

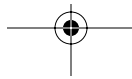


PREFACE

The idea of “remixing” carries with it ambiguous overtones. At its worst, remixing is a way to give some new shelf life to a past musical recording in order to generate continued income for washed-out rock stars and their mercenary record companies. Or sometimes a piece of music is remixed into a new song in a way that rips off the original artist both aesthetically and financially. But at its best, remixing is a matter of giving an older artistic expression new currency. In this sense, remixing is a matter of “revoicing,” allowing the original song to be sung again in a contemporary context that is culturally and aesthetically different. Such a remixing honors and respects the integrity and brilliance of the original piece while helping it to be heard anew in the ears and lives of people with different cultural sensibilities.

Whether *Colossians Remixed* is an attempt to rehear an ancient text that should simply be left in its antiquated past, or a rip-off of the original author, or a revoicing of this ancient Christian letter in a way that allows it to be heard in the twenty-first century with integrity, is something that the reader will have to decide. But we should at least be clear about our intention. The epistle to the Colossians, we are arguing, was an explosive and subversive tract in the context of the Roman empire, and it can and ought to function in an analogous way in the imperial realities of our time. This letter proclaimed an alternative vision of reality, animating a way of life that was subversive to the ethos of the Roman empire. We believe that Paul’s letter to the Colossians will only be read with integrity in our time when the radical vision of Christian faith encountered in this text engenders a similarly alternative way of life in our midst.

There is a sense in which this book is an “anti-commentary.” While cognizant of the critical literature that has been written on Colossians, and not wanting to be totally dismissive of the writing of commentaries, our project attempts to go beyond the genre of commentary writing in three ways. First, the technical apparatus of commentaries is largely absent from this book. We know the intricacies of the Greek text (or at least Sylvia does!), we understand the arguments for and against Pauline au-





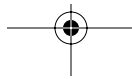
thorship, and we have followed the debate about the identity of the “Colossian philosophy”; we know that these are valid and important topics. But we aren’t overly interested in these issues because they do not bear heavily upon the questions that we bring to this text. Most of the issues raised by the commentaries remain mired in the problems of modernity, but ours is a postmodern culture (and we will offer our own nuanced reading of *postmodernity*). Our questions, therefore, seek to hear Colossians anew in our cultural context.

Second, commentaries are written for professionally religious people like pastors and professors. Both of us are professors and Brian is also a pastor, so we aren’t denigrating these fine professions. It’s just that we aren’t writing for pastors and scholars, though we do hope that our colleagues in these guilds will find what we have written to be helpful to them. Rather, our audience is people like William, whom you will meet in the first chapter—people who have a hard time hearing the Scriptures speak in a way that addresses them where they are. Ours is a cultural, political, social and ecological reading of this text because these are the kinds of questions that our friends and our students ask. They are the kinds of questions that we ask. And that leads to the third way in which this is an anti-commentary.

Not only is our audience different from traditional commentaries, so also is our question. To illustrate, we’ll tell you how this book had its origins: curiously enough, in conversation with a commentary writer.

In 1982 Brian began his doctoral studies at McGill University in Montréal where he met a young biblical scholar named Tom Wright. Tom was working on his Tyndale commentary on Colossians and Philemon at the time, and he asked Brian if he would read the manuscript. This began both a conversation that went on for a number of months and an enduring friendship. Tom would give Brian manuscript text on Tuesday afternoon; Brian would go home and read it that evening, and then they would meet and talk about it for a couple of hours Wednesday morning. The overriding question that Brian raised in these conversations was, “So what?” Tom’s exegetical work around the meaning of things like “thrones, dominions, authorities and powers” was suggestive of so much more than he was allowing himself to address in the commentary. Brian wanted him to name contemporary names. Might the Pentagon or IBM or the International Monetary Fund be contemporary parallels to the rulers and authorities that put Jesus on the cross? And if it is true that Christ is the Creator and Redeemer of “all things” as the Colossian poem so eloquently puts it, then what might be the implications of such a breathtakingly comprehensive worldview for our ecological, political and economic lives?

Tom was writing a commentary, however, and these kinds of questions went beyond anything that such a genre could bear. So this book was born over twenty years ago. Brian has continued to teach and reflect on Colossians in pretty much everything he has done since those Wednesday morning conversations with Tom. Sylvia picked





up on similar themes when she studied with Tom at Oxford from 1989 to 1992. When we married in 1993 it became clear that together we would eventually write a book that would attempt to answer the questions Brian had raised so many years earlier. And it also became clear that our answer to the “so what” question addressed to this ancient text would have to be embodied in the life that we would lead together as a couple and a family. As a result we made a commitment to each other, and we make it to you our reader, that we would not propose a way of life that we ourselves were not living out.

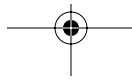
St. Paul knows that the vision that he is talking about makes no sense if it doesn't shape the Christian household as an alternative to the dominant Roman model of household life. And so the testing ground for anything that we say in this book is first and foremost our family. Our three children, Jubal, Madeleine and Lydia, did not have to “suffer through” the writing of this book. If they did then the book would in fact lack credibility. We did not “sacrifice” family life through long absences while researching and writing. So we offer the kids no apologies. Rather we thank them for grounding our lives in the important things like learning and housekeeping, playing and growing up, stories and nighttime prayers, tears and laughter.

Colossians is a subversive tract for subversive living, and it insists that such an alternative imagination and alternative way of life is formed and sustained in the context of community. So while this book began in our community with each other and with our friend Tom Wright, it immediately encompasses a larger community.

