

“The Cosmic Christ of Colossians”
A Study of Colossians 1: 15-23¹

Introduction:

In his fascinating book, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (Yale University Press, 1985), the Yale University historian Jaroslav Pelikan notes that each historical age or epoch has created Jesus in its own image and has depicted Him in accordance with its own most fundamental assumptions and character.

The Church and countless numbers of believers have understood Him throughout the centuries with kaleidoscopic variety, sometimes biblically, sometimes not as faithfully. So as Pelikan’s book colorfully documents, Jesus has been imaged or depicted as:

- ◆ The Rabbi
- ◆ The Light of the Gentiles
- ◆ The King of Kings
- ◆ The Son of Man
- ◆ The True Image
- ◆ Christ Crucified
- ◆ The Monk Who Rules the World
- ◆ The Bridegroom of the Soul
- ◆ The Divine and Human Model
- ◆ The Universal Man
- ◆ The Mirror of the Eternal
- ◆ The Prince of Peace
- ◆ The Teacher of Common Sense
- ◆ The Poet of the Spirit
- ◆ The Liberator

In our Sunday School lesson this morning, however, I would like to present to you “The Cosmic Christ of Colossians” from Col. 1: 15-23.

Undoubtedly, we in our historical age or epoch have depicted Jesus in our own image on the basis of our most fundamental assumptions and character.

In contemporary scholarly circles that image or depiction of Jesus has taken the form of the “cynic sage” (e.g., The Jesus Seminar), and in popular North American Christianity, He is often regarded as good friend and personal Lord and Savior. All too often, we conceive of Christ in informal, pietistic, and even sentimental terms.

Consequently, we need to go back to Scripture and occasionally remind ourselves of who Jesus is and what He has done, His true identity and His actual deeds.

A study this morning of the “Cosmic Christ of Colossians” will help off set any errors or limited points of view we may have adopted unwittingly on the person and work of Jesus our Lord.

I. Context of Colossians 1: 15-23

In this epistle, Paul is concerned to critique and cancel out a heresy to which the Colossian Christians had yielded. This heresy was of Jewish, Essene or Gnostic origin, and it focused on the spirit world and the worship of spiritual powers and angels instead of the cosmic Christ.

In this context, in the first 14 verses leading up to the passage I want to study this morning, Paul has greeted his Colossian readers (1: 1-2), and offered thanks to God for their faith, hope, and love and for the fruit of the preaching of the gospel among them (1: 3-8). He then offers a prayer for their growth in the knowledge of God and His wisdom and will for their lives (1: 9-12).

In vv. 13-14, using the imagery of Israel’s exodus from Egypt in the OT, the apostle announces that God has now *delivered* believers from the “dominion of darkness” and transferred them into kingdom of His Son in whom they had redemption and the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus the King, Redeemer, and Forgiver, therefore, is the One whom they should worship and follow, not the spirits or demons or angels. So in the next 9 verses (vv. 15-23), Paul explains the identity and work of this Savior and Lord in terms of a very high Christology, indeed, as the Cosmic Christ of Colossians.

How do these verses present Jesus as the Cosmic Christ?

The shorthand answer to this question is that in this skillfully word, rhythmically balanced, poetic and hymn-like text, Paul describes the pre-eminence of Jesus as the creator of the entire universe (vv. 15-17) and the pre-eminence of Jesus as the redeemer/reconciler (vv. 18-23) of the entire universe!

- ◆ In other words, it focuses on Jesus and creation and Jesus and new creation.
- ◆ He is the cosmic creator and redeemer Christ of Colossians.
- ◆ It is the explosive truth that this Jesus who lived, died, resurrected and ascended — the One whom the Colossians believed in and were to worship — was none other than YAHWEH of the OT, the full, incarnate revelation of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Lord of the cosmos.
- ◆ It is Paul’s thunderbolt claim and most comprehensive statement of what it means to confess Christ as LORD over all things!

