

COLOSSIANS
Jesus Christ: Supreme Over The Universe
Colossians 1:15-17

INTRODUCTION

Who is Jesus Christ? What we conclude about Christ will be how we view truth and falsehood, life and death, good and evil and heaven and hell.

Who is Jesus Christ? Some say He is a fool, a charlatan and an egomaniac. Others have said He never existed and was just a legend. Still others see Him as a good man, a great teacher and even a prophet. Yet, those who take the Bible literally and seriously know that it teaches Jesus Christ is God Himself. He, for the Christian, is very God and very man. He is the second person of the Trinity who took upon Himself a human nature and lived among men. Jesus Christ is undiminished deity and perfect humanity united in one person forever. One cannot think right unless he thinks right about Christ. Christ's person and work are tests of orthodoxy. As it says in Colossians 1:19, He is the One who is to have the supremacy (preeminence)!

C. S. Lewis said, "I am trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him (Christ): 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice as to whether this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing non-sense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."¹¹

Colossians 1:15-17 is probably the highest Christological statement in the Bible, but it is not easy to understand because there are many strange words and phrases to our ears, but they were well known to the Colossian Christians. Remember when Paul wrote The Book of Colossians, he was not writing in a vacuum. He was writing to meet a specific need of the Colossian Church. A heresy was beginning to enter that little church called Gnosticism, which means "knowledge"; and the followers of this heresy were called Gnostics, which means "the intellectual ones." These Gnostics were not satisfied with the simple truths of Christianity so they developed a philosophy of salvation which combined Greek philosophy, Jewish legalism and Oriental mysticism with Christianity. This system of thought was very extensive and the Gnostics taught they had the only way to God and it could only be entered by secret mysteries, passwords and rituals which were only known by the Gnostics. It was an elite society and an intellectual aristocracy.

View of Creation. Gnostics believed all matter was evil and that all matter was eternal; it was out of this evil matter the world was created. They believed God was spirit and perfectly good and could have no contact with evil matter. Therefore, God, who was called the Plaroma (the fullness or completeness of God), could not directly create an evil world. The Gnostics devised a series of emanations (aeons) which evolved from God. Each emanation was less spirit and good and more evil. Finally, there was an emanation so distant from God that it was almost totally evil and only a little spirit and good. It was this emanation which would create the world. Some Gnostics in the Colossian Church thought these emanations were angelic beings.

View of Jesus Christ. For the Gnostics, Jesus Christ was merely one of these emanations. Christ was no more than one of the angelic hierarchy which bridged the gulf between God (the Plaroma) and creation. Christ might stand high in the series; He might even stand the highest, being the first emanation. Yet, for the Gnostic, Christ was a created being and from Him came the creation. Therefore, Christ was not God but less than God.

In context, Paul in verses 1:3-14 was praying for the Colossian Christians. He finishes up the prayer by making a reference to the Christian redemption in Christ. Then he seems to stop prayer and slips into a theological discussion on the person and work of Christ. In 1:15-17, Paul, as to the nature or essence of Christ, sets forth His majesty and supreme dignity by showing Christ's relationship to God the Father and to creation.

CHRIST IS THE REFLECTION OF GOD (1:15a): *He is the image of the invisible God,* -- Paul says Christ is "the image of the invisible God." The word "image" (ikon) has two basic thoughts: representation and manifestation.

Representation. The idea of an image is an "engraving" or "impression", which is the precise and exact reproduction of an original. It is a likeness which is not accidental but is purposed to resemble the original (prototype). For instance, on our ten cent piece is an image of President Franklin Roosevelt and anyone who has ever seen him or a photograph of him would know the likeness. But we know that Christ is the exact likeness of God: *"The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."* (Heb. 1:3). Christ is the perfect imprint and very image of God's nature. Christ reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of His nature. Christ is the image of God in the sense that He is the perfect likeness of God. Jesus said, *"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father"* (Jn. 14:9).

In one of the most beautiful palaces in Rome, there is a painting by Rene' entitled the Arora. It is located on the ceiling of the palace. For people to see and appreciate this great piece of work, they have to look up. When it was originally painted, people would come in, stare up at the painting and get a stiff neck. Many times people became dizzy and passed out. The owner, being a creative man himself, decided to build a floor of mirrors and set chairs around the mirrors. People would come in, take a seat, and look at the mirrors on the floor and see the exact image of the painting on the ceiling. The mirrors reflected the real thing. Christ is the perfect mirror reflecting all that God is.

Manifestation. The concept of “image” also indicates that Christ is the outward showing forth of God. Christ is the image, indicating that He is always and everywhere the manifestation of God. The Apostle John said this about Christ: **“No one has ever seen God, but God the only Son, has made him known.”** (Jn. 1:18). Christ declares God. If we want to know what God is like in character and essence, we are to look at Christ. The invisible God is made known through Christ.

Although Paul does not come out and say it, he implies that Christ is God. Actually the name “Emanuel” means “God with us.”

