peace and its implication for worship life based on Colossians 3:15, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts . . . And be thankful."

Paul's view of peace and its implication for our worship lives are not always discussed with the attention they deserve. Interestingly, there are a few works related to the connection between Paul's theology of peace and worship. G. Ladd, for example, in his *A Theology of the New Testament*, discusses the concept of peace as a blessing that flows from reconciliation, and he describes it as a "very rich, many-sided concept."² Yet he makes no connection between peace and worship. On the other hand, James Dunn, in his *Theology of Paul the Apostle*, makes a clear connection between the ministry in the church (worship) and its practical implication (how believers should live in peace and harmony).³ M. Desjardins does the same in his discussion of peace in the New Testament. Desjardins



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used the motif of equality to illustrate Paul's understanding of peace, and he discusses the notion of *koinonia* as pointing towards the connection between peace and worship.⁴

Why is it important to talk about the connection between peace and worship? For many people today, worship is understood *inwardly*, having no connection to how we live our faith in public (i.e., outside the church). In other words, as Darrell Guder emphasized, "Our postmodern society has come to regard worship as the private, internal, and often arcane activity of religionists who retreat from the world to practice their mystic rites."⁵ For Paul, however, the churches' fellowship and worship life and their public witness or mission of sharing Christ's peace with the world are inseparably joined together.

Sharing the Peace of Christ

For many Christians, Sunday worship is understood as what happens between us and God. It is probably when we share greetings or the "sign of peace" with each other that we are made fully aware of the presence of our brothers and sisters in Christ. During our Lutheran worship, we move to shake hands with those around us, sharing the Lord's peace when the pastor says, "Let's take a moment to greet those around you."⁶ What is the significance of sharing Christ's peace together? Why do we do it during our time of worship? As Richard Giles rightly points out, "The sharing of the Peace as a sign of reconciliation and mutual love within the community of faith is one of the most potent symbols of the rediscovery of worship as an interactive event rather than a lecture or spectacle."⁷

The practice of sharing the peace of Christ during our liturgy might have originated with the disciples of Jesus. In the African Christian communities, people share greetings with a kiss. Among African Christians, the so-called "holy kiss" (φιλήμα ἁγίον) has greater implications for sharing communal life. For African Christians, the practice of a "holy kiss" is a sign of affirmation of each member of the community. With the kiss on the shoulders, hands, and cheek, Africans show their love for each other. This practice might have been derived from Paul's letters where he urges Christians to "greet one another with a holy kiss" (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thes 5:26). First Peter similarly closes with the exhortation to "greet one another with a kiss of love" (1 Pt 5:14).

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What is peace? And why is it so important to share this peace during our worship? Sometimes we think of peace as the absence of conflict and violence. So, when we share peace with our brothers and sisters in Christ, we may feel that we are trying to avoid conflict with other church members. We give a "cease-fire" kind of definition to peace, but this is only one of several meanings of peace.

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According to Paul, when we speak of peace “with,” “in,” and/or “through” Christ, we mean something far more positive than merely the absence of conflict. The peace of Christ for Paul designates a realm established by the work of Christ, by His defeating and conquering of evil forces and establishing a relationship between Himself and the believing community—and this is the gospel. The Gospel that we preach is the Gospel of peace.

This peace of Christ is different than the peace that this world can offer: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (Jn 14:27). Paul reminds Christians in Colossae that, as believers in Christ, they are transferred into this state of peace with God (Col 3:15). This implies that because they reside in this peace, they must strive for it in their communities.

According to Paul, the challenge to having peace in Christ and experiencing its implications in our worship lives and ministries is the strife that happens among Christians and others. According to Paul, strife is the result of “the desires of flesh” (Gal 5:17-21), and it is practiced among those whom “God gave up” (Rom 1:24, 26, 28) to disgrace: “They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (Rom 1:29-31).

Paul also argues that the other cause for conflict or strife in the church is departing from the apostolic teaching as described in Colossians. According to Paul, what resulted in strife among Christians in Colossae is an early form of Gnosticism, in which God is described as pure spirit (πνεῦμα). Spirit is separate and distinct from matter (the flesh), which according to them is inherently evil. They further argued that redemption involves separation of the spiritual (πνευματικός) from the material (σάρξ) in order to unite with God and ultimately to gain salvation.⁸ According to this teaching, one can accomplish this only through acquiring hidden knowledge (γνῶσις, from which the name “Gnosticism” was derived) by devoting oneself to studying philosophy.⁹

Paul uses the same rhetoric in his Pastoral Epistles, where he argues that,

If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. (1 Tim 6:3-5)

Peace in Colossians 3:15: “Let the *peace of Christ* rule in your hearts”

As Paul states, all Christians are invited to experience the peace of Christ (Col 3:15), which is drawn from the sovereignty (Lordship) of Christ. Christ made peace by overcoming the powers that are opposed to God’s will (Col 1:13, 20; 2:15). Paul’s main argument here is that believers have been taken into a new realm of Christ’s peace—a realm in which His Lordship is fully manifested—and thus they experience its blessings.

