

“The Image of the Invisible God”

The Third in a Series of Sermons on Colossians

Texts: Colossians 1:15–23; Psalm 89:19–37

Whatever the Colossian Heresy was exactly, Paul’s answer to it is to show forth the supremacy of Jesus over all things. To do that, Paul utilizes an early Christian hymn which speaks of Jesus as the very image of God and the creator of all things, who, in his work of new creation, delivers his people from the consequences of Adam’s fall—sin and death—reconciling them to God and calling them into his church, of which, He, Jesus, is the head. The content of this hymn provides Christians with some of the most important teaching about Jesus found anywhere in the New Testament—a so called “high” Christology—and sets the stage for much of what follows in the balance of Paul’s letter to the church in Colossae. Paul utilizes this hymn to set forth Jesus as the only one in whom true spiritual fullness is found (contrary to the false teachers promoting the Colossian heresy), as well as to make the point that because Jesus is creator of all things, he is that one who delivers his people from the realm of darkness (vain philosophy, human traditions, religious legalism).¹

As we continue our series on Colossians, we will take up a passage loaded with doctrinal content about the person and work of Jesus. In his incarnation, the second person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus, takes to himself a true human nature in the womb of the virgin, conceived by the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. While the gospels focus upon the events surrounding the miraculous conception and birth of Jesus, the New Testament epistles often focus upon the meaning of Jesus’ person and work, including a discussion of Christ’s two natures—one human, one divine—yet which exist in one person, Jesus the Christ, along with detailed reflection upon his saving work on the cross and in his bodily resurrection from the dead. All of this is found in the “Christ hymn” of Colossians 1:15-20.

No sooner had the apostolic churches been founded, these churches soon encountered those who either misunderstood, or else intentionally distorted, what was revealed about Jesus in the gospels, and which was proclaimed and taught by the apostles. The Colossian heresy is one of those instances in which false teaching arose in one of these newly-founded churches in the Lycus Valley in Asia Minor. When this false teaching was brought to Paul’s attention by Epaphras, the founding pastor of the church in Colossae, the apostle responds with this letter, the Epistle to the Colossians. As F. F. Bruce puts it, “the intelligent appreciation for the doctrine of Christ is the best safeguard against most forms of heretical teaching and certainly against that which was currently threatening the peace of the Colossian Christians.”² The same holds true today. The more we know about the person and work of Jesus, the more successful we will be in our witness to others, the greater our personal devotion to him, and the better our response to those who challenge our faith, much as the Colossians were experiencing.

In Colossians 1:15-20, part of our text this morning (we will get as far as verse 23), we come to another of the so-called “Christ hymns” found throughout the writings of Paul. We recently covered a similar Christ hymn, the so-called *Carmen Christi* of Philippians 2:6-11, which, you may recall has a similar

¹ Moo, Colossians, 111.

² Bruce, The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians, 55.

literary structure as well as similar content which uses highly exalted language of Jesus drawn from the Old Testament. We do not know if these hymns were used in Christian worship before Paul incorporated them into his letters. It is certainly a possibility that Paul composed them when writing the letters in which they appear, but they do seem to predate Paul. Both Christ hymns identify Jesus as one with YHWH (i.e., Jesus is God), both speak of his incarnation (Jesus taking to himself a true human nature), and in both Philippians 2 and here, Paul draws heavily upon Old Testament passages which foretell, or prefigure the coming of Jesus as Israel's Messiah and the Son of God. If we wish to be good students of Paul, we need to train ourselves to look for these echoes and allusions to the Old Testament (especially from the Psalms) which are found throughout his letters.

