

Receiving the Gift of Creation

BY WILLIAM D. SHIELL

When we see our lives as gifts from Christ, the rationales for cloning become questionable. We welcome the gift of creation in God's image and enjoy the relationships that are provided for as long as we have them. Even the pain that accompanies the limits of our humanity is not a problem to be avoided, but a part of life to be received.

Growing up in Pensacola, Florida, I loved to build sandcastles on the beach. I dreamed like every other child that my sandcastle would withstand the onslaught of beach combers, tidal waves, and crabs. Yet, by the time my family had packed the car to return home, my precious creations were destroyed.

We live in a world full of sandcastles, in which tsunamis, hurricanes, and earthquakes remind us of the fragility of life. Nevertheless, the fierce competition to build a better body, career, business, church, or corporation extends to every aspect our existence. We do not learn quickly or listen well. We may climb to the top of a mountain to see it taken away in a matter of moments.

The warning signs for impending spiritual disasters are just as difficult to spot as for natural ones. Yet many of us can feel spiritual tremors or foreshocks—the early warning signs that an earthquake is coming—in our society's fascination with cloning. Ironically, while society has not agreed when life should begin or end, scientists seek to populate life with replicas.

Ancient cultures faced a world full of natural disasters that pressed spiritual problems. The town of Colossae was no different: the area was earthquake-prone, and sometime after Paul's letter circulated among the

churches of that region, an earthquake destroyed the town.

The Colossian believers were experiencing tremors of different kind. Some of the residents of this little village on the Lycus River heard the message of the gospel, but they felt threatened from people who challenged their faith and attempted to shake their confidence. The substantial Jewish members of the community were intimidating the Colossian Gentiles into thinking they had to observe Jewish rituals in order to be true believers. Other members of the church were apathetic, were dropping out, or were not as concerned about their faith as they were before. These problems had grown so large that the people were beginning to wonder if they were right to believe in Christ in the first place. It was a shaky time as people questioned every aspect of their faith. One can imagine that the cynical ones said, "We knew this was just going to be an emotional decision, and it would soon fade away." Their doubt, apathy, and cynicism were just foreshocks, tastes of the coming spiritual earthquake in their lives.¹

Although Paul had never visited Colossae, he had heard about their problems. He provides a preparation manual that helps them address their opponents. He tells them that rather than dwelling on the impending cultural threats to their existence, they should choose ahead of time to be defined by Jesus Christ who first gave them life.

THE GIFT OF CHRIST

Paul attributes all of life to Christ who first gave life to his creation. The language of "image of the invisible God" and "firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15) is his way of saying to the Jews and Gentiles of Colossae, "The God of the Old Testament is perfectly revealed in the life of Christ; if God was present at creation, so was his son Jesus. Those of you who have placed your faith in him, you have nothing to worry about. You have enough to grant you eternal life and hope in the days to come."

Clarence Jordan paraphrases verse 15: "[Jesus Christ] is a perfect photo of the Unseen God, and has got it over everything that ever was made, because he's the reason everything was put together."² When looking for hope, Paul explains, look no further than the one who created everything.

This gift extends to all life. Not only was Christ present when life began, his life continues to bring vitality to the Colossians' existence. Christ penetrates every avenue of the universe, seen and unseen, even the things they had not imagined (1:17).

The Colossians had heard from some members of the opposition that God was disengaged, removed, and distant from the world. Consequently, this world should be rejected because God is not active in its affairs. Yet if individuals tried to attain a better knowledge of God, they might reach God. This belief system caused some Colossians to place their hope in human self-sufficiency (2:8, 16-23). Humans must try to attain God through

their own abilities and rational skills. You can imagine these opponents saying, "We are the ones in charge. We will attain knowledge of God on our own. We will reach the heights of greatness. And Christ will wait for us in the end." Paul, however, counters this notion with an understanding that Christ initiates and sustains life.

Paul's choice to define life as originating and continuing in the work of Christ provides the Colossians a way of dealing with those who tried to intimidate them. Life no longer had to be viewed as a project to be controlled but as a gift to be received.

He describes another facet of the gift: Christ not only creates and sustains life, but also reconciles his creation to God. Knowing how separated we are from God, he draws individuals closer through his death on the cross (1:20-22).

