

(Jeff - Lesson 4 Handout - 9/22/2024) **The Exaltation of Christ: His Character**

Colossians 1:15-23

What one person means by Jesus and what you mean by Jesus may be two entirely different concepts. Have you noticed that almost all cults and religions accept Jesus in one form or another – great man, good teacher, fine example, sacrifice...so when you talk to people you aren't always sure: *"Who's on first?"*

Therefore it becomes very important for us to know who Jesus is – to have a clear understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Why? Without truly understanding who Jesus really is and what He alone could and did accomplish through the cross, we become sitting ducks for cultic systems or false religious beliefs. The paragraph before us this morning in Col.1:15-23 is the most closely reasoned presentation of the supremacy/preeminence of Christ anywhere in the Bible. Some writers understood this passage to be an early Christian hymn. Hopefully you won't get lost in the weeds/details.

Dr. Constable claims that there are 13 assertions about Christ in these verses.

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

Having made these 13 assertions, the apostle moved on next to the application of Christ's reconciliation – 21-23. We can outline it like this: He Is...1:15-20 He Reconciles...1:21-23

I. Jesus Christ is Preeminent in His Character Col. 1:15

A. He is the Image of God 1:15a

"Image" is the word – *eikon or icon*. In the Greek world, this word conveyed one of two nuances of meaning – representation or manifestation. Both elements were always present. Representation occurred often in the contexts of an image on a coin or a reflection in a mirror. If this emphasis were primary, Paul would have said Jesus was the symbol of deity.

The second element of meaning in the word *"image"* (*eikōn*) was manifestation. When the term was employed, it meant that the symbol was more than a symbol. The symbol brought with it the actual presence of the object.

Thus J. B. Phillips translated it, *"visible expression"*, meaning that Jesus brought God into the human sphere of understanding. He manifested God. Similar to Heb. 1:3, where the writer stated that Jesus is called the *"exact representation"* (*character* – precise reproduction in every respect) of God, and John 1:18, which states that Jesus *"has made him known."* (*exegesato* get English exegete). The point is that in Christ the invisible God became visible.

Here it is important to note the description of God as *"invisible"* (*ahoratos*). The adjective is used of God in four

of the five New Testament occurrences (here and in Rom. 1:20; 1 Tim. 1:17; Heb. 11:27; Col. 1:16 being the only exception) and nowhere else in biblical Greek.

Since God is invisible how then can he be known? How may one gain knowledge of or access to this higher world, which is inaccessible to the senses? The answer Paul gives to that very question is Jesus. He and he alone is the exact image of the invisible God. As Jesus himself states “*He who has seen me has seen the Father...*” Jn 14:9.

Jesus Christ reveals, expresses and manifests God therefore God can be known but only through

Jesus. B. He is the Firstborn of all Creation 1:15b

Many in Paul’s day and in ours (Jehovah Witnesses) use this verse and say: “*Since Jesus is first born, he is a created being. He cannot be eternal and he cannot be God because he is just the first of many of God’s creations.*”

The Greek word is *prototokos* and may denote priority in time or supremacy in rank. It is used in Luke 2:7 to speak of Christ’s birth as Mary’s “*firstborn*” son. Scripture reveals there were other children born to her: the brothers and sisters of Jesus who would come later. Used in that sense, of course, it would mean that Jesus is the first created being. That however is not the totality.

We also know that “*firstborn*” may indicate supremacy in rank. Look at vs. 18 where we see the word “firstborn” for the second time. This time it is in reference to *resurrection*. Question: Was Jesus the first resurrection? (Lazarus, Jairus daughter, Elijah and the widow’s son at Nain). So while Jesus wasn’t the first resurrection in time he was the supreme resurrection. First because Jesus would never die again as those previously resurrected would. Second it was as a result of his resurrection that Satan and sin were defeated and our salvation was secured. Without his resurrection we have nothing and are to be pitied according to 1 Cor. 15.

Finally when you look at the context of vs. 15-16 in terms of what follows it is impossible to see “*firstborn*” as a reference to time and Jesus being created. The whole point of the passage (and the book) is to show Christ’s superiority over all things. The ‘*Firstborn*’ cannot be part of Creation if He created ‘*all things.*’ (16a) 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 Greek text.)

Therefore to declare that Jesus is firstborn is to declare that he is sovereign, supreme and preeminent over all creation. So in one verse we have seen that Jesus is preeminent in his character as the image of God and the firstborn of all creation.