The "Christ hymn" of Colossians 1:15-20 is one of the great Christological passages in all the New Testament. We call it a "hymn," but it was not intended to be sung like a modern hymn. It is not a poem or an ode in the classical Greco-Roman sense. We could perhaps most accurately speak of these Christ hymns as "creeds." They are set off in stanzas, and they have an obvious theological, confessional, and liturgical purpose. They help the Christians who use them to understand just who Jesus is, so as to better confess him and his saving work as a witness to non-Christians around us, and then to use this confession in Christian worship as a statement of those things we believe in common (as a church) and which we confess together about Jesus, our Lord who has delivered us from sin and death.³

The Christ hymn of Colossians follows directly upon Paul's assertion in the previous section of the letter (vv. 3-14), when Paul gives thanks for God's wonderful work of redemption in the person of Jesus. In verses 13-14 at the end of that thanksgiving Paul writes that Jesus—whom Paul has argued is a second Adam who has inaugurated a work of new creation—"has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." The redemptive work of Jesus raises the question, "who is Jesus?" if he is able to accomplish all of these things for his people, and deliver them from the domain of darkness and transfer them into his kingdom, in which we have redemption and the forgiveness of sin.

We know that what follows is a sort of hymn or creed because of the repetition of key words and phrases which are formed into stanzas. The first stanza (vv. 15-16) proclaims Christ's supremacy seen in his creation of all things, echoing the creation account and recalling to mind that Adam was created in the divine image, even as Jesus is the very image of the Father. The hymn also reflects the personified Wisdom of God as the divine Logos—Jesus is the Word incarnate. The idea that Jesus is God's Wisdom personified is not limited to Paul's writings, but is also found in Hebrews 1:2b-3a; in John's Gospel (1:1-5) and even echoed in Revelation 3:14.⁴

The second stanza (vv. 16-20) proclaims the supremacy of Jesus in his work of new creation, which includes reconciling the fallen sons and daughters of Adam unto himself, and then taking his place as the head of the church. The stress upon new creation provides a fitting conclusion to what was affirmed in verses 15-16, Jesus is creator of all things. As one writer puts it, "here, then, Christ is presented as the agent of God in the whole range of his gracious purposes toward the human race, from the primeval work of creation, through the redemption accomplished at history's mid-point, on to the new creation in which

³ Peter T. O'Brien, Colossians, Philemon, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco TX: Word, 1982), Vol. 44, 32-33.

⁴ Bruce, The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians, 56.

the divine purpose will be consummated.”⁵ This hymn takes us from eternity past (Jesus as the image of God), to the moment of creation (all things come through him) to his work of reconciling sinners to God (about 30 AD) to the very end of time (when all things are brought into subjection to Jesus).

With this in mind, we can take up the first stanza of this remarkable hymn proclaiming the supremacy of Christ, vv. 15-16. *“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.”* The hymn opens with the assertion that Jesus is the image (*ikōn*) of the invisible God. In our Lord’s incarnation the invisible has become visible.⁶ The second person of the Godhead has taken a true human nature to himself in the womb of the virgin. Calvin puts it this way:

The sum is, that God in Himself, that is, in his naked majesty, is invisible; and that not only to the physical eyes, but also to human understanding; and that he is revealed to us in Christ alone, where we may behold Him as in a mirror. For in Christ He shows us His righteousness, goodness, wisdom, power, in short, his entire self. We must, therefore, take care not to seek him elsewhere; for outside Christ, everything that claims to represent God will be an idol.⁷

If we wish to know what the invisible God is like, we look to Jesus, the visible image of God. As noted, Paul clearly has Genesis 1:26-27 and the creation of Adam in mind when he speaks of Jesus here. *“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”* Adam was created in God’s image and was God’s son in the sense of Genesis 5:1-5, so when Adam had a son, it was said Adam son was “in his own likeness according to his own image.” Jesus, on the other hand, is the eternal Son of God, never created, and existing before all things were created. Even in his incarnation, Jesus is still the image of God, and reflects the image which Adam and his descendants should have reflected, but due to sin, have not and will not until we are raised and glorified.⁸

The other remarkable expression used of Jesus in verse 15 is that he said to be the “firstborn” of all creation [*prōtokos*]. Those seeking to deny the full deity of Jesus, such as the Arians, seized upon this word as somehow expressing that as “firstborn,” Jesus was created by the Father in ages past, and then Jesus, in turn, created everything else. On Arian terms, Jesus was not eternally pre-existent, and he has a beginning at a moment in time. As the Arian praise band once sung, “there was a time when the Son was not.” But the term “firstborn” is not primarily a chronological reference (i.e., Jesus was born first—the first creature YHWH created), but is instead a title, referring to the first in a family, that one who was preeminent when it came to right of inheritance. The Jews understood Adam to be “firstborn” in this

O. Bruce, The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians, 57.

⁶ O’Brien, Colossians, Philemon, 43.

