

Series: *Colossians: The Supremacy and Sufficiency of Christ*

Lesson: *The Cosmic Christ*

Text: Colossians 1:15-20 (L3)

Date: Sunday, January 29, 2012

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Colonial Hills
Baptist Church

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Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

TEACHING TIP

- I mentioned this tip a few weeks ago, but I'll reiterate it for our new teachers: Read through these notes several times before you teach. However, when you teach, don't read these notes verbatim to your table. Using the half-sheet handout given to those at your table, develop your own bulleted, "key word/phrase" outline. Perhaps go paragraph by paragraph through these notes and summarize each one's main point with a key phrase or two. Write those summaries as bulleted points on the half-sheet handout. Then teach from your own outline. This will keep you from reading the notes and getting bogged down in detail. It will allow you to be selective and will force you to personalize the material as you teach it in your own words and with your own inflections.

NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Colossians 1:21-23 – Responding to Our Reconciliation

INTRODUCTION

When we come to verse 15, we find ourselves wading in waters that are over our head. No less than fifteen descriptions of the glories of Jesus are listed for us in verses 14-20. For starters, Jesus is revealed to be divine, creative, eternal, majestic, authoritative, redemptive, mediatory, substitutionary, and reconciliatory. In summary, Jesus is the Lord of creation (vv. 15-17) and the Lord of redemption (vv. 18-20). In these verses we learn that Jesus is supreme, for He is the cosmic Christ.

Colossians 1:15-20 is an incredibly Christ-focused, Christ-exalting passage, and it is our privilege this morning to gaze upon "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (II Corinthians 4:6). As we "behold His glory" this morning (John 1:14), we will organize what we see into three main considerations.



Considering what you already know about the Colossians and Paul's letter to them, why was this Christ-exalting passage so important for them to consider? See the "Background Information" from the first lesson – Colossian heretics were denying Jesus' deity, humanity, and sufficiency for salvation; Paul wanted them to grow in and according to the knowledge of God (1:9-10); Paul wanted them to give thanks for what Christ had done, etc.

CHRIST IN RELATION TO GOD: HIS GLORIOUS PERSON (v. 15a)

Verse 15 highlights Jesus' special relationship to God with one key phrase—Jesus “is the image of the invisible God.” Against the Colossian heretics who taught that Christ was an emanation from God, or a lesser spirit descending from God, Paul clearly states Jesus' equality and ministry with God. The word “image” translates the Greek word *eikon* from which we get our word, “icon.” This word is used in Luke 20:24 and Revelation 13:14 to refer respectively to Caesar's portrait on a coin and to a statue of the Antichrist's. The word, then, simply means “image, likeness, portrait.”

In Hebrews 1:3, we read concerning Jesus, that He “is the brightness of [the Father's] glory and the express image [Gk. *charakter*] of His person.” In other words, Jesus radiates or reflects God's glory and is the exact representation or reproduction of God Himself. Jesus shares the very form and essence of God (Philippians 2:6), because He Himself is God (John 1:1; 8:58; 10:30-33; Romans 9:5; Colossians 1; 19; 2:9; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8; II Peter 1:1). Since God the Father is “invisible” (John 6:46; Timothy 1:17; 6:16; Hebrews 11:27), Jesus Christ shows us what He is like, for “he that hath seen Me,” Jesus said, “hath seen the Father” (John 14:9). “In Christ, the invisible God became visible, ‘and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only Begotten from the Father’ (John 1:14).”¹

Therefore, we could say that Jesus manifests, reveals, or unveils God by illustrating, imaging, depicting, or displaying God because He Himself is God. So, if you want to know God (cf. Colossians 1:9-10), you must know Jesus. If you want to learn how God thinks and feels, what He does or how He would respond, what He desires and dislikes, what pleases Him and what grieves Him, then you need to learn from Jesus. The visible Jesus is the very fullness of God (v. 19; 2:9).

