

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*

*And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.*

Colossians 1:15-23

The story is told of a charismatic pastor, who in delivering a sermon to a group of children in the church, asked the question, "Boys and girls, what lives in a tree, eats nuts and has a long bushy tail?" One little boy said, "Pastor I know you want me to say Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me." The truth be told, we live in a day where there's a lot of confusion about Jesus. The very name of Jesus stirs up a variety of emotions and reactions. In some places today the name of Jesus is considered confrontational. In other places you cannot even say Jesus' name. You can publicly pray to God today but you had better not publicly pray to Jesus. When you ask people what they think about Jesus you get a variety of perspectives. For some, he was a good man. Others think he was a prophet or religious leader. But always, the name of Jesus is cause for reaction and response. Why? Because Jesus was God God, God in the flesh. Jesus is the presence of God. And so Jesus is controversial because most would prefer God remain a mystery so they can mold God into the image of their own expectations.

During Jesus' day there was also much confusion about who he was. Even Jesus asked his disciples: "*Who do you say that I am?*" (Matthew 16:15). In the years that followed Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven caused all kinds of confusion to surface in the churches. The early church did not have a Bible. They didn't have volumes of theological information about Christ like we do today. And so God called Paul to address the confusion that were beginning to surface in the churches about who Jesus was. Such confusions continue today. Recently a new church was planted that deliberately de-emphasizes Jesus. One of the church founders said, "The truth is that the name of Jesus Christ has become for many people offensive and *exclusionary*. We are enabling people to discover God themselves, maybe through Jesus, maybe through Buddha, maybe through any number of ways."

While most of us would be appalled by this brand of Christianity, we must first consider how many of us who claim to be born-again evangelical Christians are living out our faith that same way. Instead of calling Christians to faith through repentance and submission to the authority of God, we proclaim that Jesus died on a cross for the forgiveness of their sins - so we might have a prosperous, stress-free, comfortable life. But Christ bids us to follow him not into happiness but into holiness. If Jesus is to be supreme and preeminent in our lives we must stop asking "What can Jesus do for me? What can the church do for me?" and instead ask "How can I live for God?" Am I truly living in light of Christ's lordship?" We cannot simply add Jesus to our lives. he is to be central, preeminently supreme in life.

This brings us into the book of Colossians where we read there was a great deal of false teachings about who Jesus was were being promoted in the church. Their line of thought went like this: 1) some were teaching God did not create the world because they believed that physical matter was evil and God cannot create evil; 2) in believing that physical matter was evil, they then argued that God would not have come to earth as a human in physical bodily form; 3) therefore they did not believe that Jesus Christ was God or the Son of God but rather a great spiritual man of God or a prophet of God.

Now while we may look at these misconceptions and wonder how and why this kind of thinking and teaching was being embraced by some in the Colossian church, understand that the foundational issue at hand here is the same foundational issue that the church struggles with today - the minimizing, the diminishing of the essential preeminence, the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ, sovereign God, in and over all things. To be preeminent means “surpassing all others; distinguished beyond all things.” Many people of Paul’s day, just like today, thought that Jesus was important but not absolutely preeminent. They had given Him a place in their lives, but not the first place that Christ demanded of them. Jesus was prominent to them, but he most certainly need not be preeminent. In our text for this morning we come to the apex, the pinnacle of the reality of what Christianity is all about. In Jesus, God is completely and perfectly and fully revealed. In Jesus Christ, the preeminent supremacy of God over all things is revealed. Paul puts that issue before us in two different ways: 1) the preeminence of Jesus Christ *over everything that He has created* and 2) the preeminence of Jesus Christ *over all that He has redeemed in his new creation*. The hinge verse which separates these two truths is verse 18 - “*so that in everything he might be preeminent*” (Colossians 1:18).

1) We read first of the preeminent supremacy of Jesus Christ over his creation. “*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*” (Colossians 1:15-17). Jesus is preeminent over everything that He has created. God’s Word here proclaims four truths about the supremacy and preeminence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as *Creator*:

1) Jesus is God. “*He is the image of the invisible God.*” Paul doesn’t mince any words here - Jesus “*is the image of the invisible God.*” Images symbolically convey meaning way beyond what words can describe. My wedding ring symbolically represents the fact that by God’s mercy Nancy agreed to marry me. But as powerful as images, as symbols can be, they are simply representations of far deeper realities. My wedding ring doesn’t make me married to Nancy. Rather, my wedding ring *is a symbol* that I am married to Nancy. The ring doesn’t in and of itself do anything. My wedding ring stands for, honors, represents the deeper reality of what Nancy and I have together as one, in our life commitment to God.