- ◆ It means that every pattern of belief or conduct that ignores or denies this claim must be radically transformed. (JCLT, pp. 1-2)

Let's read the passage in its entirety, and then we will work through the details its two main sections.

II. Jesus Christ the Cosmic Creator (Col. 1: 15-17)

A. *The identity or nature of Jesus (v. 15)*

In v. 15, Paul makes two major claims concerning the nature or identity of Jesus.

Col. 1:15 And He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation.

1. *He is the image of the invisible God (v. 15a)*

Jesus as the eternally begotten Son of God was the very image of God in His person and nature, reflecting perfectly the character and life of His Father.

Human beings at the time of the original creation were also made as God's image and likeness and were designed in a limited, creaturely way to reflect God in the world as His self-expression in every aspect of their lives (Gen. 1: 26-28).

Because of sin, however, we failed to fulfill this vocation of imaging or reflecting God in the world. So it was entirely appropriate that Jesus as the eternally begotten Son and image of God should become incarnate in the flesh to fulfill this task as a man—the new or second Adam! (CP, p. 70f).

Jesus now is the only true representation and revelation of God to humanity and the world.

This is the same idea that is expressed in passages such as John 1:18,

John 1:18 No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.

And Hebrews 1:3,

“He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature.”

The words of the *Nicene Creed* (A.D. 325) are especially clear on this same point, declaring Jesus to be “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.”

Jesus as the embodied image of God not only teaches us that He is fully God, but that He also fulfills the purposes of God for humanity.

Just as humanity was the climax of the first creation, so also Christ as the incarnate image of God is both the climax of the first creation, and the beginning of the new creation (CP, p. 70f).

As such, He and He alone is the goal of our transformation. We are called to be like Him in fulfillment of our own identity as redeemed images of God, as Col. 3: 10 points out: “put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him.”

Perhaps it is fair to say, then, that both the world and humanity itself were originally conceived in view of the incarnation of Jesus as the image of God.

Perhaps God created the world to become man in it so that men and women could again become His image by grace as partakers of the divine life (2 Pet. 1: 4) (WSW, p. 2).

The idea that Jesus is the very image of God also helps us to understand the second claim in verse 15 that He is the first born of all creation.

2. *Jesus is the first born of all creation (v. 15b)*

Some have taken this to mean that Jesus was the very first created being. But this is a mistake. For if He is the eternally begotten Son and image of God, now incarnate, He is not a created being at all, but the fullness of God in the flesh.

Hence, this unique phrase — *the first born of all creation* — advances the supremacy and preeminence of Jesus in relation to the created order.

Just as there was privilege and status of the nation of Israel as God's "first born" (Exod. 4: 22; Jer. 31: 9), and just as the term "first-born" expresses the special place of priority of first born sons in Jewish families, so also Jesus has this kind of "first born" preeminence in relation to creation, *especially in terms of time and rank* (CP, p. 71).

That He is the "first-born" of all creation manifests the truth that (1) He is before it in time (temporal priority), and (2) He is superior to it in rank (ontological priority).

He therefore is the Creator and the King of all creation, a point made crystal clear in the next 2 verses.

B. Jesus is the creator and sustainer of the universe (vv. 16-17)

Col. 1:16 For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things have been created by Him and for Him.

1. Jesus is the creator of the universe (v. 16)

"For by Him *all things* were created" (v. 16). This means that Jesus was the agent of all creation — He authored it and brought it into being.

The expression "all things" conveys the notion of "the totality" which has been created by Him. What that totality or "all things" consists of is found in the next phrase.

The creation in its totality includes all things in the "heavens and on the earth"— that is, the *invisible* world of spiritual beings and realities, and the *visible* world of physical beings and realities.

You can detect that Paul has the Colossian heresy in mind here and their worship of spirits, angels, and demons. They shouldn't worship these things. Christ created them and all things. He is supreme and preeminent and Lord. Worship and follow Him.

Likewise the apostle John declared that "apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being" (John 1:3).

The author of the book of Hebrews states similarly, "He is the one through whom God made the world" (Heb. 1: 2).

