

Fall Faculty Address,  
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'An Evocative Vocative:  
Members (of Christ's body) upon the Earth'

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Forty-two years ago, as a student in an Intermediate Greek Class, I came upon the phrase "the members upon the earth" in Col 3:5.<sup>1</sup> My initial investigative inquiry in order to translate the phrase was to determine the case of the word μέλη ("members"). I quickly discovered that the Greek word had the same form for the nominative, accusative, and vocative cases. Immediately, I was in a dilemma as to how to translate the phrase within the sentence. As an articular vocative phrase, I could translate Νεκρώσατε οὖν τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς as "Therefore, *members upon the earth*, you put to death"; on the other hand, as an accusative direct object, I could translate the phrase "Therefore, you put to death *your members upon the earth*." When I checked the various translations and realized that none of the modern translations resembled my own simplistic reading "Therefore, members upon the earth, you put to death," I humbly submitted to the accusative direct object view. Years later, that is not the case.

Our investigation will posit that "the members upon the earth," an articular vocative phrase, is an expression unique to Colossians that fits precisely into the context of Colossians and that it relates to the authority of Christ. Given that the grammar significantly impacts meaning, this investigation will first examine and critique the two competing views: the direct object view ("Therefore put to death *your earthly members*: sexual immorality..."), and the vocative view ("*Members*, you put to death the things upon the earth: sexual immorality..."). It will

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<sup>1</sup> A fairly literal rendering of the phrase is preserved as the direct object of the verb in the ASV, KJV and NKJV.

then present the articular vocative phrase view ("*Members upon the earth, you put to death sexual immorality...*") as a better explanation for both the grammar and the fitness of the phrase within Paul's argument in Colossians.

### **The Direct Object View: Put to death your members upon the earth**

Most modern translations, understanding the form as accusative case and functioning as a direct object, have attempted to make the Greek more understandable with a dynamic equivalence in English: "Put to death therefore *what is earthly in you,*" followed by a colon with a series of vices elaborating "*what is earthly in you.*" The ESV, as a representative example, translates Col 3:5: "Put to death therefore *what is earthly in you:* sexual immorality, impurity...."

Other modern versions have nearly identical translation scenarios. They understand that the five 'vices' following the phrase "members upon the earth" are standing in apposition to it and that they require a dynamic translation of τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς in order to make the phrase understandable to the English reader.<sup>2</sup> This expression unique to Colossians is rendered in these translations as "what is earthly in you" (the ESV being representative). In each case, the phrase "the members upon the earth" is understood as an accusative direct object, which is then elaborated in a series of five nouns (all vices) in apposition (expressed in English with a colon): "sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness...." Bruce, who notes the difficulty of this construction in the abrupt, rough nature of this apposition (i.e., "members" are not conventionally viewed as related to a list of "vices"), suggests that a less than literal translation of the phrase τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς is necessary:

Paul is not talking here of the actual members of the human body, nor is he expressing himself in quite the sense intended by Jesus when he said that the offending hand or foot should

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<sup>2</sup> Various translations of the phrase have been put forth, each followed by a colon and a vice list: "Put to death, therefore, *whatever belongs to your earthly nature*" (NIV); "Therefore, put to death *what belongs to your earthly nature*" (CSB); "Put to death, therefore, *whatever in you is earthly*" (NRSV); and "Therefore put to death *what is earthly in you*" (NASB)

be cut off or the offending eye plucked out, if entrance into life could not otherwise be gained. This seems plain from the apposition of the noun “members” with the following list of vices. Yet this apposition is so abrupt that attempts have been made to *ease the difficulty of the construction* [italics mine] by expedients which nevertheless are unconvincing.<sup>3</sup>

Other exegetes also sense the difficulty of translation. Dunn sees the list of vices as rather awkwardly set in apposition to the phrase “the members upon the earth.”<sup>4</sup> O’Brien, also acknowledging the difficulty, comments on the phrase:

