

God's Fullness in Bodily Form: Christ and Church in Colossians



By SUZANNE WATTS HENDERSON

Salem College, North Carolina

This study explores the language of 'fullness' found in Colossians 2:9–10, where the Pauline writer suggests that Christ's fullness now manifests itself in those who are 'in him'. As Christ's body, the church has been filled with the power of God and presses toward the full expression of God's renewal of 'all things'.

KEYWORDS

Colossians, fullness, Christology, ecclesiology, plērōma

In the claim that, in Christ, 'all the fullness (*pan to plērōma*) of the deity dwells bodily' (Col 2:9)¹, interpreters have long found evidence of the high Christology at work in the letter to the Colossians, as the writer asserts the very divinity of Christ. Less frequently noted, however, is the use of the same terminology, in the very next verse, to describe the Colossians themselves: 'and you have been filled (*peplērōmenoi*) in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority' (Col 2:10). This study takes seriously the ties implicit in these verses by exploring the concept of fullness as applied to both Christ and church in Colossians. As we shall see, 'Paul'² maintains that Christ's fullness now manifests itself in those who are 'in him', as they continue to embody God's sweeping – and reconciling – power over all creation.

As a first step, we consider the relationship between Christ and church in the letter's two statements about Christ's fullness (Col 1:19; 2:9). After establishing the close correlation between Christology and ecclesiology in these passages, the study draws on other passages in Colossians that feature the language of fullness³ in an effort to determine the

nature of that fullness and its implications, in Paul's view, for the life of the community he addresses. We conclude with a hermeneutical reflection that attempts to carry the message of fullness forward to the church in our own age.

Christ and Church in Colossians

Until recently, scholarly study of Colossians has focused largely on the letter's Christology. In its view of Christ as personified wisdom and head of the church, interpreters have generally, and quite rightly, detected a secondary development of authentic Pauline thought. But this worthy line of investigation has had a less salutary effect in that it has forged an unhelpful distinction between the letter's Christology and its ecclesiology, largely to the neglect of the latter concern.

More recent studies of Colossians have broken important ground by shifting attention away from Christology *per se* and toward the paranetic purposes of the letter.⁴ As one writer puts it, 'This is what the entire letter wants to emphasize: who the Colossians are "in Christ" and what it means to live "in Christ".'⁵

of the compound verb *antanaplērōō* (1:24). While we do not treat all of these occurrences of fullness language in this article, the prevalent use of the word group confirms the concept's importance for the writer.

⁴ See, e.g., Walter T. Wilson, *The Hope of Glory: Education and Exhortation in the Epistle to the Colossians* (SNT 88; New York: Brill, 1997), and Allan R. Bevere, *Sharing in the Inheritance: Identity and the Moral Life* (JSNTSupp 226; New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003).

⁵ Bevere, 258.

¹ All biblical citations are my own translation.

² While I do not subscribe to authentic Pauline authorship of this letter, I call the writer 'Paul', hereafter without quotation marks, because I believe the letter reflects the writer's intent to carry Paul's views forward.

³ By 'language of fullness', I refer to the letter's eight uses of *plēr-* terminology, including two instances of the noun *plērōma* (1:19, 2:9), five instances of the verb *plērōō* (1:9, 1:25, 2:10, 4:12 [in participial form], 4:17), and one instance

In my view, this trend lends welcome attention to the text itself, which deliberately links beliefs about Christ with what it means to be 'in him'.

Central to the relationship the letter forges between Christology and ecclesiology, I suggest, is the language of 'fullness' that Paul applies to both Christ and church. For our starting point, we take up two key claims – found in Colossians 1:19 and 2:9 – that 'all the fullness' of God has taken up residence in Christ. These Christological assertions, in turn, will prove foundational for the concept of fullness as it pertains to the church.

