

Jesus Christ

**The Image
of the
Invisible God**

An Exegesis of the Epistle to the Colossians

Study 3 The Preeminent Person of Christ (Colossians 1.15-20)

In the first century church, Christians sang often and much. Indeed, in this letter to the Colossians Paul exhorts them to do just that:

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord”

(Colossians 3.16 KJV)

“The word *hymn* is used rather broadly by New Testament authors, similar to that of a creed, and includes dogmatic, confessional, liturgical, polemical or doxological material. It is not employed by what we understand of congregational hymns with metrical verses. Nor are we to think in terms of Greek poetical form. A hymn refers to any poetical composition in honour of God or Christ, or suitable for use in a liturgical setting. Such poetical pieces could be sung, chanted, or recited antiphonally as in a responsive reading.

At the heart of Colossians lies the magnificent paragraph of 1.15-20. Paul’s prayer of verses 9-14 makes sense when followed by the words of the hymn. The language is majestic. In the opening lines the writer has drawn on a Wisdom background from the Old Testament and Judaism, applying references and activities to Christ. A variety of stylistic features has been employed to praise Christ as the Lord in creation and reconciliation. Some of the language – for example His Lordship over the principalities and powers - appears to touch on the heresy of the false teachers.”

(O’Brien PT. 1991 *Understanding the Basic Themes of Colossians, Philemon*)

In this passage, Paul powerfully expounds the pre-eminence of Christ. Nowhere else in scripture is there a comparable listing of the characteristics of Christ and His deity. Paul described Jesus Christ in three relationships:

to deity
to creation
to the church

"These things are not new to the Colossians. In concise form they restate for the Colossians the mighty facts about the Son of the Father's love because these facts destroy root and branch the error with which the Judaizers were operating in Colosse."

(Lenski, RCH. *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*)

Scott observed that this passage "represents a loftier conception of Christ's person than is found anywhere else in the writings of Paul."

(Scott EF. *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*)

The pre-eminence of Christ in relation to Deity (1.15a)

Look at Colossians 1.15a

Paul boldly asserts that Jesus is the “image of the invisible God.” The concept of “image” involves three things:

Likeness - Christ is the exact likeness of God, a mirror image of the Father (Heb. 1:3)

Representation - Christ represents God to us

Manifestation - Christ makes God known to us (John 1:18)

While God made man in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), Christ *is* the image of God (John 1:18; 14:8-9; 2 Cor.4:4)

The Greek word translated “image” (*eikon*), “. . . does not imply a weakening or a feeble copy of something. It implies the illumination of its inner core and essence.”

(Kleinknecht H. 1964 *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*)

To call Christ the image of God is to say that in Him the being and nature of God have been perfectly manifested—that in Him the invisible has become visible.

The pre-eminence of Christ in relation to creation (1.15b-17)

Look at Colossians 1.15b

The Greek word “*prototokus*” is translated firstborn. It has two possible meanings, the first being in relation to time and the second in relation to supremacy in rank (ie sovereignty). In this particular context, both meanings are most likely in view here since He was before all of creation in **time** and He is over all of creation in **authority**.

What “firstborn” most definitely does **not mean** is that Christ was the first being that was created. This is an error which has endured across the ages with ancient Arians starting it and modern Jehovah's Witnesses still teaching it today. That Christ was not the first being created is made clear in verses 16-18 where Paul states that Christ existed before all things and is Himself the Creator.

“Though it is grammatically possible to translate this as ‘Firstborn *in* Creation,’ the context makes this impossible for five reasons: (1) The whole point of the passage (and the book) is to show Christ's superiority *over* all things. (2) Other statements about Christ in this passage (such as Creator of all [1:16], upholder of Creation [v. 17], etc.) clearly indicate His priority and superiority over Creation. (3) The ‘Firstborn’ cannot be part of Creation if He created ‘all things.’ One cannot create himself. (Jehovah's Witnesses wrongly add the word ‘other’ six times in this passage in their *New World Translation*. Thus they suggest that Christ created all other things after He was created! But the word ‘other’ is not in the Gr.) (4) The ‘Firstborn’ received worship of all angels (Heb. 1:6), but creatures should not be worshiped (Ex. 20:4-5). (5) The Greek word for ‘Firstborn’ is *prototokos*. If Christ were the ‘first created,’ the Greek word would have been *protoktisis*.”

