

Colossians 1:15-20 The Supremacy of Christ

Introduction

The conversation begins something like this- ‘mum’ ‘dad’ I’ve got a boyfriend... a girlfriend! Sometimes questions that follow a new piece of information can be unpredictable- but not in this case! What is she/he like? Is what will follow! Conversations about doing dishes or tidying a bedroom are forgotten as a more important subject is on the table. The field for discussion is endless as there are so many things that might be talked about from appearance to interests, from personal faith and convictions to career or occupation; no-one can be adequately described in a sentence or two and no-one can be truly known without spending time with them and getting to know them in a personal relationship. It is only over time that we really get to know someone. After years of friendship or marriage two people can predict how the other might think about something or speak about it or what course of action they might take in given situations.

However, the most pressing challenge for human beings is getting to know God. But how can we know One who is almighty and eternal who knows every thing and is all powerful? The wonderful fact in history is that God wishes to be in relationship with the people He has created and in the person of Jesus Christ came and lived among us to show us what God is like and how in response we ought to live in fellowship with Him. John’s amazing words in John1:14 will always be so precious to the person who has encountered Jesus. *The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.* Paul, in this letter to Christians in Colossae in Western Turkey, takes time to explain who Jesus is to a group of fairly new believers who had never met Jesus in His earthly ministry and who had been influenced by some false teaching about God’s plans and purposes for humanity and over the value of creation. In a few verses Paul packs in a lot of information under four broad headings as he sought to guide their thinking and ours today. What does he want to teach us about Jesus?

1. His relationship with God the Father (Colossians 1:15)

(a)The exact likeness of God *The Son is the image of the invisible God...* Most of us have seen a child of parents we have previously met and uttered words like: ‘he/she is so much like...’ their mother or father in one respect or another. Usually facial characteristics are prominent in the descriptive explanation. Yet on each occasion, if pressed, we would have to say that although this person is like another in their family in these respects, in other ways they are different from their – probably inheriting other characteristics from the other parent or grand-parent, as well as some features distinctive of them as a person. Yet what Paul says here of Jesus with respect to the Father is something very different. He chooses to use the word *εικὼν* (*image*). This word means a precise copy or reproduction of something that in every respect is the same as the thing it is said to be *an image of*. It was used in New Testament times to refer to the representation of the head of a ruler on a coin or the physical representation of a famous or powerful person in a statue erected in their honour. It is used in Hebrews 10:1 to refer to something that is real compared to something that is only a shadow or incomplete representation of something else. In more modern language we might use this term to refer to the likeness taken by a camera – ‘a photograph’. The picture doesn’t lie, unless it has been amended on photoshop or by some similar technology! A Roman soldier of that time Apion, in his surviving correspondence to his father Epimachus wrote the following: ‘I send you a little portrait of myself done by Euctemon.’ The word used for portrait (*εικωνιον*) is the diminutive form of the word used here by Paul. There is a second way in which this word was used in secular writing of that

day from the world of business. In business transactions a person might order goods but not have all the money to pay for them at the time when the goods are ordered, so an I.O.U. document was drawn up and signed before they parted company that day; or they might pay for goods and the shop-keeper might need to check that the money submitted in payment was genuine. To the documents was attached an accurate, detailed and easily recognisable description of the purchaser of the goods. This formal description of the person was called an εικων (*image*) [W. Barclay, *The All-Sufficient Christ*, pp. 59-60]. Therefore, when Paul want to explain something of the relationship between God the Father and Jesus there is a ready made vocabulary he can used to express it that people will easily understand.

How does Paul describe Jesus here? *The Son is the image of the invisible God...* In other words that Jesus is a 'perfect portrait' of the Father; that is to look at Jesus would be a perfect 'photograph' of what the Father is like; the Father who is invisible (I Timothy 6:16: *God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, ¹⁶ who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see.*) becomes visible in the person of Jesus. Therefore, in every respect the God-likeness of the man Jesus reveals to us all we need to know of the Father. We have the truth of the doctrinal convictions of our faith revealed through the authors of Scripture in the books of the Bible, the Word of God, but the revelation of who God is was manifested in human flesh in the living Word, Jesus Christ. Of whom John wrote at the start of his Gospel: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made* (John 1:1-3). To ask what would God say about this matter? Or what would God want done in this situation was observed in the gracious words and actions of Jesus in His earthly ministry. In His teaching consistently, not just in the Sermon on the Mount, in His healing and serving ministries and supremely in His amazing love for people revealed through His sacrifice on the cross, we see the mind and heart of the Father. In His relationship with the Father we see the supremacy of Jesus over any other person who has walked this earth who claimed to show people the way to God. No-one else has been described in this way- or at least not accurately! Jesus alone *is the image of the invisible God* (Colossians 1:15a).

