

The Preeminence of Christ • Colossians 1:15-17

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *World Parliament Of Religions*^[1]

1. In 1893, Chicago hosted the *World Exposition*
2. It's a bit hard to believe the numbers of people that came from all over the world to attend the fair
3. In an age before air travel and modern highways, some 21 million people attended!
4. One of the main events of the Exposition, was the *World Parliament of Religions*
 - a. this was to be an attempt to unite the religions of the world under one umbrella
 - b. representatives from most major religions and movements came to discuss the things they held in common
 - c. and to try and hammer out some new agreement that would unify them
5. Chicago was an interesting place for them to meet, it was DL Moody's home town
6. Moody was a well known and highly respected evangelist who had won thousands to faith in Christ
7. He was a staunch defender of the faith, and many Christians believed Moody would attack the World Parliament of Religions and denounce it.
8. Moody took a different tact altogether
 - a. he considered the Exposition and the Parliament a great opportunity for evangelism
 - b. people from all over the world were coming to Chicago
 - c. he could do world missions without every leaving his city!
 - d. so he trained and sent out preachers to specially selected spots all over the city
 - e. he used churches and rented theaters
 - f. he even rented a large circus tent and set it up in the heart of the city to hold a special crusade
9. When his friends and supporters urged him to attack and denounce the World Parliament of Religions, he refused by saying, "I am going to make Jesus Christ so attractive that men will turn to him."
10. Moody knew that if he just focused on Christ, and preached him faithfully, people would be converted
11. Moody's strategy proved correct – thousands came to faith in Christ and this campaign was considered the greatest of his highly effective career.

B. *Nothing New*

1. Moody's approach was nothing new
2. As we look to the NT and the pages of the book of Acts we find that the apostles did the same thing

3. In an age awash in rank paganism and immoral, superstitious religion, they preached Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and slowly but surely the gospel spread
4. They spent more time proclaiming truth than attacking error
5. They exalted Christ, and as they did, the lost were drawn to Him.

C. Colossians

1. This week we begin our study in Paul's letter to the church at Colossae.
2. This Wednesday, we'll spend more time with background on the letter, but this morning, let me begin by simply saying that though it isn't evident in a casual reading, Paul wrote this letter to refute a pernicious lie and false teaching that was starting to infect the churches of Asia Minor
3. That false teaching is known as Gnosticism, which was a blending of Eastern mysticism, Greek philosophy, and Christian terminology
4. Now, we won't get into it this morning, we'll leave it for this Wednesday to take a closer look at gnosticism, but the point is this . . .
 - a. while confronting heresy is the *reason* why Paul wrote this letter,
 - b. he spends precious little time dissecting it and refuting it directly
 - c. instead, he spends himself in proclaiming the truths about Christ that dispels the lies of Gnosticism
5. Picture yourself in a dark room with one window covered by drawn blinds and a heavy curtain
 - a. there is no light or candle
 - b. with you in the room are a half dozen people sitting on the floor and it is your aim and desire to help them see
 - c. you don't stand there and rebuke the darkness - you don't shout and curse at the blackness or lament the fact that the absence of light is keeping the people from seeing
 - d. no - you go to the window, and you pull back the blinds so the light that is outside can come in and give them sight
6. That is Paul's method in Colossians; the spiritual darkness that is Gnosticism is best dealt with by revealing the One who is the Light of Truth – Jesus Christ
7. One of the most revealing passages in all of scripture about who and what Jesus is is the passage we are studying this morning . . .

II. TEXT

A. V. 15-17

- 15 **He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.**
- 16 **For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.**
- 17 **And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.**
1. Oh my! Every phrase deserves its own sermon!
 2. We have just spent some 2½ months studying Jeremiah

3. We could spend 2½ years on this chapter!
4. For the sake of taking a broader look, let's just touch each element of what Paul writes here,
5. And I encourage you to come back to this passage throughout this week and meditate on what we find here.