So Paul stresses again at the conclusion of the verse that Christ is the agent of the creation of ALL THINGS. "All things have been created by Him and for Him" (v. 16).

Then he also adds the thought that Christ is also the One *for whom* the creation was made. He is the end or final purpose of creation.

The whole creation exists not only because of Christ but for the sake of Christ, for the fulfillment of His sovereign purposes, and for His glory.

Paul makes a similar point in Romans 11:36 about God Himself, "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things."

Christ, then, is the cosmic creator. "Wherever you look, or whatever realities you think of, you discover entities which, even if they do not acknowledge the fact, owe their very existence to Christ" (CP, p. 72).

TURN TO YOUR NEIGHBOR SITTING BESIDE YOU AND FOR 90 SECONDS, LIST AS MANY DIFFERENT KINDS OF CREATURES THAT CHRIST CREATED AS YOU CAN.

Here's what this statement about Christ as the comprehensive creator of all creatures in Colossians means in more practical terms.

It certainly means that He is the creator of the typical things we often think of in creation such as animals, mountains, trees, flowers, rivers, rocks and so on.

But it really means more. Christ as creator of all creatures also includes:

- ◆ Processes (metabolism, photosynthesis, nuclear fission)
- ◆ Cycles: (hydrologic, ecological, astronomical)
- ◆ Theories: (of cognition, history, personality, education)
- ◆ Practical tools and technology: (machinery, computers, cars, electric lights, cell telephones)
- ◆ Cultural institutions: (schools, governments, museums, labor unions, the courts, the family, cities, etc) (JCLT, p. 3)

In other words, everything we can think of is a part of creation, CREATURELY in character, created by Christ, from alpha to zeta, from a beautiful Bach cantata to powerful X-ray machines.

But this is not all, for v. 17 states that Jesus is not only prior to and thus supreme over the creation, but also that He also holds the universe together.

2. *Jesus is the sustainer of the universe (v. 17)*

Col. 1:17 And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

“He is before all things” (v. 17). Here, Paul states that Christ is prior to His creation of all things, and like the expression “first born” in v. 15, indicates His supremacy to it in both time and in rank. Christ is the Creator of and Lord over all that has been made.

“In Him all things hold together” (v. 17). This amazing claim establishes the truth that Christ sustains and upholds the universe. He keeps it in existence. Its very preservation and continued integration are due to His power and divine control.

He keeps it from falling into chaos. There is scientific significance here as well, as Jesus is the force that keeps the molecular, atomic and subatomic worlds, as well as astronomical and macrocosmic realities in tact. And everything in between.

Nothing is independent of Christ in its existence and preservation. No creature is truly autonomous. Everything is dependent upon and serves Him.

Hence, as a practical thought, we might ought to consider giving up the word “nature” as a synonym for creation.

The word “Nature” implies that the physical universe is its own thing, autonomous or independent and self existing. It fails to see the cosmos from the perspective of Christ as its creator and sustainer.

All things come from Him and are utterly dependent upon Him. All things are designed to serve Him and bring Him

glory.

The cosmic Christ of Colossians is the creator of the universe!

And now as we will also see, He is the cosmic redeemer and reconciler of what He has created. Everything Christ created has been corrupted and devastated by sin, and is now alienated, hostile, and unrighteous.

So here we make the dramatic move from creation to new creation!

II. Jesus Christ the Cosmic Redeemer (Col. 1: 18-23)

A. *Jesus is the head of the church, the first born from the dead, and preeminent in all things (v. 18)*

1. *Jesus is the head of the church (v. 18a)*

Col. 1:18 He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything.

Paul's description of Jesus continues with a statement concerning His relationship to the church. Jesus who is Lord of creation is also Lord of the church according to the apostle, for "He is also the head of the body the church."