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THE GIFT OF OUR LIVES

These difficulties faced by the Colossians are creeping into modern life as well. Society is driven by the desire to give individuals control over their destinies. It's hard not to laugh when I read some of the promises made for human cloning, the latest example of this desire. Under the guise of finding cures for diseases and preventing birth defects, scientists attempt to change children into their parents' likeness. These studies open a Pandora's Box of problems, the natural result of which will one day be an attempt to replicate humans born into our world. I have to ask, "Are you sure you want to clone us?" If the last fifty years are indicative of the next, I cannot imagine what a group of humans would do to each other if there were more than one of each of us to go around.

The one we should be cloning, instead, is Christ. The one who should be replicated is the one who gave his life for us. As Calvin Miller says, we must allow him to "Christify" our lives, until we are "consciously viewing the people and circumstances in our lives with the eyes of Christ."³ Christ does not come to help us avoid the pain caused by the limitations of humanity. He shows us how to view one another as gifts in relationship.

For the Apostle Paul there is a remarkable litmus test that demonstrates whether we have received the gift of Christ: it is our actions toward the creation (3:12-17). The Colossians, who focused on *escaping* this

world, had begun to disregard the creation and to think of themselves as superior beings. Paul responds that though we live in a world full of evil, Christ is reconciling all creation—"on earth and in heaven"—to himself. Therefore, we have a responsibility to it. Elsewhere Paul says the whole creation is groaning as it waits for "the revealing of the children of God" (Romans 8:22), reminding us that our stewardship of creation should flow from our relationship with God.

But we may ask, "Wouldn't the world be a better place, and wouldn't we be caring for creation, if we did everything we could to make human beings healthier?" Yet physical health and prosperity are not the ends that the Lord seeks. We are stewards of God's gifts of life and creation for as long as he allows. We do not take this creation into our own hands, but receive it as a gift from the heavenly Father. This means that we do not possess the created order for our own purposes; as a Native American proverb puts it, "We do not inherit the land from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children." Our relationship with Christ is reflected in our treatment of his world and our proper relationships with all the people he has created.

When we understand our lives as gifts from Christ, the rationales for cloning become questionable. Christ's work gives the creation its life. "We do not choose our families," as the old saying goes, or what our families will be like. We welcome the gift of creation in God's image and enjoy the relationships that are provided for as long as we have them. We see the pain that accompanies the limits of our humanity not as a difficulty to be managed or a problem to be avoided, but as a part of life to be received. Our problems—caused biologically or otherwise—are stations along the journey that will draw us even closer to the one who suffered for us and suffers with us today. Believers know that the whole creation groans, knowing that one day Christ will complete the work of reconciliation.

THE GIFT OF GOOD COMPANY

In *The Cloister Walk*, Kathleen Norris describes a visit to see her physician for treatment of her bruised knee. In the waiting room she meets a group of monks who are also awaiting appointments and have their fair share of broken limbs. When two eighty-year-old monks notice Norris walk in with a cane, they begin telling stories about the various accidents they have suffered in life. They have fallen off roofs, out of trees, into quicksand, and into lakes. As their stories keep growing in a game of one-upmanship, the men correct one another about the facts behind them. Soon a younger monk interrupts to ask Norris if she is all right. "Look at the company I'm in," she replies, "I'm not only fine; I'm in heaven."⁴

Norris understands the grace of the Christian life. We share life with individuals who have fallen so often, and we are grateful for the ways that God continues to sustain us on the journey. We are not like sandcastles that

collapse because of a brush with nature. Instead we've landed safely on the shore of grace, knowing that we have received Christ's gift and are called to share it with his creation.

NOTES

1 Most scholars agree that Paul's epistle preceded the earthquake that destroyed most of the city of Colossae around A.D. 61-62. I have chosen this as a metaphor for the spiritual problems in the community. See David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon* (The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1998), 81-115; and Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Word Biblical Commentary 44; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 31-72. I am indebted to both of these authors for their insights on this passage.

2 Clarence Jordan, *The Cotton Patch Version of Paul's Epistles* (New York: Association Press, 1968), 25.

3 Calvin Miller, *The Table of Inwardness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 76

4 Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 338-339.



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