Now, man is also said to be “made in the image of God” (I Corinthians 11:7; cf. Genesis 1:26-27). MacArthur explains what that means:

*Humans are made in God's image in that they have rational personality. Like God, they possess intellect, emotion, and will, by which they are able to think, feel, and choose. We humans are not, however, in God's image morally, because He is holy, and we are sinful. Nor are we created in His image essentially. We do not possess His incommunicable attributes, such as omniscience, omnipotence, immutability, or omnipresence. We are human, not divine.*²

¹ MacArthur, John. *Colossians*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1996. P. 44.

² Ibid.

So, while the image of God in man was never a complete image, because we are merely His creation, that image was further imperfected by the Fall.³ Christ doesn't merely resemble God; He possesses the fullness of God, for He is God. And, through the incarnation, He made God visible to us. When we look at Jesus, we look at the God of the universe.



Application: Discuss how the following excerpt from the above lesson should bear on our lives: “If you want to know God (cf. Colossians 1:9-10), you must know Jesus. If you want to learn how God thinks and feels, what He does or how He would respond, what He desires and dislikes, what pleases Him and what grieves Him, then you need to learn from Jesus.”

Transition: Paul has kicked things off in the first part of verse 15 by considering the glorious person of Christ in His equality to and revelation of God. Now, Paul gets to the “meat” of his depiction of Christ, and he starts by showing Christ's relationship to the universe, a relationship in which His glorious power is magnified.

CHRIST IN RELATION TO THE UNIVERSE: HIS GLORIOUS POWER (vv. 15b-17)

While Jesus is certainly 100% man and lived a human life for over 30 years, He is much more. In verses 15-17, the cosmic nature of our Christ is unveiled.

1. *Jesus is the inheritor of the universe (v. 15b).*

Jesus is the “Firstborn of every creature [or better, *over all creation*].” Although many deceivers have sought support from this phrase for their denial of Jesus' deity, their interpretation clearly ignores the context of this passage and misunderstands the meaning of the Greek word *prototokos* (“firstborn”). This word can mean firstborn chronologically (Luke 2:7), but it primarily refers to position or rank. In Greek and Jewish culture, the firstborn was the son who received the right of inheritance. Jesus alone has the right to the inheritance of all creation (Hebrews 1:2; Revelation 5:1-7, 13). Israel, who was certainly not the first people group chronologically, was called God's firstborn (Exodus 4:22; Jeremiah 31:9), and the Messiah is called the Firstborn in that He would be “higher [in rank, not first in chronology] than the kings of the earth” (Psalm 89:27).



Discuss how we know that “first-born” cannot be referring to Jesus as a created or birthed being. See paragraph for answers.

³ However, the grand storyline of Scripture is God's plan to glorify Himself by restoring His creation through Jesus Christ. In particular, His restoration focuses on His recreation of man into the divine image. This recreation was started and guaranteed by Jesus Christ, who was the “firstborn” or firstfruits in that process (cf. v. 18). We'll continue these thoughts when we study verse 18 and 3:10.

Furthermore, to conclude that “Firstborn” makes Jesus a created being cannot be harmonized with John 1:18,⁴ and it ignores the contextual teaching that Jesus is the pre-existing Creator (cf. Micah 5:2).

So, everything we see (and have not yet seen) has one Inheritor, one Owner. God has given to Jesus the inheritance of creation. The reason for such a privileged ownership is given in verses 16-17.

2. *He is the creator of the universe (v. 16).*

According to verse 16, Jesus is the creator of the universe. Paul first tells us that all things were created “by”⁵ Jesus Christ. This doctrinal truth is echoed in John 1:3, I Corinthians 8:6, and Hebrews 1:2. Heavenly things and earthly things, and thus invisible and visible things, were all created by Jesus Christ. Even the mighty and powerful ruling things of the universe—“thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers”⁶—were created by Jesus. The psalmist considered the same universe that we marvel at today and exclaimed, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the sky displays His handiwork. Day after day it speaks out; night after night it reveals His greatness. There is no actual speech or word, nor is its voice literally heard. Yet its voice echoes throughout the earth; its words carry to the distant horizon” (Psalm 19:1-4, NET).⁷ Such a majestic testimony to God’s

