

## The Supreme Adequacy of Christ

Colossians 1:15-23

Here are some diverse but connected thoughts as we reflect on this passage of scripture. **First**, some scholars think that the Colossae church met in the home of Philemon, Apphia and Archippus, from which the slave Onesimus had run away. So take a look at Colossians 4:9 and Philemon verses 1-2, 8-21. Let's remember to read Colossians with both Philemon, a slave owner and Onesimus, an escaped slave, in the room. How do you think Paul's appeal to make Jesus first, impacted the owner and the slave, Philemon and Onesimus?

**Second**, we know that some churches today, have their focus on the wrong things, like the church at Colossae did. One denomination used market research & focus groups, to design weekly services that deliberately de-emphasize Jesus Christ. One of the founders of the church said, "The sad fact is the name of Jesus Christ has become for many people exclusionary." Using Hindu and Zen, intermingled with a few verses from the Bible and recorded music by Willie Nelson, the leader of the group is quoted as saying, "We're enabling people to discover God themselves, maybe through Jesus, or Buddha, or through any number of ways."

Most of us are appalled by this defamation of Christianity, and we should be. Paul in many of his letters was addressing a very dangerous and deadly disease running rampant in the early church. This also occurs today. At first glance it seems pretty harmless but its spores can infect an entire community. We could call this disease the virus of practicality and heresy.

And, instead of calling people to faith, repentance and submission to the supremacy of Christ, some pastors tell people that Jesus wants to give them a happy marriage or a stress-free life or become wealthy. While Jesus will certainly change our lives, our marriages, our stress levels, and possibly our finances, when we bow before His preeminence, we must move away from "What can Jesus do for

me?" to "Am I living in light of His lordship?" We don't simply "add" Jesus to our lives. Instead we adore Him through our obedience.

Much of the false teaching taking place in Colossae had to do with the minimizing of Jesus. Many people thought He was important but not essential and key. They had given Him a place in their lives, without recognizing that He demands first place. Jesus was prominent to them, but certainly not preeminent, foremost.

**The third diverse** thought is, years ago, when I began an interim pastorate in a church, I was curious of what a pastor from another denomination who was attending the church, thought of that church. We had a delightful time getting to know each other. And he said something to me that I remember to this day. He said, in his almost two years of attending that Mennonite Church, that seldom did he hear the name of Jesus. The pastors and people mostly talked about God. I immediately decided to mostly talk about Jesus when I preached and taught.

**And fourth**, Paul begins Colossians with a typical salutation, identifying the author and then the community to whom the letter is addressed: "To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae." The recipients of this letter are first and foremost *in Christ*. This is their core and foundational identity. To embrace our identity *in Christ* is more crucial than family, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, wealth, power and you name it.

So Paul is **promoting sedition**, treason. The New Testament promotes Jesus, in the context of Roman imperial power. But the Empire had the mythology that the emperor was nothing less than a 'son of god' by virtue of his lineage. In a culture and political system, in which the emperor's preeminence is embedded, defended and legitimated by socio-economic, political, and military structures, including slavery and the best military at the time, Paul audaciously proclaims not only that "all things in heaven and on earth were created through Jesus and for Jesus," but specifically that all "thrones, rulers,

dominions, and powers” are subject to his rule! Because Christ holds all things together, is the firstborn of all creation, he is the one who must be given first place, supremacy in everything.

So let’s not miss the implications of what this kind of thinking means for society and every day life. If Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, then Caesar is not. If Jesus is Lord, then the throne of Caesar, the dominion of the emperor, the rulers that keep the imperial order in place, and the very power with which they do so, all become subject to the “beloved Son, Jesus,” to whom this little community in Colossae had pledged their allegiance. If all of creation hangs together, in Jesus, then Caesar is a pretentious usurper!

But Paul does not finish there. Paul clearly says, Jesus is the head of all things – including society. Christ, not Rome, not the emperor, is the *head*, the source, the ruler of the body. And the body isn’t the empire, it is the church! Just as Jesus replaces Caesar, so in this exercise of subversive reality, does the church - the little community in Colossae and all other such marginal communities throughout the empire.