That which is to be put to death is *somewhat unusually* [italics mine] described: “the members which are upon earth (τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς),” and these are set in apposition to a list of five vices commencing with “fornication” (πορνείαν). ... [T]he conjunction of this list with the term “members” is rather abrupt and various attempts have been made to ease the difficulty.<sup>5</sup>

Harris, in what he calls “this puzzling phrase,” attempts to clarify the meaning of “the members upon the earth” by suggesting that the phrase is a catachresis (i.e., an expression employed in a unique and surprising sense):

In an instance of catachresis, Paul says “Put to death your limbs” rather than simply “put off immorality” (cf. v. 8), not because here “limbs” mean “deeds,” as in Iranian thought (so Lohse 137), but because bodily members can become “instruments of wickedness” (Rom 6:13; cf. Rom 6:19; 7:5, 23; Matt 5:29–30; 18:8–9). Paul is not advocating ascetic suppression or rejection of bodily desires and functions; he is rather calling for

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<sup>3</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 140–41.

<sup>4</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 213.

<sup>5</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, WBC 44 (Nashville, TN: Word, 1982), 176.

termination of the immoral and self-centered use of physical limbs or organs.<sup>6</sup>

Harris offers several different translations for τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς but prefers “your limbs as used for earthly purposes” as also suggested by Moule.<sup>7</sup> He translates the entire verse: “Therefore put to death your limbs as used for earthly purposes—immorality, impurity, lust, evil craving, and especially ruthless greed, which is idolatry.”<sup>8</sup> Campbell, agreeing with Harris’ understanding of the metaphorical language, senses the same difficulty of translation, calling the phrase “a curious instance.” He understands τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς to mean “your limbs as put to earthly purposes.”<sup>9</sup> Moo also finds somewhat surprising the phrase “the members upon the earth” as the object of the verb, “put to death.” He comments:

In light of the parallels we have cited—“died to the elements of the world” (2:20); “died to sin” (Rom. 6:2)—the object of the verb *put to death* is somewhat unexpected: *whatever belongs to your earthly nature*, or, more literally, “the members which are on the earth” (cf. KJV; NKJV). “Member” (Gk. *melos*) is ordinarily used to refer to the parts of the human body (see, e.g., Matt. 5:29-30; Jas. 3:5-6; 4:1). Paul applies the word to Christians in his well-known extended metaphor of the church as a “body,” believers being the “members” of that body. More pertinent to the usage here, however, are those places in the New Testament where the word refers more generally to the “faculties” of people, faculties that in the old sphere of life are used in the service of sin and unrighteousness but that in the new realm are to be given to Christ.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2010), 126.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-27.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>9</sup> Constantine R. Campbell, *Colossians and Philemon: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, ed. Martin M. Culy, Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 51.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 255-56.

Moo attempts to solve the problem by insisting that “members” is being employed in the sense of the “faculties” of people.

In summation, many commentators recognize the uniqueness of the phrase “members upon the earth” following the verb “put to death”; they also point out the abruptness of the list of vices in apposition–vices elucidating the meaning of the phrase “members upon the earth.” Because the relationship is not precisely defined by the immediate context, commentators disagree about the precise meaning of “the members upon the earth.” However, most interpreters are in agreement on five contextual issues: 1) the accusative direct object of the imperative verb νεκρώσατε (put to death) is τὰ μέλη; 2) τὰ μέλη means ‘body parts,’ ‘members’ or ‘limbs’; 3) the article τὰ in the phrase τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς is equivalent to a possessive pronoun ‘your’ (i.e. “your members”); 4) the modifying prepositional phrase ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς (“upon the earth”) is roughly equivalent to an adjective, such as ‘earthly’ or ‘worldly’; and 5) the list of vices demands that the phrase τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς be translated with a dynamic translation equivalent. On this last issue, there is latitude of interpretation from the general “whatever belongs to your earthly nature” (e.g., Moo), “what is earthly in you” (e.g., ESV), to the more specific “your limbs put to earthly purposes” (e.g., Harris, Moule) to the more sexually specific “your members put to earthly purposes” (e.g., Pao, McKnight). The general idea is that your limbs are being used as the instruments of your fallen nature and the instruments must be put to death.