⁷ John Calvin, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries, trans T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 308.

⁸ Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 846-848.

sense as the head of the human family, as well as one who was the special object of the father's love.⁹ Similarly, when the reference is used of Jesus, he is the second Adam, but also the firstborn of all humanity in the new creation. Calling Jesus "firstborn" is a way of saying that as creator and redeemer, Jesus is preeminent over all things. It in no sense means Jesus is a creature.

The term "firstborn" has a significant Old Testament usage, especially in Psalm 89:27-29 (part of our Old Testament lesson), where it refers to the coming messianic king whose Father is YHWH and who is given the title "firstborn." The Psalmist writes, "*and I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth. My steadfast love I will keep for him forever, and my covenant will stand firm for him. I will establish his offspring forever and his throne as the days of the heavens.*" This messianic figure will be highly exalted, more than any of the kings of the earth. He will possess a throne which is said to last forever. The point which the Christ hymn is making is that Jesus is that coming one to whom the Psalm refers, especially in light of Exodus 4:22, where Moses is commanded, "*then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son.'*" What Adam failed to do, the firstborn will. What Israel failed to do, fulfill all righteousness and possess the promised inheritance (in Israel's case, the promised land), the true "firstborn" will accomplish.¹⁰ It is certainly implied here that Jesus is not only the second Adam but also the true Israel. Jesus is truly the "firstborn," and both the guarantor and the recipient of the promised inheritance, as well as the primary object of the Father's love.

That "firstborn" is not an indication that Jesus was created by the Father at a moment of time in the far distant past is seen in verse 16, when the hymn describes Jesus "as creator all things." Yes, Jesus is the visible "image of God," and the "firstborn," who is preeminent in all things, but before anything was created that is now created, Jesus was. Jesus always was. There was never a time when the Son was not—the orthodox response to the Arians.

The sequence of events in redemptive history and summarized here tell us that as the second Adam, the eternal, pre-existent Jesus holds that place of rule and authority that Adam and the human race should have exercised, had not Adam fallen into sin. But it is more than that. Jesus is that one by whom *all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.*" Jesus is before the creation—that is, he is eternal God, the very image of the Father. In Jesus, all things which now exist were created (visible to our eyes or not). Therefore, he is sovereign over all things and all creatures, and directs them to his appointed end for which he created them. As preeminent in all things, Jesus is the special object of the Father's love and therefore the firstborn over all things as their creator.

As we move into the second stanza of the hymn (vv. 17-20), what was implied, is now made explicit. In verse 17, we read that Jesus is "*before all things, and in him all things hold together.*" If Jesus is before all things, then he is not created—he is eternal. It was he who created all things. Since he alone possesses the divine power and supremacy to speak, so things that were not now are, he is that one who sustains and directs that which he has made. The hymn tells us "in him," i.e., in the person of Jesus, all created things hold together. Jesus is Lord of the universe, and he directs it to his goal. He is the one who gives life and sustains everything which he has made. As one writer reminds us, "apart from his continuous

⁹ O'Brien, Colossians, Philemon, 44.

¹⁰ Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 846-848.

sustaining activity . . . all would disintegrate.”¹¹

Here the words of the Christ hymn sound very much like those of Hebrews 1:2-3. *“In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.”* The false claim that the deity of Jesus was not a settled matter in the apostolic church, and was not fully agreed upon until the new Christian Roman emperor Constantine made that determination by forcing Christians to accept the decision of Nicea in 325, is positively laughable. Those in the Dan Brown/Da Vinci Code club who affirm that the deity of Jesus is a political matter, simply ignore the New Testament. Well, at least they have never seriously considered Colossians 1:15-20; Philippians 2:6-11, nor Hebrews 1:2-3 as apostolic teaching.

