

1-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Cox, Ron (2007) "Christ, the Creation and You," *Leaven*: Vol. 15: Iss. 4, Article 13.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol15/iss4/13>

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Christ, the Creation and You

RON COX

The story goes that a preacher would offer a children's sermon every Sunday evening. The little ones would come up and gather round while the preacher would tell them a story then ask them a question at the end. Regardless of the story, his question generally had the same answer. So much so, one evening ended with a surprise when he asked for the name of the small creature with the bushy tail that gathers nuts and jumps from tree to tree. Little Jenny, a veteran of the preacher's many children sermons, responded, "It sounds like a squirrel but is it . . . Jesus?"

Like Jenny, we have perhaps grown too accustomed to saying that "Jesus" is the answer. Or perhaps we are more like Jenny's preacher, reducing everything to the same question so that we get the right answer, but at the expense of serious thought. Either way, while we may not have meant it to, the claim that "Jesus is the answer" has come to sound like a cliché, just another slogan on a bumper sticker. The problem, however, is with us and not with the claim. It, in reality, is a profound truth that should equip us for dealing with whatever question we might have. We only need to understand better who Jesus is to appreciate its profundity. Luckily, this is the task Paul sets himself in writing to the Colossians.

THE COLOSSIAN PROBLEM

What prompted Paul to write the believers in Colossae is a bit obscure. Hints may be garnered mostly from the detractions he makes against the apparent troublemakers there, self-styled wise ones who would, Paul feared, take the Colossians captive with vacuous philosophy and speculations about the forces of the universe (Col 2.8). They were condemning the Colossians for not observing the right rituals and keeping the right diet (2.16, 21) as well as disqualifying them for their lack of spiritual acumen, their inability to experience the heady heights of angelic worship and visions (2.18). Paul responds that such people, espousing a philosophy of fear and a religion of spiritual appeasement, might appear wise but in fact were merely poseurs, offering merely human remedies inadequate for addressing the real chasm between earthly and heavenly existence (2.20–23).

But who were these troublemakers exactly? Were they Judaizers, believers so zealous for the Law that they followed Paul around, attempting to bind his converts by the regulations of scripture? Were they superstitious pagans concocting a religious and intellectual syncretism meant to assuage fates and other astral forces? Were they early Gnostics seeking the treasures of wisdom and knowledge through denial of their physical bodies and a heightened spiritual awareness? The fact is it is nearly impossible to say for sure who the culprits were at Colossae. Indeed, biblical scholars through the years have suggested more than forty-five different theories to account for what prompted Paul's letter.¹ While the specific cause has eluded us, that so many conjectures have been put forward does tell us something important: the problem at Colossae must have been one common to human beings generally, since Paul's depiction of it seems to fit so many

1. For a concise yet helpful survey of theories about the Colossian problem, see David Hay, *Colossians* (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries; Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007), 24–28.

divergent religious phenomena. This also means that the solution Paul puts forward in his letter may have common, even universal applicability.

GIVING THANKS TO THE FATHER

Paul offers his solution early in the letter, well before he specifically addresses the Colossians' problems, and he does so in the form of a thanksgiving. Paul usually begins his letters with a thanksgiving and prayer and this time is no exception (1.3–8). However, in Colossians he adds another, more specific and elaborate prayer and thanksgiving (vv. 9–23), nearly three times as long as the first. Here he prays that God will grant the Colossians the knowledge and wisdom necessary to live worthily of the Lord, generating much fruit and being steadfast. He further prays that they will be joyfully thankful for what God has done for them in including them among his holy ones, having “rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son” (v. 13).² Where in verse 3 he offered thanks for the Colossians, now he prays that they may be moved to thankfulness themselves.

Thankfulness appears, in fact, to be an important theme for Paul's letter as a whole. In what may be Colossians' thesis statement, Paul writes in 2.6–7 that the Christians in Colossae should continue to live in Christ “rooted and built up in him . . . abounding in thanksgiving.” And in what is arguably the crescendo of the letter, Paul calls the Colossians to thankfulness three times in as many verses:

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be *thankful*. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with *gratitude* in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, *giving thanks* to God the Father through him. (Col 3.15–7)

While contemporary readers might take this emphasis on thanksgiving for granted, it would seem a very potent antidote for the poisoned religion the troublemakers were pushing. After all, if the Colossians had listened to these people, they must have been anxious about appeasing the “elemental spirits of the universe” (2.8), working strenuously to observe the correct rites and wondering what more sacrifices it would take to have the “authentic” religious experience those teachers claimed necessary. The *raison d'être* of Paul's letter then was to move the Colossians from this state of religious anxiety to a state of gratitude, focusing not on what they must do but on what God has already done to give them spiritual security.