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In other words, as citizens of Christ's kingdom, they are invited to enjoy the blessings that Christ gives. Being brought into the realm ruled by Christ gives the believers an inner peace that comes through their relationship with God.

The phrase "peace of Christ" refers to the peace that Christ both *embodies* and *brings* (see John 14:27). This shows that Christ is the only provider of true peace. The Greek words in Colossians 3:15 "τού χριστού" ("of Christ") understood as a subjective genitive, provides us with such meaning—translated in some versions as "peace that Christ gives" (GNB). So He gives peace to believers (2 Thes 3:16). Paul elsewhere refers to God as "the God [or] Lord of peace" (Rom 15:13; 16:20; 1 Cor 14:33; 2 Cor 13:11; Phil 4:9; 1 Thes 5:23, Heb 13:20), and He Himself is that peace (Eph 2:14).

Following his Jewish traditions, Paul associates peace with God's very being and character. This probably is in relation to Judges 6:24, where Gideon built an altar that he called, "The Lord is peace." In Isaiah 9:6, the Messiah is also called the Prince of peace. Similarly, in 2 Thessalonians 3:16, Christ is characterized as the Lord of peace who gives peace "at all times in every way." In Ephesians 2:14, Christ is described as "our peace." It is God who is peace and who is also the giver of peace. He transforms humanity from its hostile, violent existence to be like God and to live in peace. "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace" (1 Cor 14:33).

Paul writes to the Colossians, "Let the *peace of Christ* rule in your heart" (Col 3:15). What is important to note here is that this statement of Paul implies that peace is more like a grace to be received than a value to be promoted. In other words, peace is not something we as Christians can accomplish by ourselves, but it is something we receive as a gift. Yet, it is still an exhortation. Peace is to "rule" (βραβεύω) in our hearts, meaning that it should be in charge of how we live our lives. As believers, we are called to appropriate the gift and allow the peace of Christ to reign fully in our hearts. As followers of Christ, we are not called to live in violence or in squabbles among each other, but in peace.

The word βραβεύω occurs only here in the New Testament, and generally it refers to the more general sense of "judge," "decide," "control," or "rule."¹⁰ Paul emphasizes the point about Christ's peace totally "controlling" or "ruling" our heart. "Heart" in its customary Old Testament sense denotes the center of one's personality "as a source of will, emotion, thoughts, and functions."¹¹ As in Colossians 2:2, the heart stands for the whole person. Greek writers also use *kardia* to describe the seat of one's moral, emotional, and intellectual life. For them, it is the place where one thinks and feels, and makes important decisions.¹² Paul is implying here that the peace of Christ is meant to "control" or "rule over" the whole of the readers' lives as they relate to one another. The peace that Christ brings should be the peace that determines Christians' attitudes and directs their lives.

How is peace practiced in our communities? Peace according to Paul is practiced in our communities when we offer ourselves in fidelity for the sake of others. As Paul contends, peace is practiced in the life of a congregation when we live in harmony and mutual respect, looking “to the interest of others” (Phil 2:4). In earlier verses, Paul discussed the need for Christians to tolerate, love, and support each other. In this verse, after mentioning peace, Paul again speaks of the unity Christians have. A similar message is found in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, where He says that peacemakers would be known as the sons of God, and that His followers ought to be compassionate like their heavenly Father (Mt 5:9; Lk 6:36). Just as in the teaching of Jesus, Paul counsels the Colossians to “clothe themselves” with (or put on) compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, which then results in peace and unity among believers.

Peace according to Paul is practiced in our communities when we offer ourselves in fidelity for the sake of others.

How is peace made? According to Paul, peace is a divine act of reconciliation accomplished through the death of Jesus Christ. From Paul’s writings, we understand that peace comes from reconciliation, and it is only through Jesus’ atoning death that sinful human beings can be reconciled with God, with each other, and with the whole creation (Rom 5:9–13; 2 Cor 5:14–21). God acted through a death on the cross to defeat the powers of evil and to bring reconciliation and everlasting peace to our world.

Peace that is accomplished by God through the blood of Christ is foundational for the peace in our community. “Peace with God,” achieved through God’s justifying act (Rom 5:1) is the basis for believers to “live peaceably with all” (Rom 12:18). In other words, peace is realized through “the blood of his Cross” (Col 1:20), which reconciles God with His creation. The cosmic effect of this is the demonstration of peace in one’s community. For Paul, “peace” is not merely a subjective experience like kindness; rather, it points to the powerful saving work of God through Christ (Rom 3:24; 5:17) and the reconciliation that is already promised for the eschatological era (see Rom 5:1; Eph 2:14–18; Is 52:7; 57:2).

