

COL. 1:15 – 2:5

By Ashby L. Camp

Copyright © 2006 by Ashby L. Camp. All rights reserved.

II. The Supremacy of Christ: Lord in Creation and Redemption (1:15-20)

A. Introduction

1. There is much scholarly debate over the origin of this section. Stylistically it seems different from the rest of the letter, more like poetry.

2. Many are convinced that this was a preexisting hymn, not necessarily Christian, or a creedal formula that Paul adopted.

3. Whether Paul adopted something or not, he used it for his purpose. In Titus 1:12 Paul quotes a pagan prophet, so he could surely employ preexisting Christian material.

4. Paul incorporated this hymn into his letter because it so powerfully expresses the absolute supremacy of Christ, the antidote to the Colossian heresy. They were being told that Christ was important but was inadequate or insufficient in himself for fullness with God. After starting with Christ, one had to satisfy a host of powerful spiritual beings to maximize one's relationship with God.

B. ¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God,

1. The very nature and character of God have been perfectly revealed in Christ.

2. As the writer says in Heb. 1:3, "He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (NRSV).

C. the firstborn of all creation,

1. "Firstborn" does not mean he is the oldest of created beings. The following words make clear that he is the one through whom all creation came into being.

2. "Firstborn" in this context means "most high" or "supreme one." The emphasis is on his rank.

D. ¹⁶for by him all the things in the heavens and on the earth were created, the visible and the invisible,

1. This is proof that Christ is the "supreme one" over all creation. He is superior to all creation because by him or in him all things were created. He was intimately and significantly involved in the creation of everything that has been created.

2. Heaven and invisible correspond as do earth and visible. This covers it all.

3. whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.

a. This further specification seems clearly aimed at the Colossian heresy. Even the cosmic powers that received prominence in that heresy were created by Christ. They are dependent on and subordinate to Christ.

b. These various terms (thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities) were mentioned in Jewish literature as powerful angelic or spiritual beings. Paul uses several of these terms in Eph. 1:21. In Eph. 6:12 it is clear that "rulers" and "authorities" are spiritual beings. (Generally, the reference by Paul is to hostile rather than friendly powers.)

c. The point is not to catalogue all the spiritual beings or to rank them but to show that *all* are subject to Christ. They were created *through* him and *for* him.

E. ¹⁷He is before all things,

1. This declares his preexistence, his temporal priority to the universe. As John says in Jn. 1:1-2, Jesus was there when the beginning began.

2. As the preexistent One, he is Lord of the universe. Paul is hammering the point of Christ's supremacy.

F. and in him all things hold together.

1. Apart from Christ's continuous sustaining activity, all would disintegrate. He is *that* cosmically significant.

2. In the words of Heb. 1:2-3a, "[I]n these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."

G. ¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church;

1. This expresses the church's vital union with Christ. Headship in this context refers to Christ's control over his people as well as their dependence on him for life and power.

2. This marks a shift in perspective that continues for the rest of the section (hymn). Vv. 15-17 viewed Christ in terms of cosmic power and authority; from here on the view is of Christ as Savior.

H. he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that in everything he might have first place (supremacy, preeminence).

1. Christ is the founder of a new humanity, the group that will share in the resurrection in the age to come.

2. This final age, this eternal state, has broken into this present reality in the person of Christ. The things that are to characterize that final age, such as resurrection, are seen in Christ. As the first of the "kingdom resurrections," he is the first-fruits who guarantees the future resurrection of others (see 1 Cor. 15:20, 23).

3. Thus, Christ is the beginning and firstborn in both creation and resurrection (renewed creation). This was done so that he would be preeminent, have the first place in *everything*. In both old and new creation, first place belongs to Christ.

I. The reason for Christ having first place in everything, his entitlement to this supremacy

1. ¹⁹**For in him all the fullness [of God] was pleased to dwell** (see 2:9)

a. It is only right because he is the divine Son of God. All the attributes and activities of God - his spirit, word, wisdom, and glory - are perfectly displayed in Christ.

b. The Colossians need not fear those supernatural powers under whose control men were supposed to live. Jesus is the God-man, the one in whom the divine fullness resides. He is the one mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim. 2:5-6).

2. ²⁰**and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things in heaven or things on earth, by making peace through the blood of his cross.**

a. Jesus is the exclusive means God has provided for reconciliation of *anything* that is estranged from him, whether the physical universe (Rom. 8:18-21), people (2 Cor. 5:16-21), or any cosmic powers. No part of the rupture or dislocation in the creation's relationship to its Creator can be healed apart from Christ; he's that great!

b. This does not mean that all things will in fact be reconciled to God. It simply means that Christ's death is so significant that it holds the *potential* for universal reconciliation. 1 John 2:2 speaks of Christ as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world (*κοσμος*), yet John is clear that not everyone appropriates that atonement. Christ is the universal atoner *in potential*.

c. Note that this reconciliation was brought about by an event in human history, Jesus' death on the cross. It was not accomplished in some other reality or dimension.