I can only imagine how their heads were spinning as they heard this. And it all happens because of the cross and empty tomb! And because Jesus is the image of the invisible God!

Furthermore, **sixth**, the peace which existed between nationalities within the Roman Empire, was always and often proclaimed as the great accomplishment of the empire. But we know how Rome maintained the peace, don’t we? On crosses littering the landscape, the peace was secured and established through the eradication of all opposition.

So Paul turns the imperial cruelty on its head and says that Jesus achieves his Lordship, demonstrates that he is the one in whom the very fullness of God dwells. He “reconciles to himself all things” by “making peace through the blood of his cross.” Here is a sovereignty, here is a kingdom born of blood, but instead of

this being the blood of its victims, it is the blood of its Lord and Savior.

We dare not take these words and this message lightly. Our familiarity with Jesus and the Bible can cause us to miss the radicalness of the Gospel. We must always read scripture in the shadow of empire, nation, worldly power.

**The seventh diverse thought is**, working on this, I was reminded of an important mandated theology assignment when I was in seminary. We had to write a paper of our Christological beliefs. We had to write our own understanding of Jesus, the nature of his person, his work of salvation, and what we believed about him. I still have that paper. Who Jesus is, is our focus today. Paul was countering false teachings that were being preached at Colossae.

When Jesus walked on this earth he turned to His disciples and asked, 'Who do you say I am?' It is a critical question. The church at Colossae was coming under attack from different groups. One of the beliefs of what became Gnosticism was that Jesus was not God but was Himself a created being. There are similarities today with various religions down playing the person and role and work of Jesus.

For example, BUDDHISM does not recognize Christ as Deity. Zen Buddhism also does not affirm the existence of the living God.

HARE KRISHNA (Iskon) – has Jesus as one of their gurus, but Hare Krishna is their god.

HINDUISM / NEW AGE - does not recognize the need for a personal Saviour, because each person can become god through attaining "cosmic consciousness".

ISLAM – only sees Jesus as a prophet of Allah who was superseded by Mohamed.

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES – believe Jesus was created as Archangel Michael – a lesser god. but not God, not Jehovah, Yahweh.

MORMONS – believe Jesus was born in heaven as the spirit child of Elohim – the heavenly Father by one of his wives. They think Jesus' brother was Lucifer, who became Satan. And Jesus was just one of many gods.

In SCIENTOLOGY - L. Ron Hubbard taught that Jesus was a false memory implanted into humans as a result of the Xenu space opera & that Christianity evolved from an R6 implant.

So it's important back then and today, to be clear about what we believe about Jesus. Because as Martin Luther & John Calvin used to say - the mind is an endless factory of idols.

**Eight**, we are not clear about all the varieties of false teaching going on. Scholars suspect one problem was a type of Jewish asceticism, with an over reverence for the sun, and too much emphasis on angels. Elements of Greek culture seem to have had too strong a hold on the ideas and practices of the believers. And the major problem in the early church was Gnosticism.

Gnostic doctrine taught that the world was created and ruled by a lesser divinity, and that Christ was an emissary of the remote supreme divine being. Esoteric knowledge, gnosis, was what enabled the redemption of the human spirit. Leaders had the conviction that matter is evil and that emancipation comes through gnosis – knowledge. So gnostic leaders said they held secrets that only they could convey. Which gave them power over people. They didn't believe the simplicity of Christianity was enough and tied it to lots of other philosophies. That's why Paul strongly emphasises the knowledge of Creator Almighty Yahweh God.

So it seems there was a lot of syncretism, a pulling together of a whole variety of ideas and beliefs and practices, as well as leaders using this to gain power and status. Paul was writing for a clear reason – to refute the false theology, the wrong knowledge of the Colossians. And in our text today we get to the core – the right belief about the supremacy of Jesus Christ.

**Ninth**, Paul's message and style of writing can be complicated. The story is told about Cardinal Cushing who as a young priest was in a department store & a man had a heart attack. Cushing was asked to minister to the man while they were waiting for the ambulance. As he did so, he asked the traditional questions for such a time. "Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, & God the Holy Ghost?" The stricken man, evidently of the Jewish faith, responded, "Here I am dying and he asks me riddles!"