The term 'fullness' (*plērōma*) first appears in this letter in the midst of the (likely traditional) Christ hymn of Colossians 1:15–20: 'For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell' (Col 1:19). Clearly, the statement suggests the divine indwelling of Christ, but several features of the verse's context indicate that this fullness extends to the church – and that the hymn's Christology provides a template for the Colossians' own identity and purpose. For example, even the opening description of Christ as the 'image of the invisible God' (Col 1:15) echoes the Genesis story (Gen 1:26–27), where humanity is created in God's image, as well as the Wisdom of Solomon, which claims that God 'made us in the image of his own eternity' (Wisd 2.23). Moreover, the verse anticipates Paul's discussion, later in Colossians, of the post-baptismal renewal 'in the image of the creator' (Col 3:10). Christ's reflection of the divine image, then, constitutes not the exclusive stamp of divine nature but the authentic, even authoritative, witness to the divine will.

To be sure, the hymn does repeatedly ascribe pride of place to Christ. Not only is he the 'firstborn of creation' (Col 1:15) and the one who is 'before all things' (Col 1:17), but he is also the 'firstborn of the resurrection' (Col 1:18). Put succinctly, he comes to 'have first place in everything' (Col 1:18). Yet to focus exclusively on Christ's status misses the broader implications of his prototypical role here.⁶ When Paul uses similar language to describe Christ as the 'first fruits of those who have died' (1 Cor

15:20), the point is not that his resurrection is an isolated event; to the contrary, Paul depicts Christ as the one who serves as the forerunner who establishes the pattern that those who are 'in him' will follow. Christ leads the way, setting the terms of new life for those who continue to live 'in him'.

The language of the Christ hymn itself forges intimate ties between Christ and church, as it portrays Christ as 'the head of the body, the church' (Col 1:18). Again, Christ's headship here is not a matter of mere status but functions as cohesive force, so that 'in him, all things hold together' (Col 1:17). Moreover, the hymn progresses beyond claims about Christ's fullness toward the implications of that fullness – namely the reconciliation of 'all things' (Col 1:20) – and its impact on the addressees: 'And you ... he has now reconciled in the body of his flesh' (Col 1:21–22). Thus, while many interpreters take this affirmation of God's fullness dwelling in Christ in an exclusive sense – that is, the complete expression of God has been made manifest in Christ, and in him alone⁷ – the writer here appeals to Christ's fullness as the basis on which the Colossians demonstrate the reconciliation that fullness brings about.

If the Christ hymn implies a close correlation between the fullness of God in Christ and its ramifications for the church, the elaboration of these claims found in Colossians 2:9–10 makes that correlation explicit.⁸ Already we have seen that the language of fullness extends both to Christ (Col 2:9) and to the Colossians (Col 2:10). Several contours of the context further attest the writer's view that God's fullness now resides in both Christ and church.

Even the avowal about Christ – that 'in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' (Col 2:9) – signifies in at least two respects the collective implications of the Christology he presents. First, the phrase 'in him' expresses the typical Pauline view of the Christian life, so that it must here mean more than mere location. Those who are 'in him'

⁶ See Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris; ed. Helmut Koester; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1971), 48 n. 115, who writes this of the term 'firstborn': 'In Judaism, not only the messianic king, but also Israel, the Patriarchs and the Torah are given this title of distinction.'

⁷ See, e.g. Bonnie Thurston, *Reading Colossians, Ephesians, and 2 Thessalonians: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), who writes that Colossians 1:19 'makes clear that the full nature of God rests exclusively in Christ' (25). Also Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1991), 109: 'God in his total essence is expressed only in Christ.'

⁸ Lohse calls this verse an 'explanatory repetition of 1:19' (99).

necessarily participate in Christ's relationship to God. Second, the modifier 'bodily' must also imply not just the resurrected body of Christ but also the manifestation of Christ in his earthly body, the church. If the fullness 'dwells' (present tense) in him 'bodily,' the writer forges a subtle but unmistakable bond between Christ and 'his body, the church' (Col 1:18).⁹ The fullness of God has taken up dwelling in human form, preeminently in the flesh and blood of Jesus; his bodily existence, though, continues in the life of the church, which also serves as perpetual residence for that divine fullness.