On this basis we have no difficulty accepting Jesus' words in John 14:9 to Philip: *Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father.* Yet Paul writes about Christian believers these words in Romans 8:29: *For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image (εικονος) of His Son that He might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.* Do you grasp what an incredible statement Paul has made here? That some, ideally all, believers have progressed so well in their faith that when other people see the way they live and hear the words they say that it is an accurate reflection of how Jesus would have spoken and acted! Wow what an amazing declaration! This is not the only passage to make this point. In 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul wrote: *And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.* John the apostle in I John 3:2-3 backed up what Paul wrote with these words: *Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. ³ All who have this hope in Him purify themselves, just as He is pure.* This is a statement of fact describing you and me! What an encouragement to keep close to Jesus and to seek to be like Him in our words and actions.

(b) **The one honoured by the Father** ...*the firstborn over all creation* (Colossians 1:15b) In ordinary human speech the word *firstborn* has a literal meaning of the first baby born to a couple. It can have that meaning in the Bible in many places, but that is not at all the meaning Paul has in mind in Colossians 1:15. Luke 2:7 was factually true. In his account of the

Christmas story, Luke writes these words referring to the time Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem. *While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.* (Luke 2:6-7). Yet the Greek word Paul uses here can equally have another meaning. This is seen in Psalm 89:27 with reference to Solomon's relationship with his father David. *And I will appoint him to be my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth.* It was exaltation to the highest place of honour that is following David as the next king. Yet Solomon was one of many sons and closer to being the youngest than the oldest. Therefore, this term *firstborn* indicates the individuals pre-eminence in status. It was used of Solomon, but it was also used in the Old Testament to refer to the nation of Israel. Exodus 4:22 states: *Then say to Pharaoh, "This is what the Lord says: **Israel is My firstborn son,**"²³ and I told you, 'Let My son go, so that he may worship Me.' But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son."*'' literally fulfilled in the death of that individual, but also in the death of the other first-born sons of the Egyptian nation at that time as well. It was the greatest honour for this nation to be honoured above all other nations, but with privileges comes responsibilities. (Jeremiah also refers to national Israel using this same term in Jeremiah 31:9: *Ephraim is My firstborn son*) Amos 3:2 states: *Hear this word, people of Israel, the word the Lord has spoken against you – against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt:² 'You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins.'* Privileges and responsibilities go together. Jesus was born as a human being in God's created world. He had the privilege of the place of honour over the creation, but also the responsibility of showing the people He encountered what God is like. He honoured that privileged position through His perfect life and His death in our place. How are you and I getting on? Are we honouring God through our minds and hearts?

2. His relationship with the world (Colossians 1:16-17)

(a) The agent of creation (Colossians 1:16) *For in Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through Him and for Him.* In Genesis 1:1 the Bible opens with these words: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.* The word in Hebrew here for God is 'Elohim', a plural word that is the first hint towards the revelation of the Trinity, which is assumed and never explained in the Bible. This understanding is strengthened by the words of Genesis 1:26: *Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'* The alternative explanation is that this is a plural of majesty, the royal 'we', as Jewish Bible commentators would suggest. However, Genesis 1:2 states: *...and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.* Putting the biblical evidence together the Trinitarian understand fits most readily as the best explanation. In John 1:3 John the apostle declared: *Through Him (Jesus) all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made.* In all their actions Father, Son and Spirit work together in perfect harmony.

