

19.15

### **“Realized Eschatology”: What Would Paul Think?**

The letter to the Colossians is often said to espouse a “realized eschatology,” according to which believers have already been “raised with Christ” (2:12; 3:1). This is different from what Paul says in his “undisputed letters” (the letters that all scholars agree were written by him). Paul says in his undisputed letters that believers have been “crucified with Christ” (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20); he says that they have “died with Christ” (Rom. 6:8); he even says that they have been “buried with Christ” (Rom. 6:4). But he does not say that they have been raised with Christ.

Scholars who think that Colossians is pseudepigraphical point to the “realized eschatology” of the letter as a prime example of a development in Pauline thought that the apostle himself would have rejected. Paul, they say, did not like the idea of “realized eschatology,” because it encourages an unrealistic faith that cannot hold up to the experience of suffering in the present age. Paul regards “sharing in Christ’s resurrection” as an experience that is reserved for the future (Rom. 6:5, 8; Phil. 3:10–12). He is careful to preserve a distinction between what is “already” and what is “not yet.”

Scholars who think that Paul is the author of Colossians grant that the language used here is not characteristic of him, but they claim

that the basic concept of Christ's resurrection empowering one's present life (Phil. 4:13) and defining one's current status (Phil. 3:20) is consistent with Paul's general outlook. Furthermore, they maintain that Colossians does not relax the dichotomy between what is "already" and what is "not yet" completely. In Colossians, the mystery of the gospel is expressed in one phrase: "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:27; cf. 2:2; 4:3). In that defining dictum, the dichotomy remains: "Christ in you" is *already* (it is a present experience); "glory" is *not yet* (it remains a future hope [cf. 1:5; 3:4]).