⁴ “How could He be the first of many in His class, and at the same time the only member of His class?” (Ibid., p. 45)

⁵ The first “by” translates *en* (lit. “in” or “by”) and the second “by” translates *dia* (lit. “by” or “through”). The different words may depict both the creative planning of Christ (*en*—i.e., “in” His mind) and the actual creative activity of Christ (*dia*—i.e., “through His effort”). Cf. Melick, Richard R. Vol. 32, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, electronic ed., Logos Library System in *The New American Commentary*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001. P., 217. According to Melick, the Father’s relationship to creation can be likened to an architect, with the Son’s role similar to the foreman’s, and the Spirit’s work paralleling that of an actual construction worker. The use of different Greek prepositions in I Corinthians 8:6 helps us understand that the Father is the final cause of creation (Gk. *ek*) and the Son is the means or agent of creation (Gk. *dia*). Cf. Dunn, James D. G. *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996. P., 91. The Godhead’s creative roles seem to parallel their redemptive roles—e.g., “The Father thought it, the Son bought it, the Spirit wrought it, and I praise God I got it.”

⁶ This seems to be referring primarily to spiritual forces—cf. I Peter 3:22 and the way these terms are used throughout Colossians’ sister-book, Ephesians. In stressing Christ’s creative power, Paul doesn’t highlight any physical wonders; he stresses that Jesus created the spiritual beings—the argument from greater to the lesser. This would have been an encouragement to the Colossians facing the heretical teachings about spirit beings.

⁷ **Illustration:** “By studying the creation, one can gain a glimpse of the power, knowledge, and wisdom of the Creator. The sheer size of the universe is staggering. The sun, for example, has a diameter of 864,000 miles (One hundred times that of earth’s) and could hold 1.3 million planets the size of earth inside it. The star Betelgeuse, however, has a diameter of 100 million miles, which is larger than the earth’s orbit around the sun. It takes sunlight, traveling at 186,000 miles per second, about 8.5 minutes to reach earth. Yet that same light would take more than four years to reach the nearest star, Alpha Centauri, some 24 trillion miles from earth. The galaxy to

existence and power can only be rejected through willful unbelief according to Paul (Romans 1:20).

Secondly in verse 16, Paul writes that “all things were created...for Him.” Jesus is the goal of creation as it will ultimately and fully glorify Him. Cf. Ephesians 1:10; Philippians 2:10.⁸ There is no other who is worthy of more glory than the Creator Himself! Cf. Romans 11:36.

3. *He is the sustainer of the universe (v. 17).*

Jesus has the sole right to inherit creation, because He created it. Furthermore, verse 17 adds that Christ also maintains or sustains His creation. The verse reads, “And He is before all things, and by Him all things consist.”

The verse first teaches us that *Christ is outside creation*. Paul writes that Jesus “is before all things.” This testifies to Jesus’ eternality and deity. Before “all things” were created (v. 16), Jesus was (cf. John 8:58; 1:1; I John 1:1). Micah 5:2 prophecies of the Messiah, saying, “[His] goings forth have been



What common views of God are shattered by this truth of His sustaining all things? An impersonal God, a careless God, an uncaring God, an impotent God, an uninvolved God, a purposeless God, etc.

which our sun belongs, the Milky Way, contains hundreds of billions of stars. And astronomers estimate there are millions, or even billions of galaxies. What they can see leads them to estimate the number of stars in the universe at 10. That is roughly the number of all the grains of sand on all the world’s beaches.