B. V. 15a

15 He is the image of the invisible God,

1. The Gnostics denied that Jesus was God; they called Him the beginning of the way to God and considered Him nothing more than an enlightened spiritual being – an angel, if you will
2. But Paul nukes that idea with terms that could leave no other impression in the Colossians than that Jesus is God in human flesh
3. The word “image” is the Greek word from which we get our word “icon”
 - a. today, an icon is merely a picture symbol
 - b. but in the original meaning - an *icon* referred to something that was a visible manifestation of something *more*
 - c. and that's why Paul refers to Jesus here as the *image*, or *icon* of the invisible God!
4. In all of reality, there is God, and then there is Creation / these are the two great divisions of reality = Creator and Created
 - a. God, by His very nature as Creator is *different from* and invisible to the Creation
 - b. the fact of the creation *demand*s the existence of the Creator, but at the same time, it demands that the Creator be fundamentally different – that is why he is invisible to the creation
 - c. but when God desired to make Himself visible, when He chose to enter the Creation, the manner He did so was in the Person of Jesus Christ
 - d. He is God and Man – the image of the invisible God
5. Don't ask me to explain that any further, I nor any other person can – the Incarnation is a mystery that we can grasp, but we cannot encircle
6. Our minds are too tiny to encompass God!

C. V. 15b – 17

... the firstborn over all creation.

1. Beginning here, and running all the way through v. 17, Paul shows the superiority of Christ over Creation
2. Again, the Gnostics taught that Jesus was just one of many emanations from God and not a very high or holy one at that.
 - a. they said he was an angel who pointed the way to enlightenment for all
 - b. in their system, Jesus was nothing more than a *doorman*, standing outside the true path, inviting all to come
 - c. but, they said, to get higher on the path to enlightenment, there were loftier spiritual guides
 - d. and the knowledge they possessed was only given to those who had proven

- themselves worthy
- e. in Gnosticism, the path to heaven was a ladder with many rungs, and each step up required an initiation into special secrets that could only be had by those who paid the price
 - f. Jesus? – he was the “pitch man” who stood at the very bottom; the Greeter who welcomed the first initiates – but that’s all he was good for.
3. What Paul writes here completely dissolves such nonsense!
 4. He is the firstborn over all creation
 - a. not carefully – he isn’t just the firstborn **OF** all creation but **OVER** all creation
 - b. If Paul had said “of”, then the Colossians could have concluded that Paul was referring to the resurrection – he was the first of all creation to experience the resurrection
 - c. but by saying that Jesus was the firstborn OVER all creation, the Colossians knew that Paul meant the term “firstborn” to refer NOT to the *order* of birth, but His position in relation *to* the creation.
 5. You see, in the ancient world, the firstborn son was the preeminent son in terms of the birthright and inheritance.
 - a. he became the standard bearer of the family name.
 - b. when his father died, the business became his, the house became his, the estate became his
 - c. firstborn referred to RULE
 6. When Paul says Jesus is the firstborn OVER all creation, He is refuting the idea that Jesus is some lesser being in the heavenly hierarchy
 7. No – He is the firstborn over ALL creation – not “the rest of” creation; ALL creation!
 8. Lest there be any misunderstanding what Paul means, he goes on . . .
- 16 For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth,**
9. Now, let’s stop right there!
 10. This passage is one of the most useful in dealing with the cults today
 - a. they want to say that Jesus is just one of the angels
 - b. he’s an important angel, but just an angel
 - c. and as such – he is a created being
 - d. when confronted by this passage, they reply with something like this . . .
 - e. well, what Paul means is that, he is the firstborn OF the creation, meaning he was created first, then, once he was created, he used God’s power to create everything else.
 11. Friends, I am here this morning to tell you this passage simply does not allow this interpretation
 12. Every time we come to the word “All” I want to ask you to say it out loud with me as I read; and say it loud!
- 16 For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.**
- 17 And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.**

13. It's like the Holy Spirit knew the day would come when Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons would concoct their little argument denying the preeminence of Christ
14. And he moved Paul to pen these words so that we would have a ready answer to refute their error
15. Look at it again . . .

16 For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth,

- a. Jesus created all things!
- b. did He create just the physical things?
- c. no – he created all things in both the earth and the heavens, meaning the spiritual realm
- d. Jesus isn't an angel – he is their Creator and God!

visible and invisible,

- e. both the material and immaterial creation owes it's existence to Him
- f. if there was a Big Bang – he's the one who lit the fuse!

whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers.

- g. there it is spelled out – Jesus created the heavenly hosts; the angelic realm as well as the physical universe

All things were created through Him and for Him.

- h. Again, the language Paul employs leaves us in no doubt as to his meaning,
- i. if it is created, then Jesus made it; therefore, He Himself is not part of the Creation because a thing cannot create itself!
- j. Your kids might try to get you to believe that when they say they don't know how their room became the mess it is, but trust me, a thing cannot create itself!