Why does Paul feel the need to emphasise this point? The reason was that the Christian Church was under real pressure from a growing religious group called the Gnostics whose view of the world included the notion that the physical world was evil created out of evil matter by an inferior god. The supreme God, Gnostics believed, would have no connection to or involvement with a material physical world. It is hard for us to grasp the influence of that religious movement which drew away many people from possible commitment to the Christian Church over the next century from Paul's day. Here, but not only here are there explicit markers put down to declare a very different view of the creation. Genesis 1 has the repeated refrain: *And God saw that it was good,* culminating in the triumphant declaration of Genesis 1:31: *God saw all that He had made, and it was very good* (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21,

25, 31). In the Old Testament world where gods were often confused or merged with aspects of the created order, the Bible makes a clear distinction between Creator and creation and declares the latter in the most positive light, reflecting the One who brought it into being. Why is this point important? If we do not value the physical universe we will certainly not care for it with the priority required to maintain it in a fit state for future generations. Although there are disagreements over the extent of environmental damage caused by humankind on the planet it is our duty to put right the mistakes of past generations, together with our own failures as a race otherwise it appears the consequences in terms of climate change will be severe within a few generations. Good stewardship of the planet requires us to recycle and invest in renewable energy sources where this is possible. When companies or individuals make a mess it must be their responsibility to tidy it up. Decommissioning a nuclear facility or a chemical plant will take longer and be more complex than a beach clean or some other similar project, but leaving a place as we found it –the advice for a picnic in the countryside applies equally on a larger scale to commercial ventures. We must not read II Peter 3:10b-11 which speaks of the destruction of the world as we know it after Jesus' return: *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.* Or Revelation 21:1 which states: *Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away;* as an excuse not to care for the present incredible world in which we live. The challenge to corporations and governments is that they be held accountable for their stewardship and not simply plan for an electoral cycle of four to five years. But there is also a challenge to each of us individually as well. Am I doing what I can as a good steward of the natural resources of the planet? It is easy to point the finger at other people about what they should be doing but everyone needs to play their part.

(b) **The source of cohesion in the universe** (Colossians 1:17) *He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.* The Deists of the Eighteenth Century in England had a view that God created the world and then left it to us and went off to do something else! I know this is a simplistic version of their position but the world as we know on their understanding was one in which we are left to fend for ourselves. This is so far from a biblical view. A Christian perspective is one in which Jesus is central. This is why our church mission statement is so apt. We are building a Christ centred church: looking to Christ- growing in Christ – sharing Christ. He is the One through whom the world must find its purpose for living; He is the person who has modelled how each of us ought to live. He has given us the values we need to inform our choices. He has practised what He preached more perfectly than any other person who has walked this earth. It is not just the people of that day who are entitled to consider Him *the way, the truth and the life* (John 14:6); Jesus hasn't changed. Hebrews 13:8 reminds us that: *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.* If it is true that you cannot take a good picture with your camera without focussing appropriately on the main object; it is equally true that you cannot live life to the full as God intended without giving Jesus His rightful place in our lives. When a group of people truly live out the principles He commends to us our relationships in community are significantly enriched. When what we do is centred around what He wants rather than about getting what we (I, you) want, it makes all the difference to Church Meetings called to discern the Lord's leading and guiding to us. A local church where Jesus is not central will not exist a generation later; people can find many different kinds of social clubs to attend, but a gospel centred church is one where the claims and call of Jesus to follow Him result in dedicated service to the Lord by its members for the good of their communities and for the glory of God. The supremacy of Jesus in the church is what I trust we all desire with every ounce of our beings!

3. His relationship with the Church (Colossians 1:18)

(a) Jesus is the head of the Church (Colossians 1:18a) *And He is the head of the body, the church;* in a number of Christian homes that I visited as a child and young adult I saw a plaque of varying colours and sizes that contained these words: ‘Christ is the Head of this house; the Unseen Guest at every meal; the Silent Listener to every conversation.’ I haven’t seen one for a while, though they must be still found in some people’s homes to this day; You may never choose to erect a plaque containing such a message in your home, but the question remains: Do I affirm these words with my whole heart and mind and strength? If we really believed these words more fully, we might be more careful in the way we speak to and about our fellow believers.