Three critiques of this view present themselves: 1) very rarely is a plural neuter article (τὰ, “the”) translated as a possessive personal pronoun; 2) the prepositional phrase “upon the earth” is not generally adjectival in the sense “earthly,” or “worldly” in Greek literature; and 3) the different proposed senses for “the members upon the earth” do not take into account the uniqueness of this Colossian phrase within Pauline literature.<sup>11</sup> One caveat to the last critique should be noted: the theological concept to which this view subscribes is actually taught in Romans, albeit, of course, with completely different language (Rom 6:19; 7:23).

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<sup>11</sup> With reference to the second critique, the prepositional phrase ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς (493 occurrences in the LXX and in the Greek New Testament [NA28]) is translated with an adjectival sense only in Col 3:5.

### **The Vocative View: Members, You Put to Death the Things Upon the Earth**

In order to remove the translation difficulty, an alternative view offered by Masson and Turner identifies τὰ μέλη (“members”) as a vocative form that should be understood as addressing the members of the body of Christ at Colossae.<sup>12</sup> Turner offers this translation, “You, as members of the body, must mortify the things that are upon the earth....”<sup>13</sup> This so-called vocative view has received little traction among interpreters. Bruce exemplifies their main objection with the following critique: “...such an absolute use of μέλη [members] in this sense would be tolerable only if their membership in the body of Christ were stressed in the immediate context.”<sup>14</sup> Harris concurs:

Occasionally τὰ μέλη has been construed as an art. nom. used as a voc., and τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς as the obj. of νεκρώσατε: “Members [of the body of Christ], put to death what is earthly in you...” Although possible grammatically, this interpretation would be convincing only if Paul had added τοῦ σώματος (cf. 1 Cor 12: 12, 22) or τοῦ Χριστοῦ (cf. 1 Cor 6:15; 12:27) to τὰ μέλη, or had written ὑμεῖς οὖν τὰ μέλη νεκρώσατε κτλ. (“You, therefore, as members [of the Body], must put to death....”).<sup>15</sup>

However, the fact that Paul does not spell out “members” either as “members of the body” or “members of Christ” is not necessarily a death knell to Masson’s position. In a very similar context in Ephesians that has several parallels to Colossians 3:1-17, Paul exhorts believers to “let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another” (Eph 4:25 [ESV]; cf. Col 3:8). Baugh recognizes that the compressed phrase ἀλλήλων μέλη (“members of one another”) in Eph

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<sup>12</sup> Nigel Turner, *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament*. (Edinburgh, UK: T. & T. Clark, 1966), 105, cites Charles Masson who suggests that “members” be regarded as a vocative form, and understands “members” as members of the body, the church. See Charles Masson, *Commentaire du Nouveau Testament*, (Neuchatel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1950), 142.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 141n53.

<sup>15</sup> Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 126.

4:25 stands for the idea of being “fellow members of the body of Christ *alongside* one another.” He observes:

This phrase is often rendered strictly as “we are members of one another” (e.g., NASB, ESV, NRSV), yet ἀλλήλων μέλη (*allēlōn melē*) is a compressed phrase standing for the idea of being fellow members of the body of Christ *alongside* one another (see Eph 5:30; cf. Rom 12:5). That is, believers are not members of each other’s body but of Christ’s body (cf. 1:23; 2:16; 4:4, 12, 16; 5:23, 30). So also NIV, “we are all members of one body.” The genitive simply connects ἀλλήλων (*allēlōn*) to μέλη (*melē*) with whatever relation warranted by context. More importantly, with this last colon (v. 25c) we can see that Paul’s concern in this place and throughout 4:25–5:2 is with life *within* the covenant community and building that unity he insists on elsewhere (e.g., 4:1–6; 15–16). This does not imply that Christians are free to lie to their nonbelieving neighbors but only that life within the church is Paul’s focus here.<sup>16</sup>

It is clear from the context of Ephesians that Paul can employ μέλη (“members”) as compressed language for “members of His body.” However, it must be admitted that the qualifier “of one another” helps to interpret Paul’s shorthand in Ephesians.