CHRIST IS SOVEREIGN OVER CREATION (1:15b): *The first born overall creation --* The word “firstborn” at first glance in English seems to indicate that Christ was created, but in the Hebrew and Greek language it does not mean “first created” but “firstborn.” Again there are two connotations to “firstborn” which are priority and sovereignty.

Priority. This word can mean first in time (priority). This indicates that Christ was prior to all created things: **“Through Him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”** (Jn. 1:3). Christ existed before creation. He came before matter was created and therefore matter cannot be eternal as the Gnostics implied.

There is logic here. As the firstborn, Christ was prior to all things. Since Christ existed prior to all things, He must be uncreated. Since uncreated, He must be eternal and because He is eternal, he must be God.

Sovereignty. Firstborn can also indicate “honor” or “sovereignty.” In Psalm 89:27, there is a promise regarding their coming Messiah: **“I will also appoint my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of earth.”** Messiah will be given a place of honor and sovereignty over all kings. In Romans 8:29 we read this about Christ. **“That he might be the firstborn among the brethren,”** referring to His resurrection this simply means that Christ in His position of Sovereign One was the first person to conquer death and rise from the dead.

What is the point? As firstborn, Christ is sovereign over all creation. Christ was and is always the firstborn of all creation, not the first created, not created at all, but the Creator, the Sovereign, the Beginning and the Ending, the First and the Last, the Lord of Heaven.

Jehovah Witnesses hang their hats on this verse. They believe that Christ was the first created being by Jehovah, and then through Christ everything else was brought into being. The Jehovah Witness denies that Jesus is God and mock the fact that He is the second person of the Trinity. Jehovah Witnesses cannot be Christians in any sense because they deny the deity of Christ. Over major heresies, true Christians must divide and separate themselves in order to maintain true orthodoxy.

It should be pointed out that there is a Greek word for “first created” which is protoktistes, but Paul used the word “firstborn” (prototokes) to indicate Christ’s existence prior to creation and sovereignty over creation.

Around 318 AD an elderly presbyter in the church of Alexander began to propagate a teaching with great zeal and logic. His name was Arius and he was outwardly a pious man. Arius believed Jesus Christ was the first created being and everything else was brought into being by Him. The Son was semi-eternal, but not co-eternal with the Father; thus He was more than man, but less than God. Christ was superhuman, like God but not true deity. The Son is inferior to the Father in nature and dignity although the first and noblest of all created beings. He would use the statements like “once He was not” or “He was created and made.” He would put to music sentences like, “There was a time when He was not.” Arius’ doctrine came into conflict with the orthodoxy of the church which said Christ was not created, He is co-eternal with the Father, and He is true deity. Arius complained and said, “We are persecuted because we say the Son has a beginning whereas God is without beginning.” Arius was removed from his church around 321 AD but he had many powerful friends in the church.

Finally in 325 AD the Council of Nicea was called to settle the issue once and for all. God had his man for the hour, a young man named Athanasius who was a deacon at the Church of Alexandria. Athanasius was a superb theologian with keen logic. The debate centered around the Greek words homoiousias and homousias. Arius said that Christ was homoiousias (of like substance with God but not God). The controversy was over one little iota in the Greek alphabet (equivalent to an “i” in English). The Council of Nicea, made up 300 bishops, made this declaration about Christ: Christ was of the substance of the Father... very God of very God.” Since the Nicene Creed, the church has been Trinitarian.

This by no means settled the controversy. Arius was banished as a heretic, but two years later Arius was received back and came to power. He began to attack Athanasius and Athanasius was banished in exile, not once but five times. Athanasius would not give up and he had a motto: “Athanasius against the world, and the whole world against Athanasius.” Within 50 years the Nicene Creed was accepted by the church. The church was split over an “iota” but it was worth it.

CHRIST IS THE ARCHITECT OF’ THE UNIVERSE (1:16a): *For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities;* -- Now Paul goes on to explain what he meant by “the firstborn over all creation” in a more specific way. We see the ground for Christ’s sovereignty over creation is that He is Lord over creation because He made it. Creation owes its unity, its meaning and very existence to Him. The text actually says “In him all things were created.” The whole act of creation rested in the sphere of Christ. Christ was the primary planner of creation; it took place “In Him.” He is the architect of the universe. The words “all things” in the Greek literally says “the all things,” referring to the totality of the whole or all the universe. Note also that “all things were created,” which is an aorist tense in the Greek and can mean “once and for all created.”

This verse makes it very clear that Christ created matter and matter is not eternal. Christ literally planned the whole universe as the Supreme Architect.

Logic would conclude that if Christ planned all things in the universe, He himself cannot be created; thus Christ must be God for only God can create.

Everything was created in Christ: Heaven (space) and earth (time); visible (the world around us) and the invisible (atoms, neutrons, protons, electrons, gravity, wind, etc.). And even the angelic realms were created in Christ - thrones, powers, rulers and authorities. Paul is pointing out to the Gnostics that Christ created the angelic realms and, therefore, could not be one of the angelic emanations. The conclusion is obvious - only God could create all things

The Jehovah Witnesses in the New World Translation translate Colossians 1:15-17:

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation because by means of him all (other) things were created in the heavens and upon the earth... all (other) things have been created through him and for him. Also he is before all (other) things and by means of him all (other) things were made to exist.”