The universe also bears witness to the tremendous wisdom and knowledge of its Creator. Scientists now speak of the Anthropic Principle, ‘which states that the universe appears to be carefully designed for the well-being of mankind’ (Donald B. DeYoung, ‘Design in Nature: The Anthropic Principle,’ *Impact*, no. 149 [November 1985]: p. ii). A change in the rate of Earth’s rotation around the sun or on its axis would be catastrophic. The Earth would become either too hot or too cold to support life. If the moon were much nearer to the Earth, huge tides would inundate the continents. A change in the composition of the gases that make up our atmosphere would also be fatal to life. A slight change in the mass of the proton would result in the dissolution of hydrogen atoms. That would result in the destruction of the universe, because hydrogen is its dominant element.

The creation gives mute testimony to the intelligence of its Creator. Max Planck, winner of the Nobel Prize and one of the founders of modern physics, wrote, ‘According to everything taught by the exact sciences about the immense realm of nature, a certain order prevails—one independent of the human mind...this order can be formulated in terms of purposeful activity. There is evidence of an intelligent order of the universe to which both man and nature are subservient’ (Cited in DeYoung, ‘Design in Nature,’ p. iii)” (MacArthur, pp. 46-47).

⁸ **Illustration:** Paul’s argument in these verses may be illustrated by an artist who produces a sculpture. Originally the idea and details of the sculpture come from the mind of the artist. He builds the proportions, the perspectives, the figures, and the emphases desired from the statue. Then, the sculpture is constructed by the artist as he and he alone can “see” it. Finally, those who admire the finished work think of the artist who imagined, planned, and accomplished the work of beauty. As long as the sculpture stands, people remember and appreciate the artist. In the same way, Jesus is the central point of all of creation, and he rules over it” (Melick, p. 218).

from of old, from everlasting” (cf. Revelation 22:13). Jesus, as eternal God existing before any of our universe was created, is fully able in His person and in His power to create and maintain His universe.

The verse also informs us that *Christ is upholding creation*. Paul writes that “by [*lit. in*] Him all things consist [*or are held together*].” Hebrews 1:3 reiterates this truth, stating that the Son is “upholding all things by the word of His power.” Jesus has not forgotten His creation, nor stepped away from it. Rather, He

*“maintains the delicate balance necessary to life’s existence. He quite literally holds all things together. He is the power behind every consistency in the universe. He is gravity and centrifugal and centripetal force. He is the One who keeps all the entities in space in their motion. He is the energy of the universe.”*⁹

Jesus’ power is incalculable—He existed before all things, He created all things from nothing, and He continues to sustain all things until the day when He will recreate all things.



Application: Putting aside, for a moment, Christ’s role as Savior, how does this understanding of Christ’s eternal, creating, sustaining, glorious power impact you? What attitudes should it evoke? What pursuits should it direct? Etc. How should the knowledge that we were created “for” Christ and that He’s actively sustaining us change us?

Transition: In relation to God, Jesus is glorious in His person; in relation to the universe, Christ is glorious in power. Paul’s final consideration has to do with Christ’s glorious position in relation to His church.

⁹ MacArthur, p. 48. MacArthur aptly *illustrates* this with the inexplicable “nuclear force” that holds protons together within the nucleus, a force that operates in spite of Coulomb’s law, which states that like charges repel and opposite charges attract. He then applies these considerations to his interpretation of II Peter 3:10, concluding, “One day in the future God will dissolve the strong nuclear force. Peter describes that day as the one when ‘the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up’ (2 Pet. 3:10). With the strong nuclear force no longer operative, Coulomb’s law will take effect, and the nuclei of atoms will fly apart. The universe will literally explode. Until that time, we can be thankful that Christ ‘upholds all things by the word of His power’ (Heb. 1:3)” (Ibid.).

CHRIST IN RELATION TO THE CHURCH: HIS GLORIOUS POSITION (vv. 18-20)

In verse 18, Paul begins to consider Jesus’ relationship to the church. In this rich verse, Paul communicates four aspects about Christ’s relation to His bride.

1. *He is the Head of the church (v. 18a).*

Jesus is “the Head of the body, the church.” This title certainly demonstrates Jesus’ lordship and authority over His church (Ephesians 1:20-23). This title also stresses the living, personal, and dependent relationship believers share with their Lord.