That Jesus is the HEAD of the body which is the church means several things.

a. The incarnation of Christ as the image of God continues on in the church as the body of Christ of which He is the head. The church now individually and corporately is to be the image of God in the world.

b. There is an organic connection between the Christ as head and the church as His body. He, therefore, is the source of Church's life and direction.

c. As Christ is the second Adam and new man, so also the church in unity with Christ is the new humanity in which God's purposes for creation and humankind find their renewal and fulfillment.

2. *Jesus is the first born from the dead (v. 18b)*

Col. 1:18b and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything.

In addition to being the creator and sustainer of the cosmos, head of the body and Lord of the church, Paul declared that Jesus is also “the beginning, the first-born from the dead.” This refers to Christ’s conquest over the great enemies of humanity and creation, namely sin and death.

To say that Christ is the beginning, the first born from the dead means that:

1. Christ is the first ever to be resurrected from the dead, that He enjoys the priority in both time and rank when it comes to the order of resurrection. He is its first and greatest example.
2. It means that the new kingdom age and order of resurrection life has already arrived in the midst of this present age, offering salvation and a new kind of resurrection life to those who believe.
3. It means that those who are in Christ will also be resurrected from the dead at the end, since He is the just the beginning and first born from the dead.

And in addition to His triumph over sin and death, Christ’s resurrection was also for another purpose, namely to display His supremacy in all things.

3. *Jesus is preeminent in everything since He is God (v. 18c-19)*

“So that He might come to have first place in everything.”

Let’s put some ideas in this passage together.

- ◆ Jesus is the image of God, the first born of creation, the creator and upholder of all reality.
- ◆ He is the head of the church.
- ◆ He is the beginning and first born from the dead.
- ◆ In other words, the cosmic Christ has first place in creation and new creation!

Christ's supremacy makes good sense because of what v. 19 says about Him.

Col. 1:19 For it was the {Father's} good pleasure for all the fullness [of deity] to dwell in Him.

This amplifies v. 15 which says of Jesus that He is the image of the invisible God, and now here that in Him dwells all the fullness of deity in Him.

But his supremacy is not only based on his Godhood, but also on his work of reconciling, redeeming, reclaiming, renewing and restoring all things, as vv. 20-23 point out.

B. Jesus has reconciled the universe and believers to God (vv. 20-23)

1. Jesus has reconciled the universe to God (v. 20)

Col. 1:20 and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, {I say}, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

If we put the thoughts of v. 19 and v. 20 together, what we have is the idea that God dwelt full in Christ in order to reconcile all things to God through himself/Jesus by the blood of His cross.

This dramatic language highlights the fact that human sin has resulted in cosmic effects, not only alienating men and women from their creator, but also bringing the created order under the divine curse (cf. Rom. 8:20-22).

However, through Christ, the totality of things has been reconciled to God — whether things on earth or things in heaven — the whole cosmos has been restored to relationship with God.

All those “creatures” that have been alienated from their created purpose are being restored, whether it be such as animals, mountains, trees, flowers, rivers, rocks, or the various processes, cycles, theories, practical tools and technologies, cultural institutions, etc. All are the subjects of Christ's reconciling work!

And this includes believers as well.

2. Jesus has reconciled believers to God (vv. 21-23)

a. Past condition: alienation and hostility, engaged in evil deeds (v. 21)

Col. 1:21 And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds,

Alienated = distanced, separated, divorced
Hostile in mind = averse to truth, ideological enemies
Engaged in evil deeds = practicing wickedness

b. Present standing: reconciled to God (v. 22a)

Col. 1:22a yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death,

In verses 21-22 Paul emphasized that the reconciliation accomplished by Christ resulted in a radical change in those who believed in Him.

- ◆ Those alienated are reunited in friendship with God.
- ◆ Those hostile in mind are now sympathetic with His truth.
- ◆ Those engaged in evil deeds now practice righteousness.

c. Future purpose and requirement (v. 22b-23)

Future purpose:

Col. 1: 22b in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach—

“God’s purpose then is to create a holy people in Christ.

“This he has done in principle, by dealing with sin on the cross and thus already achieving reconciliation.

This he *is* doing in practice, by refashioning their lives according to the pattern of the perfect life, that of Christ. (see 3: 10).