The Jehovah Witnesses add the word “other” which is not in the original Greek.

CHRIST IS THE BUILDER OF THE UNIVERSE (16b): *All things were created by him* -- Literally this says, “All things were created through him. Everything that came into existence came by means of Christ. As the builder of the universe, Christ put forth divine power and energy and the universe came into existence: ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”*** (Jn. 1:1-3). The universe came into being by a sovereign act of supernatural power.

CHRIST IS THE OCCUPANT OF THE UNIVERSE (1:16c): *And for Him.* --Literally this says “and unto him.” All of the creation of the universe was for the glory of Christ. Christ is the end for which all things exist and the goal toward who all things are intended to move. All things in the universe willingly or unwillingly move toward Him. Christ is not only the architect of the universe, not only the builder but also the occupant, for everything in the universe was intended for His use, pleasure and glory. Who but God could create in Him, through Him and unto Him?

As of this very moment atheistic and agnostic scientists have no explanation for the origin of the universe, but the most humble Christian accepts the truth that Christ is the Creator of all things. A Christian can say, “I know the origin of the universe.” This is not a statement of arrogance but of faith based on the Word of God. Furthermore, real scientific evidence favors a direct creation by a Creator.

CHRIST EXISTED BEFORE THE UNIVERSE (1:17a): *He is before all things,* --This is a statement of the preexistence of Christ. He existed before any material thing ever existed. He existed before matter; therefore, He created matter. In the Greek, this is a very intensive word and could be translated, “He Himself and no other is continually before all things.” Preexistence assumes eternity and only God is eternal.

CHRIST HOLDS TOGETHER THE UNIVERSE (1:17b): *And in him all things hold together.* --Christ is the principle of cohesion in the universe. Christ did not create the universe and then hide in a corner to let natural law take its course. Paul affirms the cosmic significance of Christ. He is not only the Creator of the universe but He is the Sustainer and Preserver of the universe. Christ makes the universe a cosmos and not chaos. Apart from Him, it would disintegrate. All the laws by which the universe is ordered is a product of the mind of Christ. All known, valid, scientific laws of the universe (like gravity) are in reality divine laws.

CONCLUSION

Who Is Christ? In these three verses, Paul declares Christ is the beginning of creation, and the end of creation, and the power who holds creation together, the Creator, the Sustainer, and the Final Goal of the world. Paul is declaring that Jesus Christ is God come in the flesh. He is the second person of the Trinity.

Now a keen student of the Bible would say, “Paul only deduces Christ is God. He never says it directly.” That is true but Paul left us a clincher as to the deity of Christ. You remember that the Gnostics spoke of God as the Plaroma (fullness or completeness). For them the Plaroma was the sum total of all divine powers and attributes. In Colossians 1:19, Paul says, “*For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Him.*” In Colossians 2:9, it says, “*For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.*” In both of these verses the word “fullness” is Plaroma. Paul says, “Christ is the Plaroma; that is, Christ is God. He is divine. He is deity.

Why Christ Must Be God. There are some very definite reasons why Christ must be truly God:
 1) If Christ is not God, He could not have borne the load of sin put on His shoulders at Calvary;
 2) If Christ is not God, He could not be a perfect sacrifice for sins, for only God is perfect;
 3) If Christ is not God, His teachings are a mockery, His claims worthless and we would be fools to follow in His ways;
 4) If Christ is not God, then He is not worthy of man’s worship;
 5) If Christ is not God, then it would be stupid to subject ourselves to Him.;
 6) If Christ is not God, He would not have the power to deliver us out of judgement and hell.

But the fact of the matter is that Christ is God and it is because of that truth men, women, boys and girls have sought to follow him.

Napoleon Bonaparte made this statement about Christ:

“Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and myself have founded empires, but upon what did those creations of our genius depend? Upon force. Jesus Christ alone established His empire upon love. I have inspired multitudes with such an enthusiastic devotion that they would have died for me... but to do this it was necessary that I should be visibly present with the electric influence of my looks, of my words, of my voice. When I saw men and spoke to them, I lighted up the flame of self-devotion in their hearts. Christ alone has succeeded in raising the mind of men toward the Unseen, that it become insensible to the barriers of time and space. Across a chasm of eighteen hundred years Jesus Christ makes a demand which is beyond all others, difficult to satisfy. He asks for the human heart. He will have it entirely for Himself. He demands it unconditionally.”

What Does This Mean To the Non-Christian? For you outside of Christ a decision must be made. You can laugh at, mock and spurn Jesus Christ or you can fall at His feet and declare “my Lord and my God!” The choice is yours. If you reject Christ as God and Savior, you will meet Him as a terrible, wrathful Judge at death. If you accept Him as God and Savior, you will meet Him as your loving Friend at death. What hangs in the balance on your decision? Your eternal destiny!