II. Jesus Christ in Preeminent in Creation Col. 1:16-17

A. He is the Creator 1:16

Note the “*by him...through him...for him.*” Now note the “*all things*” (repeated twice for emphasis, once at the beginning and once at the end of this verse) so that nothing is excluded. Everything that exists, exists because of Jesus. “*Heavens and earth*”, “*visible and invisible*”, “*thrones, dominions, rulers or authorities, all things*”...He is the architect of creation.

John 1:3 *All things came into being through him and apart from him nothing came into being that has come into being.* See also Heb. 1:2

Christ is the builder of creation “*by him*”. Christ is also the agent of creation (“*through Him,*” vs.16b). And finally Christ is the goal of creation (“*for Him,*” vs.16b). History is moving toward a goal when the whole created universe will glorify Christ – Phil.2:9 -11. It is no wonder that the wind and waves obeyed him, that diseases and death were conquered by him. He is master of it all.

B. He is the Sustainer 1:17

Christ is the antecedent of creation (“*before all things*” vs. 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 (preexistent) and authoritatively (sovereign). This assertion, combined with the earlier one that He is the firstborn of all creation (vs. 15), proves that Christ is no creature. If He were, He would have had to create Himself. To do that He would have had to exist before He existed, which is absurd and impossible.

Christ is the sustainer of creation (“*hold together*” vs.17b). Christ is the Person who preserves and maintains the existence of what He has created. “*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.*”

III. Jesus Christ is Preeminent in the Church Col. 1:18 -19

The personal pronoun “*he*” is again *autos*, and as in verse 17, it represents the intensive use and should be understood to mean, “*he himself, he and no other.*” The obvious meaning of “*head*” (*kephale*), especially in this context and in Paul’s use of this term as a description of Christ, is that of authority, supremacy, director, control. Paul’s emphasis in Eph. 1:22-23 is the same.

That He is the head of the body stresses several things as to Christ’s Headship: The first is Christ’s supremacy, authority, and right to direct His body, the church. The second, and closely related, is that the church is a spiritual organism connected to Christ and through which He acts and manifests Himself. As the body is powerless and dead without the head, so the church is powerless and dead without Christ.

Put another way: Without him the Church cannot think the truth, cannot act correctly, cannot decide its direction.

“*Firstborn*” is again *prototokos* (see vs. 15), meaning his is the preeminent resurrection. He is the first one to break the hold of death in a glorified body by virtue of the resurrection. As such, He is the beginning of a new creation of God, so that he himself may become first in all things.

“*He*” is again the intensive *autos*, “*he himself, he and no other.*”

The reason that Jesus is preeminent over the new creation is because of his work of reconciliation; and the reason his work of reconciliation is complete is because he is fully and completely God – vs.19.

“*pleroma*” – the full number that makes up the whole or simply put totality. 2:9 states that “*in him all the fullness (totality) of deity dwells*” and since there is no subject here in vs 19 to express anything differently it must bear the same meaning – fullness of deity.

“*Dwell*” is the aorist tense of *katoikeo*, “*to dwell, reside, settle down*” and indicates a permanent abode. The aorist here could well be what grammarians call an **ingressive** aorist, “*to take up a permanent abode,*” or it could be a **constative** aorist, a simple reference to the fact that “*all fullness resides in Jesus Christ.*”

The statement actually means that God was pleased to take human form in Jesus. He was no less than God, and he continues to be fully divine.

So many people today reject Christ as the only way, and assert He is only one of many ways to God, or just a part of the way to God. But the Bible emphatically states that Jesus Christ is the only way, and the one and only name by which anyone can be saved. This is because of Who He is (15-19) and What He accomplished by virtue of His death and resurrection (20-22).

Since Christ is supreme/preeminent in his Character, Creation and the Church, He is therefore able to be the complete and sufficient reconciler of man to God – vs. 20 -23.

IV. As Preeminent Christ Accomplishes Reconciliation Col. 1:20-23

A. The Scope and Means of Reconciliation 1:20

There are two major Greek words translated “*reconciliation*”. The first is *katallasso* which means “*to change*”. When people change from being at odds or hostile to one another to being in friendship or at peace with each other they are said to be reconciled. When the Bible speaks of reconciliation it refers to the restoration of a right relationship between God and man.