16. This passage makes me ache to be a better preacher
17. If I was, then I would speak to you about the vastness of creation
 - a. I would direct you to consider how wide the universe is
 - b. the millions of billions of stars in a hundred million galaxies
 - c. then I would ask you to consider the tiniest insect and how infinitely complex *it* is, yet so small
 - d. Jesus Christ created every single particle of it!
18. I find it fascinating that as science continues to explore and research, many scientists are coming to a remarkable conclusion – the design that is becoming increasingly clear in the universe could never have resulted by chance, no matter how much time you give it
19. One of the most promising avenues being used by Christians in the sciences today is the argument from design
20. A hundred years ago, skeptics believed science would be THE tool that would hammer home the last nail in religion's coffin
21. Today, science is swiftly approaching the conclusion that Creation is just that – CREATION which owes it's very existence to a Creator!
22. Science can answer the “what, where, & how” of the universe, but not the

“why”

23. V. 16 tells us the “why”

All things were created through Him and for Him.

24. Both the *origin* and the *goal* of all creation is Jesus Christ

25. Everything finds its purpose and fulfillment in relationship with Him

26. The entrance of sin into the creation through man’s rebellion against God has frustrated that goal

27. That’s why we see the pain and suffering so prevalent around us

a. it’s why things break and wear out

b. it’s why death ultimately lays claim to everything from starfish to stars

28. And it’s why Jesus became man and went to the Cross; to restore us to our purpose and original destiny – to spend eternity with Him

29. Paul goes on . . .

17 And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.

30. Once again, Paul speaks categorically

a. before anything else was, Jesus was!

b. therefore, logically, the only conclusion is – He must be God, The God!

31. But Jesus is not merely the Divine Watchmaker who created it all, wound it up, and has set it aside to wind down

32. He is still intimately involved IN the creation

33. He is the one who holds all things together, as we saw in our study last week – this is the passage I referenced then

34. He is the one who holds the center of every atom together so that it doesn’t fly apart

35. In Him all things consist – are held together = Jesus is the integrating agent of the Universe.

III. CONCLUSION

A. Seeing Christ

1. We live in an age in which well meaning preachers and teachers have re-cast Jesus as a fun-loving good guy

2. In an attempt to make Him more *appealing* to the lost, they’ve presented a scaled-down Christ

3. Paul’s words in this passage remind us of who He really is – The Creator who is FIRST over and above all things

4. He is Preeminent!

5. Seeing Him this way steels our hearts against heresy which inevitably redefines Jesus in terms less than He really is.

6. Paul’s hymn sings of the supremacy of Christ;

a. He is the firstborn over everything - He has the highest place

b. He is Creator and Goal of everything – it all flows from Him and then back toward Him

c. Finally, He is the Sustainer of everything

[Lance – Use your hands]

Firstborn Over – Hands high
Creator – hand to left
Goal – hand to right
Sustainer – brings hands together

7. R. Kent Hughes says of this passage, “[The Holy Spirit intends these words to] stretch our puny little minds and dominate our thinking and change us. When we truly understand what is being said here, it is amazing that we should ever look anywhere else for meaning or purpose in life. Since He is the Creator who holds all things together, He knows how best to fix and order our lives.”^[2]

B. Fixing It^[3]

1. Some years ago, a South American company bought a new printing press from a US manufacturer.
2. It arrived and was put together according to the instructions, but it failed to work
3. So they wired the US company and explained the problem
4. The South Americans were desperate because they had a huge order to fill and needed the press
5. The US company sensed their desperation, and sent their best technician
6. When he arrived, the South Americans were disturbed, he was so young
7. They sent a telegram back to the US that said, “Your man is too young. Send someone more experienced.”
8. The message they got back read, “He made the machine. He can fix it!”
9. Jesus not only created us, He sustains us and we were created FOR Him.
10. When we are broken, when life seems to be out of alignment, when things just seem to be wrong, He is the one we can come to for healing, for correction, to be made right and whole.

C. To The Lost

1. God made you for Himself
2. He gave you life as a gift
3. You are now living that life for yourself rather than Him, and the result is that you sense deep inside something is missing
4. So you try all kinds of things to satisfy the ache, the emptiness
5. But nothing satisfies.
6. God has made us for Himself, and we are restless until we find our rest in Him.
7. God gave you life – now, give it back to Him.

^[1] Hughes, R. Kent., *Colossians*, pg. 29

^[2] *ibid.*

^[3] *ibid.*