But Jesus is not just a symbol of God. He is God. The word “*image*” in Greek means “likeness, manifestation, or replica.” “*Image*” in Paul’s day was a die or stamp that was able to make exact reproduction. Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God. He is the precise copy because He is God. He both represents and manifests God to the world. As both God’s representation and representative, Christ brings clarity to our hazy notions of our most sovereign immortal, invisible God.

In Christ we see *who God is* – Creator and Redeemer. In Christ we see *what God is like* – the God of mercy and love and grace and power and holiness and justice. And in Christ we see *what God does* – the One who sent His Son to rescue sinners from the dominion of darkness and bring them into a reconciliation with all creation through His death on a cross. In John 14:9, Jesus said: “*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.*” Hebrews 1:3 says, “*He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.*” 2 Corinthians 4:4 speaks of “*the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*” Jesus is and always will be God.

2) Jesus is the firstborn over all creation. “*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.*” Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that this verse teaches that Jesus was a created being and therefore not God. But Jesus is not only God; He is the “*firstborn*” of and over “*all creation.*” We usually associate the term firstborn by implying the first child in the birth order. While it does imply priority in time here, it does not mean that Christ was the first being created or born. Instead it distinguishes Christ from all created things as being “*before*” in time, as supreme over all creation.

Actually, the phrase “*firstborn*” is most frequently translated as “owner or heir.” In ancient times it meant the “ranking one, or supreme one.” Jacob was not born first but he was the heir. This is strongly supported in Psalm 89:27 where we read that God appointed King David as his “*firstborn*,” even though he was the youngest of eight brothers. This verse concludes by saying that David will be the “*the highest of the kings of the earth*.” Jesus is the “*firstborn*” over all creation.

3) Jesus is the creator of all things. “*For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities.*” Jesus is the image of God and the preeminent exalted one over all creation because He is the Creator. Jesus is not a mere man. He is the One Sovereign Creator of all things, the Creator of those things we can see and those things we cannot. Because the false teachers taught that the physical world was evil, they taught that God could not have created the world. They reasoned that if Christ were God, He would only be God over the *spiritual world*. But Paul writes that all “*thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities*” in heaven *and on earth, both of the visible and invisible world*, are under the authority of Jesus because he created them.

The point Paul is making here is that Jesus has sovereignty over everything. He is the Creator. And Jesus is not only the Creator, He also provides the purpose for His creation. Paul continues to write here that “*all things were created through him and for him.*” The Word of God tells us that goal of all creation is to glorify God. Revelation 4:11 tells us that as the host of heaven surrounded the throne of the Jesus they proclaimed, “*Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.*” Jesus created everything.

4) Jesus holds all things together. “*And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*” In the midst of war and unrest and political division and economic uncertainty we must keep in mind that it is Jesus who holds everything together. “*He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*” Jesus existed before everything else as he declared in John 8:58: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.*” Jesus existed before all things and Jesus created all things, and Jesus holds all things together. To “*hold together*” means to prevent something from falling into complete chaos. Christ is before all things, in rank. He has preeminence over all things in terms of time and status.

Jesus is not only the Creator of the world; he is the spiritual glue and divine gravity that holds all things, all of life, all of creation together. By him everything *came to be*, and by him everything *continues to be*. Hebrews 1:3 reminds us that he holds everything together by the power of his divine creative word: “*He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.*” (Hebrews 1:3). Despite what the media might say, Jesus is keeping everything from falling apart. He upholds everything by the power of his word. There is no conflict in Christ. There’s no crisis in heaven. He will be exalted among the nations. No matter what, Jesus is the preeminent sovereign omnipotent God who holds all things together.

II) We have seen that Jesus Christ is preeminently supreme over creation – and now we read of the preeminent supremacy of Jesus Christ over all that he has redeemed in his new creation. “*And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell*” (Colossians 1:18-19). The image of the invisible God entered the sphere of human experience in order to reconcile all things in heaven and on earth by means his death and resurrection. God’s Word here shifts from the *old natural creation* to the *new spiritual creation*. The *creating God in Christ* is now the *reconciling God in Christ*. Jesus is preeminent over everything that he has created and we now see that Jesus is preeminent over all that he has redeemed and newly created. Another way to say it is: 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. As God’s Word continues it now proclaims two truths about the supremacy and preeminence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as the redeemer of His new creation.