The remarkable point here is that this same Jesus who has created all things, is the Jesus who took to himself a human nature in the womb of the virgin, and then came to earth as the second Adam to undo the consequences of the first Adam’s sin. He is creator. He is new creator. In fact, his work of new creation is confessed in verse 18, when the hymn states, *“and he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.”* An abridgment perhaps of Paul’s discussion of the church as the body of Christ in his earlier epistles (1 Corinthians 12:12-27, or Romans 12:4-5), here our Lord’s work in new creation is defined, in part, by the fact that he is the head of his body (composed of all its various members), which is the church.

Unfortunately, whenever the topic of “church” comes up, it is taken to be a divisive subject because there are so many churches with so many different emphases, that we put religion under the same ban as we do politics. Religion isn’t something you discuss in public, because doing so will lead to an argument. There are also those who do not think the church is anything but a voluntary organization you can join or unjoin at will. But for the hymn’s author, as for Paul, the church is the body of Christ of which he is the head—that one to whom we submit and who gives life to his body. Local congregations, individually and collectively are that body’s manifestation. We might not like the subject because it makes us uncomfortable and often pulls the rug out from under our feet, but the point being made is that Jesus’ work in new creation is, in part, to create and form a church, a mystical body, with Jesus as head. The New Testament nowhere conceives of people being Christians and professing faith in Christ, apart from the local church. In the New Testament, when anyone is converted and comes to faith in Jesus, they do so in the context of a local church.

Furthermore, Jesus is said to be “the beginning” which is a reference to his preeminence in all things,¹² but when linked to the title which follows, “firstborn from the dead,” it becomes clear that Jesus’ role in the new creation begins with his resurrection from the dead. As Jesus’ power was manifest when he spoke and all things came into being, so too, when he conquered death and the grave the first Easter, his Lordship is seen to extend over all things as he brings all things into submission under his feet, including death, as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 15. This is what we mean when we confess, “Jesus is Lord.” As the hymn puts it, *“in everything he might be preeminent.”*

In verse 19, we find yet another affirmation which explains why Jesus is Lord over all things, why he is

¹¹ O’Brien, Colossians, Philemon, 47.

¹² O’Brien, Colossians, Philemon, 51.

seen as “preeminent” in all things. *“For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”* This is as clear an assertion of Jesus’ deity as one finds in all the New Testament. There is much debate about how to translate the Greek sentence, which is translated by the ESV somewhat ambiguously. We ought to understand it as “God in all his fullness has chosen to dwell in Christ.”¹³ This expression in the hymn would refute the notion taught by the false teacher(s) spreading the heretical idea that fullness was achieved by embracing their philosophy, human traditions, mysticism, and legalism. No, fullness is only found in Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate, God in his fullness.¹⁴ Paul’s point is that what the Colossians are seeking, they will never find apart from Christ. Since God’s fullness is found only in Jesus, then those advocating the Colossian heresy are looking for the wrong kind of fullness in all the wrong places.

The final verse in the hymn (v. 20), speaks of Jesus’ new creation work in reconciling the lost and fallen world brought about by Adam unto himself. The fullness of God dwells in Jesus *“and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”* Those of us who grew up in American evangelicalism were used to hearing that “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” Since we have been taught to think that way, we tend to understand reconciliation as speaking of a sinner reconciling themselves to God. But the focus of Paul’ assertion here, as in 2 Corinthians 5:17-19, is *“therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”* It is Christ who reconciles God to us and us to God. He, not us, is the reconciler.