III. Reconciliation Appropriated by the Colossians (1:21-23)

A. ²¹**And you once were alienated and hostile in mind in evil deeds,**

1. Emphatic position of "And you" stresses the involvement of the Christians at Colossae with this reconciliation.

2. Paul is drawing a sharp before-and-after contrast ("once") to highlight God's mighty action.

3. Before conversion they were estranged from God. They not only went their own way but were consciously antagonistic to God in their mind-set. This "hostile mind" naturally led to evil actions. Our convictions determine our behavior to a large extent. If God is not believed in, we will not order our lives to please him (see the characterization of the Gentile world in Rom. 1:18-32).

B. ²²**but now he has reconciled you in the body of his flesh through the death [of him] to present you holy and blameless and without accusation before him,**

1. As Christians, their past has been wiped out. Note that no credit is given to their response, the fact they had accepted God's gift. Their new position is the result of *God's* work.

2. Their reconciliation was accomplished through the physical death of Jesus Christ. Paul's emphasis on the physicalness of Christ's sacrifice (1:20 - "blood of his cross") may be a corrective to a tendency of the Colossian heresy. Later Gnosticism, of which this heresy may be an incipient form, denied the incarnation (docetism). This was a problem as early as John's writings (e.g., 2 Jn. 7).

3. The purpose of God's reconciling work was to present them holy and blameless before him and free from accusation. All will stand before him for judgment (Rom. 14:10; Rev. 20:11-15), but Christians are declared blameless, without fault or stain (see Rom. 8:31-40; Eph. 5:27).

C. ²³**if indeed you remain in the faith, securely established and firm, not moving away from the hope of the gospel that you heard,**

1. Paul reminds them that they must remain faithful to the end to be accepted on that great Judgment Day. He is not doubting that they will; he simply is stating a fact. They cannot abandon the apostolic gospel which they received; that is the ground of their hope.

2. This reminder is particularly needed in light of the threat to their faith being posed by the Colossian heresy.

D. which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven and of which I, Paul, became a servant.

1. Perhaps he means that all humankind has "representatively" or "in principle" been preached to in that the word had spread to Jew and Gentile and without the exclusion of any group or class.

2. This reference to the gospel's universal scope vouches for the fact it is *the* authentic message, not like the localized and select teaching of the heresy.

3. Paul is a servant of that gospel in that he has been divinely commissioned to spread it.

IV. Paul's Ministry (1:24 – 2:5)

A. In Christ generally (1:24-29)

1. ²⁴**Now I rejoice in the sufferings on your behalf, and I fill up in my flesh what is lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church,**

a. This verse raises several questions: What are Paul's sufferings and how can they be an occasion for rejoicing? In what sense can these sufferings be *for* the body of Christ in general and the Colossians in particular? In what way is something lacking in "Christ's afflictions," and in what way can Paul (or any other Christians) fill this deficiency?

b. Paul's sufferings - In keeping with the Lord's words to Ananias in Acts 9:15-16 (see also, 1 Thess. 3:3-4), Paul suffered as a consequence of his commission as an apostle to the Gentiles (1 Cor. 4:9-13; 2 Cor. 11:23-33; see also, 2 Cor. 6:3-10).

c. Fill a deficiency in "Christ's afflictions"

(1) Obviously this does not mean that Christ's death in any way lacks anything in atoning or reconciling efficacy (see 1:20, 22).

(2) "Christ's afflictions" seems to refer to what in Jewish apocalyptic literature was called the "woes (or birthpangs) of the Messiah."

(a) The Jewish idea was that the Messianic Age would immediately be preceded by the suffering of God's people. This continues in the N.T., but it is modified.

(b) The "coming age" already has been inaugurated, but it overlaps with the "present age." This dual state will continue until Christ's return. The woes of the Messiah, the afflictions of Christ, continue as the sufferings of his people (Acts 9:4) throughout this dual age until they reach their *appointed limit*. (Rev. 6:9-11 demonstrates the concept of a set quantity of righteous suffering.) Then Christ will return, consummating the "age to come."

(3) All Christians participate in these sufferings (see Acts 14:22; Rom. 8:17). As N. T. Wright (p.90) puts it, "All Christians will suffer for their faith in one way or another: if not outwardly then inwardly, through the long, slow battle with temptation or sickness, the agonizing anxieties of Christian responsibilities for a family or a church, the constant doubts and uncertainties which accompany the obedience of faith, and `the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to,' taken up as they are within the call to follow Christ."

d. Paul rejoices because:

(1) His bodily sufferings contribute to the total of sufferings to be endured before the consummation of the age to come. By helping to fill up this predetermined measure, Paul brings the end so much closer.

(2) By personally absorbing a disproportionate share of the affliction of Christ, the predetermined measure of suffering the righteous must endure, he reduced the amount of suffering left for fellow Christians.