It may feel like that as we try to unpack Paul's writings and here in Colossians, at times it may seem like riddles. Long run on sentences. Words and phrases we have to work hard to unpack, especially as they were used back then. Plus the issues of translation. But it's worth while for our theology, faith and living to dig deep for clear meanings. It's always good for us to be reminded to keep the main thing, the main thing – the supremacy of Christ. And our scripture doesn't mince words.

We find that **Paul refutes at least three** misconceptions:

One - The false teachers taught that God did not create the world because in their view matter was evil and God cannot create evil.

Two - Believing that matter was evil, they argued that God would not have come to earth as a human in bodily form.

Three - They did not believe that Christ was the unique Son of God but rather one of many intermediaries between God and people.

Instead we are reminded of the main point, the key of Christianity. In Jesus, God's complete and perfect revelation is fully revealed. Paul does not hint at reality here. He's direct. The passage breaks into two natural sections with the last part of verse 18 providing the overriding theme: "...so that in everything he might have first place, the supremacy."

The first part is **The Supremacy of Jesus Over Creation**, verses 15 to 17. Creation is his territory. This is the basis for his supremacy, sovereignty, rule, authority, and power.

Then the other part is **The Supremacy of Jesus Over His New Creation** verses 19 to 23. He is the Head – the Chief, the Leader. This is also the basis for his supremacy, sovereignty, rule, authority, and power.

Jesus is paramount over everything that He has created in Colossians 1:15-17 and He's preeminent over all that He has redeemed in verses 18-23. Another way to say it is that He has first place over both the cosmos and the church. He is Lord of everything He has made and He is Lord over everyone He has saved.

The Colossians Christology is striking in that, while the cross is mentioned, the suffering and death of Jesus are not the primary focus of the hymn. This is in sharp contrast to the Christ-hymn of Philippians 2:6-11. Similar to the Christology of John, Colossians emphasizes the power and divinity of the Messiah. Christ Jesus is described as the source of all created things, as that which quickens and sustains all things, as the head of all things.

Notice these characteristics about Christ. They are such loaded statements that we could spend a lot of time on each. Plus they are in the context of refuting heresy.

He is the image of the invisible God (15)

He is the firstborn over all creation (15)

All things were created through him & for him.

He always has been. (17)

He holds all things together. (17)

He is the head of the body, the church (18)

He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead

He has the fullness of God dwelling in Him.

He is reconciling all things to Himself (20)

Paul is in full attack mode against reducing Jesus to who we want him to be. Notice how Paul has built up the first believers reading this letter with thanks for their faith, prayers for them to grow, mature in their faith and now

here – this is who Jesus really is. Don't let any teacher or false prophet diminish his supremacy and mislead you in the faith. That's why it's important to do your own Bible study.

The Colossians believers had become recipients of God's marvelous act of reconciliation. They and we are made acceptable to God and are challenged to continue striving forward in the truth that had saved us. That's one of our challenges today. Being reconciled to Christ.

Martin Luther insisted that all persons must confront their own sinfulness in all its ravaging depths before they can enjoy the comforts of salvation. There is truth in this. Though we need not be sullenly sin-conscious, we must always remember who we are: forgiven sinners.

And **one last diverse** thought. Many scholars believe this passage was based on a hymn that was sung by the early church. Isn't that what the church has done over the years? Taken key verses and beliefs and turned them in to songs – to help us remember and strengthen our faith?

Our challenge every day from Paul and Jesus is we all need to answer the question: Is Christ just prominent – noticeable, in our lives, or is He preeminent – superseding every thing else, dominant in our lives? He doesn't just want a place in our lives, He demands first place.

Jesus Christ is Lord! He is the unique Son of God. He is Lord of Creation. He is Lord of His Church. He is Lord of each one of us! We belong to Him.

One Monday, years ago, Paul Harvey, during his radio broadcast, reminded his listeners that Billy Graham's words were heard all around the world when he preached. Mr. Harvey then quoted from the Book of Daniel and the Gospel of Mark, stating that the gospel would be preached to the whole world and then the end would come. He then paused and said this: "To some of you this brings great comfort. To others of you, if it's not comforting, you can make it so."