The second word the one Paul uses here in vs. 20 and 22 is *apokatallaso* where the preposition *apo* intensifies the meaning. It now means “*thoroughly, completely or totally reconciled*”. Only Paul uses the term and he does so in five places: Rom. 5:10-11;11:15; 2 Cor.5:18-20; Eph.2:14-17 and here in Col.

While we don’t have the time to do a full rundown on these verses let me summarize it this way. For Paul reconciliation was the sum and substance of the gospel – the saving work which God wrought through the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. He refers to the gospel as “*the ministry of reconciliation*” (2 Cor. 5:18) “*the word of reconciliation*” (2Cor. 5:19); he describes the response of faith for which the gospel calls “*receiving our reconciliation*” (2 Cor. 5:20). He sums up the content with the affirmation “*God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself*” (2 Cor. 5:19).

Note two specific truths regarding reconciliation. First, reconciliation is a work of God. The bible is not the story of man’s search for God but instead God’s provision for man. The initiative belongs wholly to God. It pleased the Father...

Second, reconciliation is a work that has been accomplished “*having made peace*”. Accomplished at the death of Christ. Therefore reconciliation with God waits not upon human achievement but upon human acceptance. When an individual accepts Christ’s work on the cross as payment for sin they are reconciled to God.

The scope of reconciliation goes far beyond humanity. It includes the material creation, humanity, and spiritual beings. He reconciled “*all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven.*” Each has been alienated and stands in need of correction.

The spirit world suffered a fall when many of the angels rebelled. The human fall is recorded in Gen. 3 and its theological implications explored in Rom. 5:12–21. The material world was affected as a result of the fall of Adam and Eve, as recorded in Gen. 3:17ff.

Reconciliation must be defined in this context, therefore, as all things being put into proper relation to Christ – mankind; creation; angels. Those who respond to his voice will be brought into a relationship of grace and blessing. All will be subordinated to Christ either in faith or judgment.

The means of this reconciliation is “*through the blood of the cross*”. The emphasis is on the sacrificial death of Christ as the means of reconciliation – sufficient for all people and all things. Thus Jesus died not only to provide individuals with salvation but also to restore a harmony to the universe. That harmony is an assured

aspect of redemption. Rom. 8:20-22

B. The Accomplishment of Reconciliation for Mankind 1:21-23

1. What we once were 1:21

“*alienated*” – estranged or cut off, separated; *hostile in mind* – mentally antagonistic to the truth of God; *engaged in evil deeds* – activities that did not please God. This is the condition of every individual without Christ. Fallen man is not good at heart.

2. What we are now 1:22-23

“*holy*” – separated from sin and set apart for God. “*blameless*” – without blemish our character is clean or acceptable to God. “*beyond reproach*” – no one can bring a charge against us. In the courtroom of life no charge can stand against us because Jesus paid for it on the cross.

Once we were separated from him but now by reconciliation we belong to him. Since we belong to him we ought to do everything in our power to be practically holy, practically blameless and practically above reproach – How? – vs 23

“*continue in the faith*” – stable, steadfast, firm with hope. This is the proof of your reconciliation. This is evidence for you to know you are holy – you belong to God.

The word “*if*” has caused some consternation but it ought not. This is a first class conditional clause in Greek and can be translated “*since*”. There is no element of doubt here as Paul fully expected them to continue in the faith.

To continue in the faith is to be content with the gospel that first saved and delivered you and brought you to peace with God. It means to base our lives on the doctrine of grace. It is to be unmoved and unmovable in the face of “*new doctrine*”, fancy teachings, or attractive thoughts.

Conclusion

We have covered a lot of ground and looked at a lot of theology, so I want to end with one question: *Who is on first? Who is on first in your life?* Look at the end of vs. 18 “*so that...*”. Here is the purpose of why Christ is preeminent in character, creation, and the church. The word translated “*preeminent*” or “*first place*” is used only here in the New Testament and it means – *first, supreme and primary*.

Now we have already seen that Jesus is first in character, creation and the church so what’s left? Our individual lives. Since Christ is preeminent we should completely follow him. Any other course is completely irrational. Or as Rom. 12:1 states to present ourselves to Christ as living sacrifices is our reasonable service. The goal of the Christian life is to make Christ first in every area of our lives with the result that everything is sacred and nothing is secular. Monday at 10AM is just as sacred as Sunday at 9AM. A rational life is one lived entirely under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. So I ask again, “*Who is on first?*”