At times, Paul is not averse to using compressed language, leaving something startling for the reader to complete and contemplate. As Fee and other commentators have pointed out, Paul even employs “Christ” as a shortened form for “the body of Christ” in 1 Cor 12:12 (cf. 1 Cor 12:27).<sup>17</sup> In 1 Cor 3:11, speaking of building the church on the right “foundation of Jesus Christ, Paul employs the name “Jesus Christ” as compressed language for “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (cf. 1 Cor 1:23, 24; and 2:2). The point being made is that an almost wholesale rejection of the vocative view in Col. 3:5 is based on a weak premise that

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<sup>16</sup> S. M. Baugh, *Ephesians*, eds. Wayne H. House, Hall W. Harris III, and Andrew W. Pitts, *Evangelical Exegetical Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 391.

<sup>17</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 603. See Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 589-90.

“members” cannot refer to the members of the body of Christ because ‘body’ or ‘Christ’ does not occur in the immediate context. Actually, when one looks at the closest parallels to the continuous paraenetic section in Col 3:5-17, it is the Ephesians 4:25-5:2 pericope that offers the most parallels. As Baugh has pointed out in Ephesians, this continuous paraenetic section begins with “members” in compressed language for the members of Christ and “members” is the focal point for all the exhortations that follows.<sup>18</sup>

Another major feature of the vocative view understands the prepositional phrase ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς (“upon the earth”) to be functioning as a substantival phrase “the things upon the earth” because of the neuter plural article (τά), which precedes it and functions as a substantizer, turning the prepositional phrase into a noun phrase “the things upon the earth.” In this case, it is to be translated as the object of the verb “put to death”; this results in the translation: “Therefore, you as members [of Christ] put to death the things upon the earth” (followed by a colon and then the list of vices).

There are three critiques of this view: 1) it assumes an ellipsis (i.e., “members [of the body]”) without context; 2) prepositional phrases are not normally *independent* substantival phrases when connected to a head noun with identical articles framing that noun (e.g., Col 3:5; τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς); and 3) the proposed sense does not take into account the uniqueness of the Colossian phrase within Pauline literature.

### **The Articular Vocative Phrase View: Therefore, Members upon the Earth, You Put to Death**

The hallmark of this position is understanding τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς as an articular vocative phrase functioning as an epithet of address: “members upon the earth.” This view posits an alternate way to understand the sentence structure of Col 3:5, involving three grammatical features. First, τὰ μέλη (“members”) is an articular vocative of address introducing a continuous ethical section beginning in 3:5. Second, the article before the prepositional phrase τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς (“upon the earth”) serves as a function marker attaching the prepositional phrase to τὰ μέλη (“members”), forming the epithet “members upon the earth.” Third, the objects of the verb “put to death” are the list of nouns

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<sup>18</sup> Baugh, *Ephesians*, 391.

commencing with sexual immorality. Taken this way, the translation would be “Members upon the Earth, you put to death sexual immorality...” This understanding is at the very least an acceptable grammatical option; and it has the advantage of solving the difficulties of the other two views. As regards the direct object view, the neuter plural article being translated as a possessive pronoun “your” is no longer necessary; and the prepositional phrase “upon the earth” being viewed as the adjective, “earthly” or “worldly”, is no longer needed. With respect to Turner’s simple vocative view, this vocative phrase view removes the inherent grammatical difficulty of employing the articular prepositional phrase τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς (“the [things] upon the earth”) as an *independent* substantival object unrelated to its head noun τὰ μέλη (“members”).