1) Jesus Christ has supremacy over the new creation of his church. " And he is the head of the body, the church." Like a grain of sand that irritates an oyster inside of its shell to produce the beauty of a pearl, so the church was born and emerged from the wounded side of Jesus. It was the irritation of our sin that put him to death, and as he covered our sin with his blood, our souls were turned into beautiful pearls of great value. That is the church. Jesus is the beginning, the source and the head of the church.

If Jesus is the creator and head of the church as he is creator of all things, it means that the destinies of creation and the church are bound together and that God's purposes for all creation are being worked out and are to be lived out in the congregational life of the church. The church does not exist to meet the needs of its members or to insure its institutional survival. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, "I will build My church." The church belongs to Jesus. Arrowsmith Baptist Church is not yours or mine or ours. The church exists to fulfill the redemptive purposes of Jesus, who is the head of the church.

The creative principle of God and His glory should flourish in the church as it bears fruit through its preaching of the gospel and by its living out the gospel for the glory of God. Since Jesus is the head, the focus of the church is *always to be Jesus*. The church is *not about us*. And the church is *not about church*. It's about Jesus! Jesus is to be the source of the church's life. *Christ-likeness is to be the effect of the church*. Paul describes how the headship of Jesus Christ is to be lived out in the church.

*He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.*" Jesus is the "beginning," which means that He is the source. Christ's resurrection "the firstborn from the dead" is to be the source of new life for those in the church. The goal of the resurrection was not merely to give those who surrender their lives to Jesus Christ the hope that they might live after they die. The goal of the resurrection was also that those who surrender their lives to Jesus might live out the new resurrected life they have received in Christ while they are living before they die. Jesus died and rose from the dead "that in everything he might be preeminent.." Christ is to be preeminent, supreme in your life, in my life, in our lives, in our families, in our church, in our work, in our play - in all of life, *in this life and in life after death*.

"For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." Jesus Christ is the fullness, not the partial, embodiment of God. The fullness of God dwells "in him" - not around, upon, or under Jesus, but "in Him." The fullness of God "dwells" in Him. To "dwell" means to take up residence; this points us to the incarnation, the birth of Christ in human form, as the apostle John writes, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14). Colossians 2:9 tells us "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily."

God the Father was and is pleased to dwell fully and permanently in His Son Jesus Christ. All of the character and personality and attributes of God – His Spirit, His Word, His wisdom, His power, His joy, His love, His righteousness, His mercy, His grace, His glory – are revealed and released in the form and presence and reality of Jesus Christ . Jesus is to be seen as supreme and preeminent in the lives of those in the church - as we live out the Father's good pleasure for all His fullness that dwells in us. For as we read in John 1:16, "For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.."

2) Not only does Jesus Christ have supremacy over the new creation of his church, God's Word also tells us that Christ has supremacy over the new creation of our very own lives. "And through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister." (Colossians 1:20-23).

In these verses Paul describes the redemptive work of Jesus Christ in reconciling a sinful lost people back to God. As people come to saving faith in Christ, as they are reconciled to Jesus through His blood, they become members of His church, of which He is the head. Reconciliation is defined as the restoration of fellowship after estrangement. The word “*alienated*” here implies isolation, loneliness, and a severe sense of not belonging. When we are out of relationship with God, we are then out of relationship with one another, and it mars our entire life. Sin distances us from God and twists our thoughts and behaviors, producing fear and suspicion of God and of one another, generating an urge to strike out, hurt, or destroy. “*And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.*”

Reconciliation in Christ breaks that cycle of sin, heals our ruptured relationships with God and with one another, brings us into accord with God’s holy character and purpose. Paul emphasizes here that it is Jesus Christ alone who can accomplish this; reconciliation and salvation and sanctification do not come from our works, wills, or striving. Paul writes: “*HE has now reconciled in HIS body of flesh by HIS death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.*” What we are reading here is that in Jesus we have been reconciled back to God in order to live the life that God wants for us. If we are to be holy, without blemish and free from accusation before the judgment seat *in the future*, we must continue to grow deeper in our faith *in the present*. It is God’s goal through Jesus Christ to make us holy and blameless. But while we all are still a work in progress, God does require a response of our free will on our part – “*if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven.*”

We must never take our salvation in Jesus Christ for granted. We must never be nonchalant about our sacred responsibilities to glorify God and to love God and to surrender our wills unto God; to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses and follow Jesus; to grow deeper in holiness and loving one another. Jesus has reconciled *all things* to Himself! He has made peace on our behalf through the blood of His cross. Although we all are born alienated and hostile in mind, although we all engage in deeds which are not of God, yet Christ went to the cross to reconcile us in His fleshly body through His death, so that He, Jesus Christ, might present us before God holy and blameless and beyond reproach. It is Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ alone who offers the only solution to sinful human alienation from God.