2. ²⁵of which I became a servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to complete the word of God,

a. Paul's commission was for the Colossians in that he was an apostle to the Gentiles.

b. Specifically, this commission was to complete (or fulfill) the word of God, meaning to effectively proclaim it throughout the world.

3. The word of God Paul is to fulfill or effectively proclaim is defined as "**the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations**"

a. God's plan for the end time was secret during the ages and generations of the past. That plan, which is Christ and God's decisive action in him, is now disclosed (see 1 Cor. 2:7; Rom. 16:25-26).

b. This secret or mystery **but has now been revealed to his saints**, those who have heard and received the gospel. It is in the effective presentation of the gospel that the revelation of the mystery takes place (see Eph. 3:8-9).

c. ²⁷**to whom God desired to make known what [is] the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.**

(1) Paul here sets forth several features of this mystery that has now been disclosed. First, it is something magnificent. Paul uses the terms *riches* and *glory* in reference to it.

(2) This mystery had a special reference to the Gentiles in that the O.T. indicates that Gentiles will be included in God's plan of salvation (e.g., Isa. 49:6; see Rom. 15:9-12), but the relationship of Gentiles and Jews in that salvation is not spelled out. The fact that Gentile salvation would be brought about through the inclusion of Jews and Gentiles on equal footing in one body had remained a mystery until its fulfillment and proclamation (see Eph. 3:2-12).

(3) This mystery is Christ in them, the hope of glory. They were Gentiles, but Christ was in them because they had believed the gospel. They therefore had a sure hope that they would share in the fullness of that glory at the consummation (see Col. 3:4; Rom. 8:19; Phil. 3:21; 2 Thess. 1:10).

4. ²⁸**We proclaim him, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom,**

a. Paul and his associates proclaim Christ. This is done by means of warning and teaching. The verb "warning" implies criticism and correction. In Colossians there is an emphasis on teaching.

b. They warned and taught *every person*, not like the Colossian heretics who pitched their teaching to some intellectual elite.

c. Their teaching was "in all wisdom." This may stand over against the heretics who boasted of their superior wisdom with its speculative knowledge of higher worlds.

5. **so that we may present every man perfect (mature - NRSV) in Christ** - The goal of their warning and teaching is that at Christ's coming (which Paul seems to have in mind - see 1:22) every believer may be presented as a fully mature Christian.

6. ²⁹**for which also I labor, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works in me.** – Paul spends himself in that effort, but he gladly acknowledges that the strength for such ceaseless labor comes from God.

B. To the Colossians specifically (2:1-5)

1. **For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and the ones in Laodicea, and as many as have not seen my face in [the] flesh,** – Paul has raised this subject of his "struggling" because he wants the Colossians and the others in the Lycus Valley he has never met to know that he is "struggling" for *them*.

2. ²**so that their hearts may be strengthened, having been instructed in love and into all the riches of the fullness of insight, into the knowledge of the mystery of God, namely Christ, ³in whom are all the hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge.**

a. The purpose of Paul's struggling for them is that their hearts may be strengthened. He wants to fortify them against the threat posed by this false teaching. This is a restatement of his purpose in 1:28, to present everyone fully mature in Christ.

b. This strengthening or fortifying of their hearts is expected to result from their having been instructed *in* love and *into* all the riches of the fullness of insight.

(1) Many understand the participle (συμβιβασθεντες) to mean "having been united" but the notion of instruction seems more suited to this context.

(2) "*in* love" indicates the manner of the instruction and "*into* all the riches of the fullness of insight" indicates the object toward which the instruction moves. In other words, it is expected that loving instruction will bring them into all the riches of fullness of insight.

c. The phrase "all the riches of the fullness of insight" is then clarified by the phrase "into the knowledge of the mystery of God, namely Christ." To be instructed into all the riches of the fullness of insight is to be instructed into the knowledge of Christ. He is the mystery of God, a point Paul made clear in 1:25-27. Christ is God's plan for the end, God's plan of salvation.

d. This Christ is the one in whom *all* the hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found. It is therefore useless to look for sources of wisdom and knowledge apart from him. Christ is not simply the beginning of wisdom, he is also the end. This is obviously relevant to the Colossian heresy but also to so much of what is passed off today as spiritual wisdom and knowledge (e.g., the limitless power of the inner self).

3. **⁴I say this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.** – Paul has told them of the futility of seeking wisdom and knowledge elsewhere to keep them from being deceived by smooth talking heretics.

4. **⁵For though I am absent in the flesh, I am with you in the spirit, and I rejoice to see your well-ordered condition** (REB - unbroken ranks; NRSV - morale) **and the firmness of your faith in Christ.**

a. It is not clear how Paul understood his spirit being with them (or with the Corinthians - 1 Cor. 5:3-5). It may be tied to the corporate nature of the church.

b. At the moment, Paul is happy with what he sees. Although troubled by false teachers, they were in a well-ordered condition (orderly life) and were firm and stable in their faith.