The next verse confirms and clarifies this context-based hunch, again in at least two details. First, the phrase 'in him' parallels and expounds the same phrase in the previous verse, referring here explicitly to the letter's addressees. Further the language of fullness applies to them as well: 'And you are in him the ones who have been filled (*peplērōmenoi*), [that is,] in the one who is the head of every ruler and authority' (Col 2:10). Although some interpreters distinguish the meaning of the perfect participle *peplērōmenoi* from meaning of the fullness (*plērōma*) dwelling in Christ,¹⁰ the text itself suggests that the concept of Christ's fullness extends, in turn, to those 'who have been filled'. Thus, the landscapes of Christology and ecclesiology merge, as the writer establishes his readers' identity 'in him'. As those who have been filled (perfect tense), they assume the bodily role of Christ himself.

Besides the two passages that specifically mention God's fullness (*plērōma*) dwelling in Christ, other uses of the *plēr-* word group elsewhere in Colossians drive home the point that, for Paul, any insistence on divine fullness dwelling in Christ must relate to the writer's hopes for the church. Notice, for instance, the substance of the letter's opening petition, where Paul prays, 'so that you might be filled (*plērōthēte*) with the perception of [God's] will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding' (Col 1:9). Likewise, toward the letter's end, Paul describes the prayers of a co-worker in a similar manner when he claims

that Epaphras is 'always contending on your behalf in prayers, so that you might stand complete and brought to fullness (*peplērōphorēmenoi*) in every will of God' (Col 4:12). In both cases, Paul expresses the Colossians' spiritual development through the language of fullness elsewhere used to characterize Christ. Like Christ himself, those who now constitute his body manifest the same fullness, as they continue to dwell 'in him'.

To this point, we have considered the evidence that suggests that the Pauline writer understands both Christ and church in terms of God's fullness. Just as Christ has been filled with the deity (Col 1:19, 2:9), so too might the faithful be filled by God (Col 1:9, 2:10, 4:12). But such a close correlation between Christology and ecclesiology raises a related question. If Christ's fullness now impinges upon the church, the language must denote something other than his divinity *per se*. Surely, Paul does not mean that the church is divine in the sense that anticipates Chalcedonian formulation; what then does the language of fullness mean in this letter? We now broaden our inquiry to consider both the term's linguistic backdrop and the letter's claims in order to flesh out the concept of fullness that so dominates this letter.

The Language of Fullness in Colossians

As noted above, interpreters typically take the language of fullness in Colossians – especially the noun *plērōma* – to mean something akin to 'the divine essence in its totality'.¹¹ Yet the close connection we have detected between Christ's divine fullness and the filling of the faithful strains such a reading and compels us to understand the terminology as it applies both to Christ and church.

The language's use in Hellenistic Greek offers limited interpretive guidance. Outside the NT, *plēr-*terminology carries variegated connotations, ranging from the filling of a container, to the fulfilment of an expectation or prediction, to the completion of a designated task or timeframe. Yet within first-century Jewish thought, both the LXX translators and other writers employ the language to emphasize God's filling of the world. For instance, in Jeremiah 23:24, God asks, 'Do I not fill (*plērō*) heaven and earth?' And Wisdom 1:7 maintains that the 'spirit of the Lord has filled (*peplērōken*) the world'. Philo

⁹ Lohse, 101, says the relationship is 'no doubt intended'.

¹⁰ See Delling, TDNT VI, 292, n. 9: 'There is no connection with the πλήρωμα of v. 9.' Although she perceives a connection between the two verses, Margaret Y. MacDonald introduces an unnecessary distinction when she says that Colossians 2:10 'relates the completeness of believers to the fullness of the deity in the previous verse' (*Colossians and Ephesians*, Sacra Pagina 17 [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000] 98, emphasis added).

¹¹ Martin, 114.

carries this notion forward as he speaks of God's 'filling and embracing all else' (Leg. All., I, 44). In each case, the emphasis lies on the far-reaching authority and dominion of God. God fills the created order not just at its inception, but in the sense that God sustains and directs all things in the present.