We are to live out our reconciliation with God today - “*so that in everything he might be preeminent.*” Like toddlers entering preschool who learn to cope with the rude awakening that they are not the center of the universe, God’s Word here confronts us with the truth that the earth we live on is not the center of created reality - but yet we still live our lives as if everything revolves around us. Scientists continue to hold onto the theory that the beginning of the universe started with the “Big Bang” – yet the Bible clearly tells us it all began with simply with a Big Word spoken by a Big God. The British scientist, Stephen Hawking once said that “the eventual goal of all of science is to provide a single theory that describes the whole universe”. Well, we know what that theory is – it’s risen Jesus Christ!

The resurrection victory of God in Christ is grounded in the very fabric of all history. And in spite of appearances to the contrary in our world today, God still has plans to accomplish His glorious purposes that He intended from the beginning for this world that we live in that is suffocated with so much self-centeredness, terrorism, division, hatred, and violence. If we belong to Christ, then we too have a place in history, since Jesus is the center, the origin, and destiny of all of history. We are meant to be here! We have great purpose - living for His glory! God has not left the world to its own. He is in charge and He is charging towards the fulfillment of His glorious victory at this very moment!

God's purpose in Christ is for the whole of creation is to be reconciled back to Himself. Sin makes a shambles of created harmony. Sin battles against the restoration work of God. And as sinners we are not *victims*; we are *perpetrators* of that battle. The theme of human rebellion and sin is an unbroken scarlet thread that runs through the entire Bible to the foot of the cross. It's is at the foot of the cross where we either live and grow - or die. We have been created and called to the great purpose of glorifying God through Christ's preeminent supremacy in our lives over and above our battle with sin.

Some years ago, early in the initial days of the war in Iraq, high ranking generals declared that they had achieved air supremacy over the country. They boasted that they controlled the airspace and could shoot down anything they wanted to, whether it be planes or pigeons. Well that's not really true. It was Jesus who had air supremacy as well as land and ocean supremacy over Iraq. It is Jesus and not the armies of all the world who have supremacy at this very moment. If any of us sitting here this morning are basking in our independence and don't believe that Jesus has preeminent supremacy over us, know that you are wildly delusional. No one can diminish the supremacy of Christ any more than we can diminish the brightness of the sun by writing the word "darkness" on a piece of paper. The question is *not if* Jesus is preeminently supreme over all things. The real question is - Are we going recognize Jesus as the supreme one in our lives and surrender our hearts, minds, and souls to him?

The crucifixion was an evocative symbol of Roman power that declared the sovereignty of Caesar over the world and yet Jesus submitted to it with a view of establishing once for all the Lordship of God. The crucifixion that expresses the zenith of disempowerment, degradation and death becomes the vehicle for the expression of the preeminent, supreme saving power of the risen Jesus Christ. It is by renouncing our own power to save ourselves, that the power of God is unleashed in our lives with formidable force. It is in the display of our sacrifice and our human weakness - that we learn what the true risen power of Jesus Christ really is. It is at the cross that every dictator who subjects others to his tyranny must learn that Jesus is Lord. Jesus' surrender and willingness to embrace death on behalf of others reveals that he is the supreme, preeminent, glorious Lord and King. Amen?

True followers of Jesus Christ don't wear rabbit feet around their necks. We walk under ladders freely. We break mirrors without fear - because we believe Jesus Christ is supreme and preeminent over all things. Jesus is not one God among many; he is the One and Only God. He reigns over all. C.S. Lewis once wrote: "There is no neutral ground in the universe; every square inch and every split second is claimed by Christ and counter-claimed by Satan." Jesus asked the question, "*Who do you say that I am?*" To which Peter replied, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" And Jesus answered him, "*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*" (Matthew 16:15-19).

In 1 Corinthians 2:2 the apostle Paul declared: "*For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*" As fallen sinners who have been reconciled back to God by the glorious redemptive purpose and work of the cross; as redeemed members of the Jesus' new creation, let us also commit our hearts to knowing nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified, "*that in everything he might be preeminent.*" Jesus Christ is preeminently supreme over everything! Amen? Amen!

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Pastor Leland Botzet

Arrowsmith Baptist Church