Furthermore, as the human head enlivens and directs the body, providing unity and order to the diverse entities of it, so Christ is the life-giver and leader of His body, the church.¹⁰ A church that fails to recognize Christ’s headship will be without the unity, maturity, energy, focus, ministry, and relationship that the Head provides.



What aspects of of Jesus’ relationship to His church are highlighted by this title, “Head”? See paragraph for answers.

2. *He is the Founder of the church (vv. 18b, 20).*

Christ is secondly described by Paul as the “the Beginning, [that is,] the Firstborn from the dead.” Christ was the first one to rise from the dead, never to die again; His resurrection provides both the power and the pattern for the resurrection (or re-creation) of those who have faith in Him (I Corinthians 15:20-23).¹¹

We can summarize Paul’s point here in three different ways: (1) as He executed the creation of the universe, so He also started the recreation of humanity; (2) as He is the Lord of creation, Jesus is also Lord of the new creation; (3) as the “Firstborn over all creation,” He has supremacy over creation (v. 15), and as the “Firstborn from the dead,” He has supremacy over redemption (v. 18). See, in his glorious depiction of the cosmic Christ, Paul has been highlighting the interrelated works of Christ in creation and redemption. Carson fleshes out this concept:

Christ is the beginning in the sense that He is the firstborn from among the dead, i.e. the founder of a new humanity. The

¹⁰ “This concept is not used in the sense of the head of a company, but rather looks at the church as a living organism, inseparably tied together by the living Christ. He controls every part of it and gives it life and direction. His life lived out through all the members provides the unity of the Body (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12–20). He energizes and coordinates the diversity within the Body, a diversity of spiritual gifts and ministries (1 Cor. 12:4–13). He also directs the Body’s mutuality, as the individual members serve and support each other (1 Cor. 12:15–27)” (Ibid.). From Ephesians 4:15-16, we could add that the Head enables the Body’s maturity.

¹¹ Cf. Jamieson, Robert, A. R. Fausset, A. R. Fausset et al., *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, Col 1:18.

*resurrection age has burst forth and as the first who has risen from among the dead (here firstborn means first in a series) He is the 'firstfruits' who guarantees the future resurrection of others (1 Cor. 15:20, 23). The 'hymn' had previously spoken of Christ's primacy in creation [vv. 15-17]; it now mentions His primacy in resurrection [vv. 18-20]. In both new creation and old the supremacy now belongs to Him alone.*¹²

So, Christ is supreme as Head over His church, because He is also its Founder. He initiated this new humanity (i.e., the new creation, the redeemed people of God, the church) by rising from the dead to break the power of death and guarantee the regeneration and resurrection of believers.

Verse 20 adds that Christ, the Founder of the new creation, accomplished not only resurrection, but also reconciliation. The Father "determined... through [Christ] to reconcile all things to Himself, by making peace through the blood of [Jesus'] cross—[all things,] whether things on earth or things in heaven" (lit. from the Greek; cf. II Corinthians 5:19). Although not addressed by Paul, we understand from Scripture that the glorious creation accomplished by Christ in verses 15-17 had been terribly marred by sin (cf. Genesis 3; Romans 8:19-23). Jesus paid the price of sin in order to be our redemption (Colossians 1:14), and He took our place as the embodiment of sin (II Corinthians 5:21), so that it might be fully taken away. Jesus' death on the cross both provided an actual and pledged a complete pacification of the universe under God's lordship. Paul will specifically apply this reconciliation to humanity in verses 21-23, but in verse 20 he simply addresses the wholistic work of Christ by the reconciliation of His cross to effectively re-create what He initially created (cf. Ephesians 1:10).¹³

¹² Carson, D. A. *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994. Col 1:18.