Against this backdrop, we can detect nuances reflected in the language of fullness as it applies to both Christ and church. First, the writer depicts both Christ and church as those selected for God's purposeful endeavour. Notice that the two verses asserting the fullness residing in Christ (Col 1:19, 2:9) portray the *plērōma* as an autonomous entity, operating of its own volition and deliberately choosing to make a home in Christ. While the noun remains unmodified in Colossians 1:19, the writer adds the phrase 'of the deity' (*tēs theotētos*) in Colossians 2:9 to make explicit the source of that fullness. In both cases, this fullness finds its abode in Christ without any effort or act on Christ's part.

In much the same way, the Colossians themselves have been filled by a force that lies outside their own capacity for self-direction. We have already noted Paul's prayer in Colossians 1:9 that the Colossians be 'filled with the knowledge of God's will'. The passive voice suggests that access to this divine knowledge comes as a gift through God's agency, not their own. Similarly, both the participle *peplērōmenoi* that describes those who are 'in him' (Col 2:10) and Epaphras's prayer that the Colossians stand 'complete and brought to fullness' (Col 4:12) employ the divine passive to designate an outside source of that fullness. The language suggests, then, that both Christ and church embody divine fullness because an active God has chosen to infuse the created order with that fullness. Thus filled by God, both Christ and church become the bodily staging ground for God's work in creation.

But what is the nature of that work, and how does the indwelling of God's fullness relate to it? Already, we have seen that Hellenistic Judaism portrays God's filling of creation as a declaration of God's expansive, all-encompassing dominion. Careful attention to the text of Colossians reveals that Paul writes with a similarly comprehensive notion of God's power in mind.

To begin with, Colossians 1:15–20 repeatedly asserts Christ's dominion, as God's designated agent, over 'everything,' as some form of the word *pas* appears eight times in the hymn's six verses:

Christ is the firstborn of 'all creation' (Col 1:15, 18) and the one through whom 'all things' were created (Col 1:16, 2x); he was before 'all things' (Col 1:17) and is the one in whom 'all things' hold together (Col 1:17). Not only do these verses establish Christ's priority, but they also assert his expansive reach in relation to the created order. When the hymn speaks of 'all the fullness' that dwells in him (Col 1:19), the term confers upon Christ the full extent of authority over 'things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers' (Col 1:16).

If the hymn affirms Christ's authority, Colossians 2:11–15 correlates the Colossians' post-baptismal state – their having been 'buried with [Christ] in baptism' (Col 2:12) – with the cross's disarming effect on the 'rulers and authorities' (Col 2:15).¹² The point here is not just to assert Christ's triumph over those powers but also to remind the Colossians that they now share Christ's dominion. The significance of that authority, for Paul, becomes clear in Colossians 2:16, where he offers this conclusion: 'Therefore (*oun*), do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or observing festivals, new moons or sabbaths ... do not let anyone disqualify you' (Col 2:16–19). The fullness has been deposited in Christ, to be sure, but also in his body of baptized believers, buried and raised to a new life that shares Christ's authority over any earthly power.

But Christ's decisive victory over the 'rulers and authorities' – and the resulting triumph conferred upon the church – entails more than sheer power play. Indeed, several factors converge in the letter to associate the concept of fullness with God's larger agenda, which is the renewal of the created order. To be captive to the powers of the world – the *stoicheia* (Col 2:8, 20)¹³ – is to participate in schemes of division; to be filled by God is to participate in God's agenda of reconciliation.

Take, for instance, Paul's prayer that the Colossians might be filled 'with the knowledge of [God's] will' (*thelēmatos*) in all spiritual wisdom and understanding' (Col 1:9). While this expression is

¹² As Wilson notes, 'Christ's preeminence in the universe is extended to humanity through the rite of baptism' (147).