This he *will* do in the future, when that work is complete and the church enjoys fully that which at present it awaits in hope.

The present process, which begins with patient Christian living and ends with the resurrection itself, will result in Christians being presented without shame or fear before God, glad subjects before their king.” (CP, p. 83).

Requirement: perseverance of the saints!

Col. 1:23 if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.

“From the human point of view, Christians discover whether their faith is of the genuine sort only by patient perseverance, encouraged by the Christian hope.” (CP, 83f.)

III. Major Themes for Reflection and Application

One: *Who is Jesus?* On the basis of this passage, it is insufficient to say that He is a cynic sage or merely personal Lord and Savior, especially in informal, pietistic, and sentimental terms. While He is our personal Lord and Savior, He is also:

- The image of God
- The first born of all creation.
- The maker of heaven and earth
- The sustainer of the universe
- The head of the church
- The first born from the dead
- The reconciler of creation and the church!

He is the cosmic Christ of Colossians! How unique He is among world religions!
How our conception of Him needs infinite expansion!

Two: *What is the world?* On the basis of this passage, we must make the wonderful rediscovery of the world as Christ’s creation. Jesus is the cosmic creator. We must recognize its deep religious meaning and sacred character since it is by Christ, through Christ, and for Christ. Everything that exists speaks of Him! The whole earth is full of His glory! This transforms living into a

sacrament and enables us to see our Savior in all things great and small.

It reminds us of our stewardship of the earth, and our responsibility to care for creation and to be godly, redemptive, salt and light shapers of culture by calling. It reminds us of our profound tasks in the world done as unto the Lord rather than for men, for He is its maker and sustainer!

Three: *What is being redeemed?* On the basis of this passage, we must recognize that all things are being reconciled to God. Jesus is the cosmic redeemer. Most of our efforts in evangelism focus on the human soul, but if Christ has indeed reconciled the totality to God, then the church as the instrument of reconciliation ought to be concerned with how that reconciliation affects every aspect of life and culture, and all creation.

Everywhere there is alienation, hostile thought and wicked deeds, there Christ has shed His blood to bring reconciliation. This certainly includes our reconciliation with God, but it also includes reconciliation with other people, whether with believers or unbelievers.

But reconciliation puts things back together again, and so there is need for reconciliation to occur through the church in business, politics, law, the media, arts, journalism, foreign policy, labor relations, in families, in churches and so on.

In other words, believers who have been reconciled to God should be agents of reconciliation across the whole spectrum of life, bring the newness of the kingdom to bear in all the earth.

Four: *Who is the head of the church?* If Christ is the head of the church, then why do we act as if we owned it? We should seek His leadership and guidance and joyfully submit to Him.

Five: *What is the way to peace?* Our alienation, our hostility, our wickedness, all which produce the tumult, stress, misery, and disorder in our lives, has been overcome by Jesus the reconciler! Peace comes through the blood of Christ's cross who has reconciled us to God. As Paul says, then, in 2 Cor. 5: 20, "We beg you on behalf of Christ: Be reconciled to God!"

Six: *How should we then live?* On the basis of this passage, as those created and reconciled by Jesus Christ, by the one who is the head of the church and the first born from the dead, we must seek to be holy, blameless, beyond reproach, continuing in the faith, firmly established and not move from the hope of the gospel.

The basis for this is clear: we have believed and been baptized in the name of the cosmic Christ of Colossians, the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of

all things!

¹ I have used four sources in preparing this study. First is a Sunday School lesson provided online by Founders Ministry <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/ss/110203.htm> (abbreviated FM). The second is N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale NT Commentaries (Downers Grove: IVP, 1986), (abbreviated CP). The third is an unpublished paper by Kristen Michaelis, "Woman and the Salvation of the World: Reflections on the Thought of Paul Evdokimov" (abbreviated WSW). The fourth is a paper by Kenneth Hermann, "Jesus Christ: Lord of ALL Things" (abbreviated JCLT).