(Geisler, NL. 1999 Beware of Philosophy: A Warning to Biblical Scholars. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*)

Look at Colossians 1.16

In the first century it was common for people to debate about what force brought about and held the world together. The teaching in some systems of philosophy was that water was the responsible force, while others contended that bit was air. In this environment Paul contended that the ultimate unifying and sustaining force was not a *what* but a *who*: Jesus Christ. He declared boldly that Christ is everything – He is Creator, Sustainer, Head, Beginning, Firstborn and Preeminent over all life (Rom 11.36 & Eph 1.20-21)

Christ is the **originator of creation** ("in Him," v. 16a). "All things"—in every place, of every sort, and of every rank—originated with Him. God mediated the beginning of life for the entire universe through His Son (cf. John 1:3, 10; Heb. 1:2). Christ is the Architect of creation. Paul listed various ranks of angelic beings, namely, "invisible . . . rulers" and "authorities." He may have been using the terminology of the false teachers, who taught many gradations within the angelic sphere, or these gradations may actually exist.

In Gnosticism, and in its primitive development in Colosse, angels received varying degrees of *veneration* according to their supposed *rank*. Probably ranks of heavenly powers are in view here (v. 16). Thus Paul claimed that Christ is superior to all angelic beings, good and bad (cf. Heb. 1:1-14).

(Constable, *TL Notes on Colossians*)

"The *good* angels cannot *add* anything to the fullness of riches and resources which believers have in Christ. The *evil* angels cannot separate them from his love (Rom. 8:35-39)."

(Hendriksen, W. 1979 *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Philipians and Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*)

Christ is the **agent of creation** ("through Him," v. 16b). He accomplished creation (cf. John 1:3; Heb. 1:2). He is both the Architect and the Builder of the creation.

Christ is the **goal of creation** ("for Him," v. 16b). History is moving toward a goal, when the whole created universe will glorify Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 15:25; Phil. 2:10-11; Rev. 19:16).

Paul used the verb "created" twice in verse 16. In the first instance, it is in the Greek aorist tense, and refers to creation as an act. In the second, it is in the Greek perfect tense, picturing: ". . . the universe as still remaining the monument and proof of His creative might."

(Constable, *TL Notes on Colossians*)

"For centuries, the Greek philosophers had taught that everything needed a primary cause, an instrumental cause, and a final cause. The primary cause is the plan, the instrumental cause the power, and the final cause the purpose. When it comes to Creation, Jesus Christ is the primary cause (He planned it), the instrumental cause (He produced it), and the final cause (He did it for His own pleasure)."

(Wiersbe, WW. 1989 *The Bible Exposition Commentary*)

Look at Colossians 1.17

And He is before all things and in Him all things consist

As Lord of the universe, the one who is before all things Jesus has every right to be Lord over those He has created. If Jesus is truly Lord in one's life, there can be no limitations or conditions on that statement.

(Jeremiah, D. 2013 *The Jeremiah Study Bible*)

Christ is the **antecedent of creation** ("before all things," v. 17a). This revelation clearly separates Christ from every created entity. "He" has the force of "He and no other" in the Greek text. The word is an intensive pronoun. He is before all temporally (because He is pre-existent) and authoritatively (because He is sovereign)

"The phrase 'before all things' sums up the essence of His designation as 'Firstborn before all creation' and excludes any possibility of interpreting that designation to mean that He Himself is part of the created order"

(Bruce, FF. 1984 *Colossian Problems. Bibliotheca Sacra*)

Christ is the **sustainer of creation** ("hold together," v. 17b). Christ is the Person who preserves and maintains the existence of what He has created. God the Father has delegated the administration of His universal kingdom to God the Son

(McClain, Alva J. 1968 *The Greatness of the Kingdom, An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God.*)

"Every law of science and of nature is, in fact, an expression of the thought of God. It is by these laws, and therefore by the mind of God, that the universe hangs together, and does not disintegrate in chaos."

(Barclay, William. *The Letter to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians.*)

Verse 17 sums up the thought of verses 15-16 and completes the statement of Christ's relationship to creation.