¹³ The term *stoicheia* is a notorious crux of interpretation, both here and in Galatians 4:3, as it can denote either celestial powers or simply rudimentary elements (cf. Heb 5:12). In both Colossians and Galatians, though, the writer clearly views the *stoicheia* as a power that animates earthly dominion and that works in opposition to the power of God in Christ.

admittedly opaque, Paul expresses God's will in this way: 'To them God willed (*ēthelēsen*) to make known what richness of the glory of this mystery [there is] among the Gentiles, [the mystery] which is Christ in you, the hope of glory' (Col 1:27). At least in this case, God's will entails the deliberate disclosure of God's mystery through the church – the 'Christ in you' – as it manifests God's glory among the Gentiles.

What is more, the Christ hymn's concluding verse exposes the very purpose of the *plērōma*'s dwelling in Christ: 'to reconcile all things to himself, making peace through the blood of his cross, whether things upon the earth or things in the heavens' (Col 1:20). Read in this light, the fullness takes up residence in Christ with the express aim of the reconciliation of 'all things'. Thus, Christ evinces God's fullness in the decisive sacrifice on the cross, which has reconciled 'all things' to himself. Nothing in creation now lies outside the redemptive powers of God, and as God's fullness incarnate, Christ has demonstrated God's far-reaching purposes of reconciliation.

Nowhere is God's agenda of renewal, enacted through Christ and community, more evident than in the exhortation found in Colossians 3:1–17. Though *plēr*-terminology does not appear in this passage, the instruction here employs creation imagery that echoes the Christ hymn. Particularly in Colossians 3:10–11, Paul portrays the baptismal experience as re-creation, when he writes that '[you] have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator, where there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!' The creator's very image precludes the possibility of human division and affirms the unity of all things. Indeed, the summary exclamation, 'Christ is all and in all,' asserts not only the full range of Christ's sway but his reconciling renewal of the created order as well.

Christ's Fullness and Ours

The language of fullness found in the letter to the Colossians serves, then, two primary purposes. First, the writer employs this terminology to promote the Colossians' identity as Christ's 'body' by noting that his fullness now extends to their life in him. Second, the concept of fullness conveys God's expansive, inclusive sway, a force at work – in Christ and in the church – to renew and reconcile

'all things'. For the letter's original readers, and for readers today, the language of fullness functions not mainly as a tool deployed in Christological debate but as an image expressing God's comprehensive project of restoration and its bodily manifestation in the church. We close our thematic study, then, with a brief reflection on the concept of fullness for the life of today's church.

If the 'fullness of the deity' has taken up residence both in Christ and in the church, perhaps we can find in this letter a reminder that God graciously infuses us with a power that is not our own. In one sense, we are passive participants in an endeavour much larger than our own dreams or abilities; if Christ's body today is 'filled' in the sense discussed here, we begin by acknowledging that the agent of that filling is *extra nos*. This fullness comes not from self-actualization, human ingenuity, or organizational leadership; this fullness comes as a gift, and as a calling.

And yet, as for the Colossians, perhaps the temptation for today's church lies not so much in overestimating our own powers as in our failure to embrace the spiritual authority with which God fills us. Like the Colossians, we often accept the clout of earthly 'rulers and authorities' without question, taking for granted their standards of judgment and division, assuming as given, even necessary, the 'human commands and teachings' that promote separation. But Paul's hope for the Colossians – and, I suggest, God's hope for the church today – is that we might be filled with Christ's power, a power that works toward the reconciliation of 'all things'.

My hunch is that, for this Pauline writer as for the authentic Paul, to speak of Christology and ecclesiology as separate concerns promotes a false dichotomy that compromises our understanding of both Christ and church. Christ's superiority, his unique embodiment of God's fullness, means little apart from his enduring impact on those who carry forward his enterprise. By the same token, for the church to implement an agenda that does not proceed from its life 'in him' is to subscribe to 'simply human commands and teaching'. As Christ's body, the church has been filled with the power of God and presses toward the full expression of God's renewal of 'all things'. To manifest this kind of fullness in our midst is to follow Paul's mandate to 'clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony' (Col 3:14).

Copyright of Expository Times is the property of Sage Publications, Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.