The articular vocative phrase view raises the question: why did Paul employ this unique phrase, “Members upon the Earth,” as an epithet to introduce a series of practical prohibitions and exhortations in Col 3:5-11? The answer points backward in the context. The view presented here understands the previous paragraph, and especially verse 4, as being essential for understanding Paul’s employment of the unique epithet “members upon the earth.” Most interpreters agree that the key to understanding the paragraph beginning in Col 3:5 is its relationship to the prior paragraph (Col 3:1-4), as indicated by the inferential conjunction “therefore” marking a strong relationship.<sup>19</sup>

The emphasis of the previous paragraph in 3:1-4 is on two summary exhortations closing the main body of the hortatory letter that began in 2:6. The first exhortation is in Col 3:1: τὰ ἄνω ζητεῖτε (“seek the things that are above”). The second exhortation is in Col 3:2 and contains both positive and negative elements: τὰ ἄνω φρονεῖτε (“focus your attention on the things above”; i.e., the heavenly realm); and μὴ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς (“[do] not [focus] on the things upon the earth”; i.e. on the realm below; Col 3:2).<sup>20</sup> These two summary exhortations are precursors to the specific paraenesis directed to the whole corporate body in Col 3:5–4:1. These two exhortations focus on Christology: they have been raised “with Christ” in the past (3:1), are currently hidden “with Christ” in the present

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<sup>19</sup> Moo, *Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 255; David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 219.

<sup>20</sup> I am indebted to Murray Harris for insights throughout this paragraph.

(3:3), and will be revealed “with Christ” in the future (3:4).<sup>21</sup> In the paragraph, as many have pointed out, there is an already-not-yet element; a realized eschatology that focuses on our participation in the resurrection of Christ (Col 3:1; and death as well, Col 3:3) through union with Him.<sup>22</sup> Since believers have already participated in His resurrection through union with Him, it is only appropriate that they “seek the things above,” that which belongs to the realm above where Christ is seated with all authority at God’s right hand (Col 3:1). In fact, believers are to “focus their thoughts on the ‘above-things’ ” (Col 3:2) and not focus on the earthly realm, since through union with Christ, they have already participated in Christ’s death—they have died ([to the world]; cf. Col 2:20). Their new spiritual life (through union with Christ) is now concealed in safekeeping by God (Col 3:3) in the realm above.<sup>23</sup> They are to focus their thoughts on the realm above because Christ is their ‘Life’ (employed as an epithet) and when he appears, they will be revealed with him in the open display of His glory at His advent (Col 4:4).<sup>24</sup>

Harris notes the emphasis in verse 4 on the *actual future event* expressed in the adverbial clause “when Christ, ‘your life’ appears” you will appear with Him in glory.<sup>25</sup> It is obvious that Christ takes central place (five references) emphasizing the believers’ new spiritual reality. Christ [who is] the believers’ ‘Life’ is everything (Col 3:4; cf. 3:11). This emphasis is highlighted by the words “your Life” which are in apposition to Christ—in a rare, and emphatic placement in the Greek text. The language in the original is arresting, abrupt, and definitely emphatic. Harris, commenting on “your Life” is instructive here:

It “is” Christ, not in the sense that Christ’s risen life in heaven can be equated with believers’ spiritual life on earth or that the Church is the resurrection body of Christ, but in the sense that Christ is the *source, center, and goal* [italics mine] of the individual

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<sup>21</sup> David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 201. Dunn, *Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 209.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Andrew T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet: Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimension in Paul’s Thought with Special Reference to His Eschatology*, SNTSMS 43 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>23</sup> Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 196.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 123, 196.

and corporate lives of believers (cf. 1 Cor 8:6; Gal 2:20; Phil 1:21; Col 1:16).<sup>26</sup>