This peace that Paul describes is radically different from the peace that the Roman Empire promised to offer. In the Roman Empire, the term “peacemaker” was applied to Roman emperors and generals, who established peace by military act.¹³ In response to peoples’ opinion that the Roman Empire ensures peace and security, Paul responded in 1 Thessalonians 5:3: “While people are saying, ‘Peace and safety,’ destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.”

As Joel White rightly noted,

the political ideology of the Pax Romana played a prominent role in Roman imperial propaganda, beginning at the latest with the commissioning of the Ara Pacis Augustae in 13 BCE. As the epigraphic record of countless proclamations, inscriptions, temple dedications, etc. from the early Principate bears witness, Rome constantly made both

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implicit and explicit promises to those who willingly accepted her aegis that they would enjoy the lasting benefit of the Augustan Peace.¹⁴

According to Paul, Jesus' death on the cross provides a critique to the norm of the Roman Empire—death rather than military might establishes true and lasting peace. In other words, what appears to be a defeat is a victory that brings true peace to our world. This way, Paul calls believers to live in peace: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body *you were called to peace*” (Col 3:15 NIV). It is to the peace of Christ that we are summoned “as members of one body.” In other words, the call to let the peace of Christ reign in our hearts includes an exhortation to manifest Christ's peace in our relationships with each other. Paul here also implies that as Christ's body, the church is meant to be a place of peace. Christ is the head of the body, the church, and He is the origin of peace and reconciliation. In this way, the gift and the command are inseparable.

Paul on the Relationship between Peace and Worship

After calling believers to live in and exercise the peace “of,” “in,” and/or “through” Christ, Paul adds, “And be thankful” (εὐχάριστος). This word only appears here in the New Testament, and it prepares the readers for Paul's discussion of worship in the following verses (Col 3:16–17). This thankfulness is an appropriate response expected of the Christians who have experienced the benefit of the peace of Christ and the divine gift of forgiveness that makes it possible (Col 2:13). This is also consistent with Paul's call to all Christians to “give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thes 5:18), where the act of thanksgiving means acknowledging our dependence on God's grace through Christ.

According to Paul, being at peace with each other is our response of gratitude to the grace of God which is reflected in our worship, and this is how Paul's theology of peace and worship are related. Unlike the modern context where thanksgiving is often associated with the practice of interpersonal relationships or to the holiday season of Thanksgiving, thanksgiving in Paul's theology is connected to our act of worship. Believers are called to a life of worship by acknowledging the Lordship of God in everything that they do.

The life of thankfulness (worship) is an identity mark for a believer as “the new self” (Col 3:10). Worship is to be performed by the entire Christian community in response to the divine acts of grace through God's Son. This reminds us of Paul's critique of the practices in the pagan world—“although they knew God, they didn't honor him as God or give thanks to him” (Rom 1:21). For Paul, pagans are known for being ungrateful to God, and their ingratitude is defined by their failure to glorify God. Colossians, on the other hand, are called to “be thankful” by being willing to “let the peace of Christ rule in [their] hearts” (3:15).

In connection with Colossians 3:16–17, Paul’s call to Christians to be thankful also reminds us of the central role of the Lordship of Jesus Christ in our worship life. Believers are called to be thankful to God and to Him alone. In Paul’s letters, the call to thanksgiving often accompanies the confession of the Lordship of Christ. This way, the text in Colossians 3:15 concerning thankfulness is a link between the section that discusses the behaviors of those who claim Jesus as their Lord (Col 3:5–14) and the theme of worship both in public formal settings (Col 3:16) and in everyday living (Col 3:17). Just as the life of thanksgiving is meant to affirm the covenantal relationship between God and His people in the Old Testament, for Paul an act of thanksgiving defines our lives as people who belong to Jesus. The relationship between a sacrificial life that submits to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and a life of thanksgiving (worship) is best noted in 1 Thessalonians 5:18: “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

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Paul mentions thanksgiving multiple times in Colossians, showing the importance of gratitude in the Christian life (1:3; 2:7; 3:16–17; 4:2). Christians should adopt an attitude of thanksgiving. In Colossians 3:15, Paul does not provide us with reasons for being thankful. But in the previous text, Paul encourages Colossians to praise God for delivering them from a tyranny of darkness and for including them in His eternal kingdom, which is a kingdom of peace (Col 1:12–14). This shows that Paul’s theology of peace and worship are tied together.