Food and worship pretty much sum up the human condition, and two communities have significantly contributed to our lives in these areas. First, we have been sustained with bread and wine, prayers and fellowship, baptisms and funerals, joy and sorrow, through our worship at the Church of the Redeemer in Toronto. This wonderful parish has been a place for us to serve as teachers and preachers, in ministry to the homeless and in pastoral care for the hurting and dying. And it has been a nourishing community that has sustained and encouraged our growth in Christian discipleship.

Second, the food side of the equation, is our involvement in a community called Karma Co-op. As one might tell from its name, Karma is a richly diverse multifaith community that runs a food cooperative, and it is as part of this that we buy our food. When we talk about the meaning of Paul's community ethic in chapter ten of this book and address it to how and what we eat, our debt to our friends at Karma will be clear.

Another important community is our students. The book begins with a student named William, and it is fair to say that the whole book has been written in conversation with our students. We have shared material from the book with students throughout Canada, the United States, New Zealand, Australia and Britain and have been enriched deeply through these conversations. The most sustained dialogue, however, has been with our students at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto,





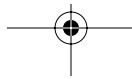
the Graduate Christian Fellowship and Wycliffe College (both at the University of Toronto), and the Creation Care Studies Program in Belize and New Zealand. We are indebted to many students who read all or large sections of this manuscript while it was in process and offered helpful challenges and corrections, probing questions and deep encouragement along the way.

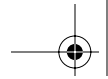
Many others have also helped in the writing of this book. Tom Wright, Andrew Lincoln and Walter Brueggemann read sections of the book and provided encouragement. Thank you. Three friends, however, read the whole manuscript and gave us invaluable assistance. Janet Somerville confessed to us that she is more invested in relationships than in books and so finds that she doesn't read as much as she would like to. But when we asked if she would like to take a look at what was then a much longer manuscript, Janet immediately said yes. Her comments came at a crucial time in the development of this book, and for that we are deeply thankful. Richard Middleton is no stranger to things written by Walsh and Keesmaat, since he has coauthored works with both of us in the past. His insightful comments have helped us immeasurably, and we can also thank Richard for the overall three-part structure of the book. Byron Borger runs the best Christian bookstore in the world in Dallastown, Pennsylvania, called "Hearts and Minds." He is also the most well-read Christian that we know. His comments and suggestions on the manuscript will save us from some, but not all, of the criticisms that he anticipated. Janet, Richard and Byron aren't just generous colleagues who took considerable time out of their busy schedules to read a very long manuscript; they are fellow sojourners on the way, following the same Lord. With them at our side we find it just a little easier to stay on the path.

There is a fourth person who read the whole manuscript, and not just once! Jason Postma was our student assistant from the Institute for Christian Studies, and he carefully developed the indices that appear at the end of this book. A good index is a valuable asset to any book, and the production of such an index requires a careful and close reading of the text. Jason's work demonstrates something that goes beyond careful and close reading. This text, this rehearing of Colossians, *matters* to Jason, and the work he put into preparing the indices wonderfully demonstrates his enthusiasm for the project.

Sylvia's professional context while writing this book was the Institute for Christian Studies. She thanks her colleagues for their support and the Institute for sabbatical leaves to work on this book. Brian serves as a Christian Reformed campus minister to the University of Toronto and is grateful to the Christian Reformed Churches of Classis Toronto for their support and for a writing leave in 2004. A team of wonderful co-workers has always blessed Brian's ministry. Brian Lim, Charleen Jongejan, Alison Hari-Singh and Geoff Wichert have made ministry at the U of T both fruitful and fun. Their voices and lives can be heard throughout this book.

The Priscilla and Stanford Reid Trust provided the Christian Reformed Campus





Ministry (CRC) to the University of Toronto with two very generous grants in order to hire staff to assist Brian in his ministry and release him from some responsibilities in order to create time for the writing of this book. Professor Stanford Reid was a historian who insisted that his Christian faith was integral to his scholarship, and as such, he was a model of Christian scholarly discipleship to a generation of Canadian Christian academics. We are indebted to his ministry and grateful to the Trust for their financial support. We hope that this book does justice to the memory and heritage of Dr. and Mrs. Reid.

Rodney Clapp encouraged us to write this book when he was editor for academic books at InterVarsity Press. A change of publishing houses doesn't change friendships, and we continue to find great joy in our friendship with Rodney. Gary Deddo graciously took this orphaned contract and saw it through to completion with patience and grace. The copyediting of Ruth Goring has helped us achieve greater clarity and economy in our writing. Thank you.

Finally, this book is dedicated to our friend Bud Osborn—poet, prophet and priest. A priest because he mediates the pain of the most vulnerable, bringing it before the throne of God; a prophet because he proclaims to the powerful the cries of the suffering and demands justice; and a poet because it is through his poetry that he exercises his prophetic and priestly offices. Bud Osborn gives us courage to persist and to insist on life in the face of death, compassion in the face of cruelty and justice in the face of oppression. We dedicate this book to Bud because there is a profound kinship between the subversive poetry of Bud Osborn and the subversive vision of life we find in Paul's letter to the Colossians. Both root their subversion in following Jesus and in living for the kingdom that liberates rather than the empire that enslaves. At the end of his poem, "Down Here," Bud writes:

let my words
sing a prayer
not a curse
to the tragic
& sacred mystery

of our beautiful
suffering
eternal worth

If our words can echo the words of Bud Osborn, then we would be deeply grateful. This book, and these words, are dedicated to him.

Pentecost 2004