Every believer is united with Christ under His headship. When we come to faith Paul states in I Corinthians 12:12-14: *Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts **form one body**, so it is with Christ.*¹³ *For we were all baptised by one Spirit so **as to form one body** – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.*¹⁴ *And so the body is not made up of one part but of many.* If Jesus’ headship of the Church is truly acknowledged then the unity in its ranks will be evident. Listen to these words from Ephesians 4:3-5: *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*⁴ *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;*⁵ *one Lord, one faith, one baptism;*⁶ *one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.* When we gather in a Church Meeting we are not a democracy in which the majority viewpoint prevails. What we are doing is to seriously seek to discern the mind of Christ. Where ‘what do I want’ is put to one side as I am willing to consider the views of others, as we collectively seek to discern what God is saying to us. In the prayer Jesus taught His disciples it includes these lines: *Your kingdom come! Your will be done! On earth as it is in heaven* (Matthew 6:10); would other people looking at my life and yours be able to notice the difference Jesus is making in our lives? This is a big challenge to me and I think to most if not all of us today?

(b) Jesus is supreme in the Church (Colossians 1:18b) *He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy.* We sing a song sometimes that contains these lines: ‘I’m coming back to the heart of worship And it’s all about you, it’s all about you Jesus I’m sorry Lord, for the thing I’ve made it When it’s all about you, it’s all about you Jesus.’ (C.M.P. 1016 When the music fades); or another familiar modern song that has these words: ‘All for Jesus, all I am and have and ever hope to be. Jesus all for Jesus; all I am and have and ever hope to be. All of my ambitions, hopes and plans I surrender these into Your hands. All of my ambitions, hopes and plans I surrender these into Your hands. For its only in Your will that I am free...’ (C.M.P.1075 Jesus, all for Jesus). It is not too difficult to sing these words in church on Sunday, but it can be much more difficult to live these words Monday to Saturday as well. In a sinful human world in the workplace and even sometimes in family life things don’t always go to plan. We can struggle with our frustrations – ‘that things weren’t meant to be this way!’ The good thing is that God knows and feels deeply your pain as He in an even more profound way echoes these sentiments. In an ideal world created for them humanity in the person of its first representatives chose to go their own way rather than God’s with the sad and predictable consequences outlined in the early chapters of Genesis. Jesus leads the way for each of us to follow in His footsteps. He has the place of honour - *firstborn* – with reference here to being the first person to die and be raised again to life who would never die again. This is the most obvious pointer to the significance of the resurrection. Paul writes about this truth in I Corinthians 15:20-23: *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, **the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.***²¹ *For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.*²² *For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.*²³ *But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then,*

when He comes, those who belong to Him. What is the purpose of this extraordinary demonstration of the power of God? ... so that in everything He might have the supremacy (Colossians 1:18b). Does He have that supremacy in your life and mine? Does He have 'the' place or simply 'a' place in our thinking, our choices, our priorities? We declare that Jesus is Lord. One day we will stand before Him to give an account of our stewardship of this calling as Paul reminded the Christians in Rome. *For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone.*⁸ *If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.*⁹ *For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that He might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.*¹⁰ *You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.*¹¹ *It is written: "As surely as I live," says the Lord, "Every knee will bow before Me; every tongue will acknowledge God."*¹² *So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.* (Romans 14:7-12). Is Jesus supreme in your choices and mine? If not why not?

4. **His relationship with the Father in redemption** (Colossians 1:19-20)

(a) **The revelation of God displayed in Jesus** (Colossians 1:19) *For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him...* How can any human being offer insightful words of comment on something so extraordinary except to offer worship and adoration to our amazing God? The mystery of the coming of God in human flesh and as a baby at Bethlehem is truly remarkable. It is a pointed reminder that God's ways of working are often very different to what we might expect. *For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,' declares the Lord.*⁹ *As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts* (Isaiah 55:8-9). Yet that passage continues with a wonderful promise to reassure God's people. *As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,*¹¹ *so is My word that goes out from My mouth: it will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.* (Isaiah 55:10-11). The glory of God was veiled in Jesus' first coming, but when He returns as King of Kings and Lord of Lords it will be on display at His final triumph. Come Lord Jesus!

(b) **The reconciliation with God accomplished through Jesus** (Colossians 1:20) *and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.* Notice here Paul writes *all things* not some things! The supremacy of Jesus will be revealed and declared in the triumph of the King! No-one else could accomplish what He has done in restoring fellowship between the Creator and His creation. He has opened up the way for us to have fellowship with God. Have you received it? The salvation He obtained on the cross is available to all as a free gift but we must receive it and claim it for ourselves; then live our lives in service of our wonderful God and Saviour Jesus Christ. To Him be all the glory and praise, for ever and ever, Amen.