¹³ Carson has a very helpful paragraph explaining the reconciliation of verse 18: "The climax of the paragraph comes with the references to reconciliation and peacemaking through Christ's death. The opening words of the paragraph had stated that all things had been created in, through and for Christ. He is their Lord in creation. What is not spelled out, however, is what has happened to all things since creation: the unity and harmony of the cosmos have suffered a serious breach, needing reconciliation (cf. Gn. 3). It was God's good pleasure to reconcile all things through Christ (2 Cor. 5:19). Heaven and earth have been brought back to the order for which God made them. The universe is under its Lord, and cosmic peace has been restored. Reconciliation and making peace (which includes the idea of pacification, i.e. over-throwing evil) are used synonymously to describe the mighty work which Christ achieved in history through his death on the cross as a sacrifice (Rom. 3:25; 1 Cor. 11:25; Eph. 1:7). The peace which Christ has brought may be 'freely accepted, or... compulsorily imposed' (F. F. Bruce). The principalities and powers over whom God has triumphed (2:15) did not gladly surrender to God's grace. They were 'pacified'. They continue to exist, opposed to men and women (cf. Rom. 8:38-39), but they cannot finally harm the person who is in Christ and their overthrow in the future is assured (1

3. He is the Priority of the church (vv. 18c-19).

"For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in the Son" (v. 19). Such divine fullness is complete (Colossians 2:9), so that the one who is in Christ can participate in that completion (Colossians 2:10). In other words, since Christ is supreme, He is therefore sufficient for all those who are in Him (cf. John 1:16; Ephesians 1:20-23). Therefore, in all things Christ has the preeminence (v. 18c). Melick explains, "Just as creation depends on Him for its existence and order, redemption depends on Him, and He is the primary figure in it...Both dimensions owe their existence to Him, the preeminent One."¹⁴ Therefore, as He is supreme in reality, so also should He be in the church's pursuits and practice.



Application: How does the church keep Christ as supreme in its life? *By preaching Christ corporately, by pursuing Christ individually (devotion, communion, etc.), by reveling in Christ daily (worship, thanksgiving, etc.), by "putting on" Christ hourly, by submitting to Christ interpersonally, etc.*

CONCLUSION

John Owens provides a fitting conclusion:

"The revelation made of Christ in the blessed gospel is far more excellent, more glorious, more filled with rays of divine wisdom and goodness than the whole creation, and the just comprehension of it, if attainable, can contain or afford. Without this knowledge, the mind of man, however priding itself in other inventions and discoveries, is wrapped up in darkness and confusion.

This therefore deserves the severest of our thoughts, the best of our meditations, and our utmost diligence in them. For if our future blessedness shall consist in living where He is, and beholding of His

Cor. 15:24-28; see on 2:15). Further, it cannot be assumed from this verse that all sinful men and women have freely accepted the peace achieved through Christ's death. Although all things will finally unite to bow in the name of Jesus and to acknowledge him as Lord (Phil. 2:10-11), it is not to be supposed that this will be done gladly by all, and to suggest that v 20 points to a universal reconciliation in which every person will finally enjoy the blessings of salvation is unwarranted" (Ibid., Col. 1:20).

Also, "In this discussion of reconciliation, Paul had two basic reference points. First was the beginning of restoration, which occurred at the cross. The death of Christ provided the objective basis upon which all else followed. Thus Paul looked backward in time, resting his hopes on what was done in Christ. Second was the culmination of reconciliation which will take place in the future. Paul expressed by faith this necessary outworking of the death of Jesus. 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" (Melick, p. 228).

¹⁴ Melick, p. 223.

*glory, what better preparation can there be for it than a constant previous contemplation of that glory as revealed in the gospel, that by a view of it we may be gradually transformed into the same glory?*¹⁵

Such transformation will become the emphasis of later chapters in Paul's epistle to the Colossians. For now, let this one truth echo in our minds and push us toward greater comprehensions of our completeness in Christ: Christ is supreme; therefore, He is sufficient!

¹⁵ John Owen, *The Glory of Christ*. Reprint, Chicago: Moody, 1949. Pp. 25–26, quoted in MacArthur, p. 48.