Summary Statement

Christ is the supreme authority in all the universe in relation to Deity, creation and the church

Look at Colossians 1.18

So far in Colossians (ie 1.1-1.17) everything Paul has written about Christ was also written by other New Testament authors. However, what he now embarks on is exclusively Pauline in its description and assertions about Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 and Romans 12:4-8, Paul used the human body as an illustration of the unity and diversity which was present in the church. Here in Colossians he uses it to illustrate the sovereignty of Christ over Christians (cf. Eph. 4:11-13). Our Lord supplies authority and direction for His body

The term "head" (Gr. *kephale*) here does not point to Christ as the ruler of the church, though He is that, but to His being the beginning and the principle in creation and redemption.

(Bedale, S 1954 The Meaning of *kephale* in the Pauline Epistles. *Journal of Theological Studies*)

He is sovereign because He is "the firstborn from the dead." Christ is the "beginning" of the church, in that He is its power and source of spiritual life. He became this at His resurrection, when He became "the firstborn from the dead" in *time*. Christ was the first Person to rise from the dead—with a glorified body—never to die again. He broke death's hold on humanity (1 Cor. 15:20, 23). Thus Christ became preeminent also in the new creation, the church, as well as in the old creation (vv. 16-17).

(Constable, TL *Notes on Colossians*)

The church has a hope unlike any other in that Jesus is the firstborn from the dead – the first to be **raised from the dead** into a glorified form. Because of His resurrection there will come a day when all fallen creation will be re-created, and the elect in Christ will join Him in glorified, everlasting bodies.

(Jeremiah, D. 2013 *The Jeremiah Study Bible*)

Look at Colossians 1.19

Here in verse 19 is the very essence of Christ Jesus, the Son of God, the Son of man. Nowhere else in scripture is the divine nature of Christ so strongly affirmed as in this verse: **All the fullness of God in Him**. Paul affirms Christ to be the fully God, one in essence with the Father and the Holy Spirit and puts to rest any assertion to the contrary, of which there were many circulating amongst the first century churches, propagated by false teachers, Gnostics and Judaizers.

His point is that all divine power resides in Christ because of His resurrection (v. 18), and there are no other mediating agents (cf. 2:9; Eph. 1:23; 3:19; 4:13; 1 Tim. 2:5). Christ is not just a mere man, a great teacher, an angel or any other celestial being – He is the full and complete manifestation of God. This verse reflects the words of Christ Himself: If you have seen Me you have seen the Father (John 14.9).

Look at Colossians 1.20

As human beings, we are born sinful, we are enemies of God and we need to be reconciled to God. Reconciliation is a one-way thing since God needs no reconciling to humankind. This reconciliation is provided by God in the form of the shed blood of Jesus Christ on the cross (Rom 5.1, II Cor 5.18).

"All things" would include the angelic world and the rest of creation as well as humanity. Christ's death has dealt with the defilement that sin caused, as well as with its guilt. In what sense did Christ "reconcile all things . . . in heaven" to Himself, including Satan and his angels? He did not do so in the ordinary sense of bringing them into salvation, but in the wider sense of bringing them into subjection to His will. Christ's death has pacified Satan and his angels. They now have to submit to Him (cf. 2:15), just like when He created them.

(O'Brien, PT. 1974 Col. 1:20 and the Reconciliation of all Things," *Reformed Theological Review*)

"The Christ-hymn of Colossians 1:15-20 is a powerful statement about the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Christ's supremacy is seen at every turn. The first portion focuses on His preeminent role in creation, while the second emphasizes His work as Redeemer. To any Christian, in Colosse then or elsewhere today, who may have been or is confused about Christ's role in the world, these six verses testify to Christ's absolute authority, which is not to be shared with any person, angel, or demon."

(House, HW. 1992 The Doctrine of Christ in Colossians. *Bibliotheca Sacra*)

Summary Statement

Paul makes 13 assertions about Christ in Colossians 1.15-20

1. He is the image of the invisible God (v. 15).
2. He is the first-born of creation (v. 15)
3. He is the originator of creation (v. 16).
4. He is the agent of creation (v. 16).
5. He is the goal of creation (v. 16).
6. He is the antecedent of creation (v. 17).
7. He is the sustainer of creation (v. 17).
8. He is the head of the church (v. 18).
9. He is the first-born from the dead (v. 18).
10. He is the preeminent One (v. 18).
11. He is the fullness of God (v. 19).
12. He is the reconciler of all things to Himself (v. 20).
13. He is the maker of peace (v. 20).