In the same way, the majority of Paul’s references to peace (his theology of peace) are founded on his call to Christians to live a life of thanksgiving (1 Cor 1:4; 2 Cor 9:15; Rom 1:8; 2 Cor 1:11; Eph 1:16; Phil 1:3, etc.), which according to Paul should be done in relation to the context of God’s grace given in Christ. As Paul stated in Romans 12:1, we worship God by offering our “bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” As Herman Strathmann rightly notes, these words of Paul refer to an “interiorization” and “exteriorization” of Christian worship.¹⁵ “The service which Christians are to offer consists in the fashioning of their inner lives and their outward physical conduct in a way that plainly distinguishes them from the world, and which corresponds to the will of God. This is a living sacrifice which they have to offer.”¹⁶ It is possible for Christians to offer themselves as a “living sacrifice” precisely because they are alive in Christ Jesus, who Himself “died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God” (Rom 6:10)—this is God’s grace shared with humanity.

Contrary to our common modern understanding of worship that is limited to rituals or ceremonies performed by believers when assembled together, Paul’s argument in Romans 12:1 ties worship to the believer’s daily life, which is practiced openly in the world. According to Lutheran scholar Ernst Käsemann, for Paul, “Christian worship does not consist of what is practiced at sacred sites, at sacred times, and with sacred acts. . . . It is

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the offering of bodily existence in the otherwise profane sphere. As something constantly demanded this takes place in daily life, whereby every Christian is simultaneously sacrifice and priest.”¹⁷

Similarly, Paul calls the Colossians to adopt a lifestyle characterized by thankfulness, which is reflected in the way they lead their worship lives and interact with each other and their neighbors. To practice God's peace means to worship God recognizing His Lordship over our lives and sharing Christ's peace with each other and the world. In other words, thanksgiving (worship) and sharing the peace of Christ should be the kinds of characteristics that are reflected in our lives.

Conclusion

In Paul's theology, there is no doubt that the themes of peace in Christ and worship are intertwined and interdependent. Colossians 3:15 describes how the two are related, on the basis of which we can understand Paul's theology of peace and worship. As Paul contends, with Christ as the head, we are all parts of a spiritual “body,” which is the church. Peace within the body requires peace among its parts.

At this challenging time, when conflict has become a common experience for many congregations, it is very important to remind each other about Paul's idea of peace and worship, and how the two are interrelated. Like the Christians in Colossae, every group of believers will experience internal conflict at times, but seeking peace will help us resolve issues in the context of Christian love. When we share Christ's peace with each other, we can engage in a true worship, one that adopts the life of thankfulness.

Endnotes

¹For more discussion of this topic, see P. F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003); R. A. Horsley, *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997); R. A. Horsley, “Jesus-In-Movements and the Roman Imperial (Dis) Order,” in A. Win, ed., *An Introduction to Empire in the New Testament* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2016), 47-69; Jürgen Becker, *Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

²G. E. Ladd and D. A. Hagner, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 497.

³James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 533-620, 625-711.

⁴M. Desjardins, *Peace, Violence and the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 54-60.

⁵Darrell Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 243.

⁶In *Lutheran Service Book* (LSB), this directive is indicated in Divine Service, Setting 1, after the Prayer of the Church and before the offering (p. 159). It reads: “Following the prayers, the people may greet one another in the name of the Lord, saying, ‘Peace be with you,’ as a sign of reconciliation and of the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Matt. 5:22-24; Eph. 4:1-3).”

- ⁷ Richard Giles, *At Heaven's Gate: Reflections on Leading Worship* (London: Canterbury Press, 2010), 141. This may be why the traditional homily began with “Grace to you and Peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ” and the concluding blessing of the institution of the Eucharist, “The Peace of the Lord be with you always.”
- ⁸ See Paul Deterding, *Colossians: Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2003), 7-12.
- ⁹ Deterding, 10. The origin of Gnosticism seems to be an attempt by some early Christians to interpret the Christian faith in light of Hellenistic philosophy. For more detail, see Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *The Anchor Bible: Colossians, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (London: Doubleday, 1994), 393; Kurt Rudolph, “Gnosticism,” ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1035.
- ¹⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 156; Peter T. O’Brien, *Word Biblical Commentary: Colossians, Philemon* (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 204; D. Wiederkehr, *Die Theologie der Berufung in den Paulusbriefen*. *Studia Friburgensia*, NS 36 (Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 1963), 196.
- ¹¹ O’Brien, *Word Biblical Commentary: Colossians, Philemon*, 204.
- ¹² See Margaret MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 141.
- ¹³ See J. D. Crossan, “Roman Imperial Theology,” in *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, R. A. Horsley, ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2008), 69-71; and Harry Maier, “A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire,” in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2005): 323-49.
- ¹⁴ Joel White, “‘Peace’ and ‘Security’ (1 Thes 5:3): Roman Ideology and Greek Aspiration,” in *New Testament Studies*, 60. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 501.
- ¹⁵ Herman Strathmann, “λατρεύω, λατρεῖν” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 58-65.
- ¹⁶ Strathmann, 65.
- ¹⁷ Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 329.