When Paul is making his case for the Lordship of Christ, he begins with the fall of Adam into sin, so that the world lay under God’s wrath because of our collective rebellion against our creator. This is what Paul has in mind when he speaks of reconciliation—we are at war with God because we are in rebellion against God. American evangelicals, on the other hand, tend to start with human freedom and ability to choose the good, not human sin and the inability to do anything to make the first step toward God. This stanza clearly emphasizes the fact that in Jesus’ work of new creation which dawns with his resurrection, he is Lord over all of creation. It is Jesus who reconciles the fallen creation and his chosen people (who make up Christ’s church) to God.

It is not as though God has some ambivalent love for the world, so that he sends Jesus to save all those who choose to be reconciled. Rather, since people who are dead in cannot choose Jesus, unless and until God makes them alive in Christ, the focus of reconciliation falls upon the sovereign activity of Jesus. Throughout the New Testament, our salvation is grounded in the love of God who acts to reconcile the fallen world to himself through the incarnation and saving work of Jesus. In the person of Jesus, God will save his elect by redeeming them, but will also renew fallen creation through this second Adam.

The means through which God accomplishes this is the blood of Jesus shed upon the cross. We are saved by His typable blood, shed on a Friday afternoon two thousand years ago, just outside the city of Jerusalem. It is the death of Jesus—in which the Father pours out his wrath upon his Son to save us from God’s wrath and anger—which reconciles the holy God to a fallen creation. God does this because he is

¹³ Moo, Colossians, 132.

¹⁴ Moo, Colossians, 132.

love. But he must also satisfy his holy justice. In the cross of Jesus, we see the wrath of God and the love of God both on display in a perfect embrace. The two things are reconciled (God's love and his justice), every bit as much as the creation and God's elect are reconciled to God through the self-giving of Jesus, who allows himself to be crucified, yet in doing so, fulfills God's eternal purpose. As Luke tells us in Acts 2:23, "*this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.*" Jesus is the creator of all things, while at the same time, the one who sheds his blood to reconcile his people and renew all things—things on earth and things in heaven—unto the Father.

While the hymn (whether composed by Paul or used in Christian worship) refutes a number of the tenets of the Colossian heresy, it also reflects the things the Colossian Christians embraced by faith when the gospel was first preached to them. In light of Jesus' reconciling work on the cross, in verses 21-22, after quoting the hymn Paul reminds the Colossians, about their personal stake in Jesus' work of new creation. "*And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.*" One of the sure evidences that Jesus is the firstborn from the dead and that one in whom the fullness of God dwells, is the fact that those receiving this letter are the recipients of Christ's saving work.

Until the gospel was preached in Lycus Valley by Epaphras (or perhaps others) the Colossians were just like those spreading the Colossian heresy—in rebellion against God, hostile to him in their thinking and doing evil deeds. In other words, the Colossians were thinking and acting like pagans under the wrath of God. They were not seeking God, nor worried about their sin. Yet God had mercy upon them and Jesus' reconciling work was proclaimed to them—Jesus died in the flesh to reconcile them to God. Another of the main rhetorical devices found in Paul's writings surfaces here—the use of contrast. Once you were, but now you are.¹⁵ Once you were dead in sin, now you are alive in Christ. And, Paul adds, they are not merely alive, but once reconciled, the former Colossian pagans have been presented to the Father (by the Son) as holy, blameless, and above reproach. In the epistles to the Romans and Galatians, Paul would have said of them, they have been justified through faith in Jesus.

As we wrap up, our application is provided for us by Paul himself in verse 23. "*If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.*" The gospel is being proclaimed in all the earth. Colossians heard it nearly two thousand years ago. We have heard it in this sermon. They believed it. So must we. Paul exhorts them to continue on believing the doctrine in the Christ hymn and which he taught them. So too must we. Paul calls them to continue in a steady and determined manner, despite the challenges raised by pagans and by the difficulties of life. So too must we. Paul urges them not to shift their hope away from the gospel. He urges us to do likewise. For our hope as we head into this advent season is in a Savior (Jesus) who is the image of the invisible God, who is the firstborn from the dead, Lord over all things (visible and invisible), and the head of his church of which we are members. Let us continue in all these things! It is our duty, our joy, and to our benefit.

¹⁵ Moo, Colossians, 138.