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A Further Brief Note on Colossians 1:24

by L. Paul Trudinger

In this short paper Dr. Trudinger, who recently contributed to our pages a study of the creation theme in the first chapter of the Gospel of John, takes up the interpretation of Col. 1 : 24 at the point to which it was brought by the Rev. Roy Yates in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY for April-June, 1970.

THE Rev. Roy Yates, in a recent contribution to this journal,¹ has put us in his debt by giving a most readable yet comprehensive survey in short compass of the major lines of interpretation regarding the ideas expressed in Colossians 1 : 24. Taking as read, so to speak, Mr. Yates' lucid summary, it is my purpose in this brief note to touch upon one line of interpretation which he does not specifically raise, yet which does perhaps fuller justice, in my view, to the over-all tenor of Pauline teaching, than does the conclusion to which Mr. Yates comes. At the same time the suggestion which I wish to make does not contradict or preclude Mr. Yates' conclusions and it does guard against those interpretations which he feels, and I think rightly, are lacking in strong Biblical support.

The issue I am treating of concerns the significance of the words "filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ." Although F. W. Beare is able to speak of "the clear meaning of the passage,"² Mr. Yates, more rightly I feel, speaks of "the obscurity of the language and ideas of the verse."³ Along with many major commentators,⁴ Mr. Yates holds out strongly against any interpretations which imply deficiencies in the sufferings endured by our Lord. He concludes, however, by interpreting the passage as meaning that in some way Paul sees his sufferings borne on behalf of the Church as helping to *complete* Christ's sufferings, the Church being the "Corporate Christ." I would maintain, however, that the New Testament contains little testimony to the idea that Christ's sufferings require to be yet brought to completion. Much more strongly attested, it seems to me, is the "once-for-all"

¹ "A Note On Colossians 1 : 24," *The Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol. XLII No. 2, 1970, pp. 88-92.

² *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1955), p. 177.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 88.

⁴ *Inter alios*, Lightfoot, Beare, Moule, and Best.

character of Christ's sufferings and the consequent glorification, the honour and victory ascribed to the Son.⁵ Does Christ in a sense continue to suffer? There is a clear strand in contemporary Christology which speaks of Christ suffering in the sufferings of His Church and His world and I would be the last to deny the force of the moral influence of this view. There seem to be some New Testament passages which lend support to this position. The words of our Lord, "I was hungry and you gave me food . . ." are much quoted in this regard. F. W. Beare cites Acts 9 : 4, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*" to underscore the view that those who afflict the Church afflict Christ.⁶ The precise interpretation of such passages, however, is open to much debate. It is one thing to point to the deep "fellowship of suffering" between the suffering Christian and his Lord who suffered, and quite another thing to insist that the sufferings of Christians and of the Church *supplement*, in Lightfoot's words,⁷ the afflictions of Christ. Participation with Christ in suffering does not necessarily *complement* the suffering of Christ. That the Church as the Body of Christ implies the view that the Church is an extension or even the complement or completion of Christ, in Armitage Robinson's words, is only one interpretation of the significance of the figure "the Body of Christ," and one which I believe has comparatively scant attestation in Scripture. Christ is Himself "the fulness of the Godhead,"⁸ and that "for the sake of the Church," and in this sense He requires no completion.

In what sense, then, can Paul speak of making up the deficiencies in the sufferings of Christ? Without a doubt a central plank in Paul's platform was the participation of the Christian in suffering. He preached consistently the truth "that through much tribulation we must enter the kingdom."⁹ I find little evidence that Paul understood this participation in suffering vis-a-vis Christ's suffering in any other way than did Peter when he wrote, "Christ also suffered for you leaving you an example that you should follow in His steps."¹⁰ (Which is *not* to say that Peter understood Christ's sufferings as primarily an influential example, but rather that he saw the Christian's suffering as being in conformity to the pattern of his Lord's suffering.) Paul speaks of his desire to be conformed

⁵ See Romans 6 : 9-10, Philippians 2 : 8-9.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 178.

⁷ J. B. Lightfoot, *Epistle to the Colossians* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1879), pp. 164-66.

⁸ See Colossians 2 : 9-10, and Ephesians 1 : 22-23.

⁹ Acts 14 : 22.

¹⁰ 1 Peter 2 : 21.

to Jesus in His dying, to share in His sufferings.¹¹ He is aware that he has not fully achieved this desire. The deficiencies are Paul's. Though he has indeed suffered much and knows a great deal about fellowship with his Lord in suffering, yet he sees himself as still in arrears as far as being in conformity to the full measure of Christ's sufferings is concerned. In this sense he can speak of "making up the deficiencies in the afflictions of Christ," through his sufferings on behalf of the Church. He indeed rejoices thus to suffer for such suffering brings him nearer to his goal of being made conformable to Christ in His dying, so that he and the Church may attain to the resurrection. The Church's suffering, then, is for *its* completion, not Christ's.

This interpretation of these difficult words seems to me to safeguard the very truths that Mr. Yates affirms, but even more strongly to underscore the view that "the things lacking" in *no* way apply to Christ, but to Paul, to the Christian, to the Church, who are all still "pressing forward to the mark of their high calling," being not yet fully conformed to the pattern of the sufferings of their Lord.

The Washington Theological Coalition.

¹¹ Philippians 3 : 10.