The meaning of “your Life” is full orbéd in Greek, incapable of being translated completely in English. It can be translated “Jesus Christ ‘the Life of each one of you’ ” (i.e., “he is everything to the individual”; Col. 3:4) and also translated “Jesus Christ ‘the Life of you all’ ” (i.e., “he is everything to the corporate body”; Col 3:4, cf. Col 2:19).<sup>27</sup> Both aspects occur in this new reality: individual believers have participated with Christ in His death, and resurrection (Col 3:1-3); and, at the second advent, they will appear *σὺν αὐτῷ* (“together with Him”) *τότε* (“at the same time”) in glory as the glorified new humanity (Col 3:4; cf. Romans 8:23; the body [sg] of you all [pl.]). Harris offers a paraphrase of verse 4:

...When this Christ, who is your very Life, appears at his second Advent and his glory is manifested, then you too will fully share in his appearance and in the open display of his glory.<sup>28</sup>

It is at this point that Paul shifts from the summary exhortations, “seek the realm above” (Col 3:1) and “focus your thoughts on the realm above and not on the realm below” (Col 3:2) to specific commands addressed to the corporate body. The unique articular vocative phrase “Members upon the earth” (3:5) evokes a recognition that the Colossian believers are members of Christ’s body in this realm, on the earth, who have not yet experienced his shared glory in the realm above. As those who are focused on the realm above, Paul exhorts them to put to death the things belonging to this realm: “Therefore, Members upon the earth, you put to death completely those sexual dispositions and activities which

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Your’ (plural) ‘life’ (singular) certainly does refer to the individual believer in this context (the so-called distributive sense of the head noun “life”; cf. Robertson 409; Turner, 23-25; BDF §140); but it also refers to the future corporate entity as well (“the life of you all”)—we are all going to be glorified together at the same time with Christ at His second advent (v. 4). The singular head noun represents this corporate concept. The same ambiguity takes place in Rom 8:28 where the redemption of *your (pl.) body (sg.)* takes place when final glorification happens to the entire corporate body (composed of individual members) at the same time (see also 1 Cor 6:19, 20; 2 Cor 4:10).

<sup>28</sup> Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 196.

characterized your former lives in idolatry” (author’s paraphrase). Verse 6 is an aside calling attention to the group with whom they were in corporate solidarity; as pagans, they were “son of disobedience” (a Hebraism for pagans).<sup>29</sup> If one accepts the textual variant “sons of disobedience” in verse 6 as original (several English translations do), in verse 7 Paul would be identifying the Colossians as those who formerly walked “among these” (i.e., “sons of disobedience”) when they were living “in these things” (sexual debauchery). Sexual sins that characterized their old life as pagans were virtually eliminated within the body (v.7). In verse 8, Paul exhorts them: “But now indeed you strip off completely” the five dispositions and actions which affect social relationships.<sup>30</sup> In verse 9, in an even more emphatic way (asyndeton), he clearly expresses corporate body life with the reciprocal pronoun in the command: “Do not lie to one another.” He then states the twofold ground in verses 9b and 10a: “because you have stripped off the old man/old humanity with its practices (a causal participial phrase)” and “because you have put on the new man/new humanity (causal participial phrase) who is being renewed....” Harris comments about the individual and collective overtones of this old and new humanity:

Paul’s contrast between ὁ παλιος ἄνθρωπος (v. 9) and ὁ νέος [ἄνθρωπος] (v. 10) is not only a contrast between “the old self” and “the new self” (GNB, NRSV, NASB,<sup>2</sup> ESV; Barth-Blanke 4, 410–11), “the old nature” and “the new nature” (RSV, NEB; Dunn 210), but also between the old humanity in Adam and the new humanity in Christ, humans as they are in Adam and humans as they are in Christ. Ἀνθρωπος has both individual and collective overtones: this individual “man” or “Man(kind)” as a whole is “old” (παλαιός, -ά, -όν) in the sense of belonging to the “earlier, unregenerate” state (BDAG 751c).<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> See W. T. Wilson, *The Hope of Glory: Education and Exhortation in the Epistle to the Colossians* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 241, 246. Also, the textual problem concerning “sons of disobedience” is notorious, with some English translations omitting the phrase. However, the manuscript evidence is widely diversified and early, and therefore is included here.

<sup>30</sup> Τὸ πάντα is being used as an adverbial accusative (translated “completely”) whose usage is not uncommon in Greek literature (as is evident in 1 Cor 15:28; Col 3:11; Eph 1:23; 4:10, 15).

<sup>31</sup> Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 131.

With respect to this collective sense, it is clear in verse 11 that the relative adverb “where” (ὅπου; obfuscated in most English translations) refers back to the new man/humanity in v.10 as its referent and the negative impersonal verb “there is no longer” (οὐκ ἔνι) points forward to a community of believers *where* there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and foreskin, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freedman. Harris picks up the referent (new man/humanity) offering this paraphrase of verse 11:

In this new humanity [i.e., the referent to the relative adverb “where”]...all personal distinctions are eradicated — between Greek and Jew, the circumcised and the uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, the slave and the freeman. On the contrary, Christ himself amounts to everything and he is in all of you<sup>32</sup>

This new humanity no longer has personal distinctions regarding racial privilege (Greek and Jew), legal and ceremonial standing (circumcised and uncircumcised), cultural norms of personal worth (barbarian, Scythian), or norms regarding social class (slave and freedman). At the end of verse of 11, in a short elliptical sentence actually beginning with “but” (ἀλλὰ), Paul offers a compressed summary statement about the relationship of this new humanity to Christ: “but in every way, and in all, Christ” (ἀλλὰ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν Χριστός). The idea seems to be “in every way” (τὰ πάντα, adverbial accusative) and in everyone (ἐν πάσιν; prepositional phrase)—Christ (nominative subject in emphatic placement). Or put differently, supplying the elliptical verbs, “Christ [is] everything” (an adverbial accusative emphasizing degree of authority and importance) and “Christ [is] in all” (i.e. those who belong to the new humanity).

The first element of the summary statement, Christ is everything, emphasizes His place of importance for those who belong to the new humanity (cf. “Christ, your Life,” Col 3:4; “He is head over the body,” Col 2:9). In every corporate-body relationship within Colossians, the authority of the Lord as head over the body is emphasized: He is the “Lord Jesus” who has authority (3:17); He is the “Lord,” the measure for determining what is fitting (3:18); He is the “Lord” to whom one pleases

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 197.

in service (3:20); He is “Lord Christ” whom one serves (3:24); He is the “Lord” (i.e., “Master”) in heaven to whom one must answer (4:1).

The second element of the summary statement, “Christ [is] in all” emphasizes that Christ is in each one of those individuals who belong to this new corporate humanity. He indwells all without distinction.

Of even more importance for the macro-context, the thought unit running from Col 3:5-11, is the semantic frame consisting of “Members upon the earth” and “Christ.” The semantic unit begins with a compressed phrase “Members upon the earth” and ends with a compressed phrase “all, and in all, Christ” with Christ emphatically placed. Christ is everything to the those who belong to the *new humanity*, he indwells each individual believer in *the new humanity*.

Earlier in the epistle, Paul states that Christ is “head over the body” (Col 1:18; 2:19), the body is identified as the corporate group called the church (Col 1:24), and later, in the immediate context, believers are called as *one body* (i.e. as members of a single corporate body, Col 3:19). The semantic connection between new humanity, body, church, and “members” is compelling, given Paul’s usage in Colossians, as well as Ephesians. Members of the “new humanity” upon the earth are to put to death (i.e., put off) those values that represent the old humanity of which they were formerly members.

### **Conclusion**

The unique articular vocative phrase τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς (“Members upon the earth”; Col 3:5) evokes a recognition that believers are members of a *new humanity* in this realm, on the earth, who have not yet experienced His shared glory. As members of this *new humanity* who are focused on the realm above, Christ is everything and consequently, they are to put off those attitudes and actions that reflect the perspective, values, attitudes and deeds that characterize this realm below.