HIS BELOVED SON

The careful reader will of course have noticed that in both 2.6–8 and 3.15–17, Paul does not encourage a generic thankfulness but rather thankfulness specifically made possible by Jesus Christ. It is through Christ (“in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” 1.14) that God brings spiritual security to the Colossians and it is through Christ that the Colossians respond to God in gratitude (3.17). That Christ is the ground of thankfulness explains why Paul, in the remainder of the larger thanksgiving (1.15–23), focuses on the Son's significance for the universe and for the Colossians personally. Paul establishes from the outset the Lord's *bona fides* and will refer back to them, even quoting what he had written here later in the letter (see, for instance, 1.24, 2.9–10, 15, 18–19, 3.10–11). For reasons that will become clear momentarily, we should consider Col 1.15–20 and 1.21–23 as separate moves in Paul's effort at laying a foundation for gratitude. In 1.15–20, he dramatically describes Christ's accomplishments as creator and reconciler of all things, which he will pointedly juxtapose against the reputation of the “rulers and authorities” whom the troublemakers vaunted (see 2.10, 15, as well as 2.8, 18, 20, assuming that the rulers and authorities are identical to the “elemental spirits of the universe” and “angels” mentioned in those verses). In 1.21–23, he makes it clear

2. All citations are from the NRSV except Col 1.15–20, which is the author's translation.

that such accomplishments specifically benefit the Colossians, undercutting any reason they might have for looking elsewhere to improve their lot. Hence, understanding these verses is essential to understanding Paul's solution to the Colossian problem and, by extension, to the human problem that plagues us all.

CHRIST HYMN

Colossians 1.15–20 is a rich, effusive description of God's Son that is nearly unparalleled in Paul's writings and the New Testament as a whole, standing alongside only Philippians 2.6–11 and John 1.1–18 as one of the great christological statements of earliest Christianity. In our passage, Paul says that God has transferred the Colossians into the kingdom of his Son

who is the image of the invisible God,
 firstborn over all creation,
 since in him were created all things
 in the heavens or upon the earth,
 the visible things and the invisible things,
 whether thrones or dominions,
 whether rulers or authorities,
 all things have been created through him and to him.
 And he is before all things
 and all things hold together in him
 and he is the head of the body, the church;

who is the beginning,
 firstborn from the dead,
 so that he might become in all things preeminent,
 since in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell
 and through him to reconcile all things to him,
 making peace through the blood of his cross,
 through him whether things upon the earth
 or things in the heavens

To appreciate this passage we must consider not only what it says but how it says it. Formally speaking, Col 1.15–20 is set off from what comes before and what comes after by a change in person: where verses 12–14 are written in the first and second person and verses 21–23 in the second person, verses 15–20 are only in the third person, suggesting that the passage is not specifically addressed to Paul's audience. The structure of verses 15–20 is also offset from its immediate context in having these other formal characteristics: parallelism (see the next paragraph), chiasm ("heavens and earth" in v. 16 become "earth and heavens" in v. 20), and increased repetition of terms (e.g., "all" appears eight times, "firstborn" twice, the prepositions "in," "through," "to" and "upon" at least twice each). When we add to all this the fact that Paul cites portions of 1.15–20 throughout the remainder of the letter (see above), it seems probable that he did not write this passage at the same time he penned the letter. Rather, he appears to be quoting a text, probably a hymn,³ which must have been familiar to, and even favorably regarded by the letter's audience.⁴

3. We know very little about early Christian worship and especially what their hymns and spiritual songs (cf. Col 3.16) might have looked like. The arguments that the New Testament contains such hymns are based upon the kind of internal evidence discussed here, such as elevated language, parallelism, chiasm, etc. It is interesting to note that the relative pronoun "who" which begins Col 1.15–20 also begins other suspected liturgical texts in the NT (see Phil 2.6, 1 Tim 3.16, Heb 1.3, 1 Pet 2.22). For more on Col 1.15–20 as a hymn, see David Aune, *Westminster Dictionary of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 105–106.

4. Eduard Lohse's argument for Col 1.15–20 as an independent text that pre-existed the letter remains in my estimation the most astute and appropriately conservative to this day; see *Colossians and Philemon* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 41–46. Peter T. O'Brien makes a case for taking the passage in its whole as originating with the letter itself; see *Colossians and Philemon* (WBC 44; Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 40–42. Both texts provide bibliography and analysis of previous arguments about the origin of the passage.

Examining the passage's parallelism raises the prospect that if it is a hymn, it is one that comes in two stanzas (vv. 15–18a and vv. 18b–20; as shown in the translation above). Both stanzas begin by clarifying the identity of the Son (cf. “He is the image . . . firstborn over all creation” // “He is the beginning . . . firstborn from the dead”). After the subject is properly identified, the basis for the identification is provided (note the “since in him were created all things” and “since in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell”). The basis for the Son's identity is established by the use of prepositions: first generally, by the use of “in him” (“*in him all things were created*” // “*in him all things hold together*” // “*in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell*”); and then more specifically with “through him” and “to him” (“all things were created *through him* and *to him*” // “*through him* to reconcile all things *to him*”). Finally, the chiasm mentioned above demonstrates that the scope of the Son's activity, with respect to both creation and reconciliation, is comprehensive (cf. “in the heavens and upon the earth” // “whether things upon the earth or things in the heavens”).

While such formal considerations may seem arcane, they are actually important for helping us to understand how Paul ministers to the Colossians. If he has in fact appropriated a hymn (or even penned one) for the letter, Paul has done so in order to communicate the greatness of Christ, demonstrating the close relationship between what we believe and worship and how we behave. He is at the least modeling for the Colossians his own advice by letting the Word of Christ dwell in him richly, even as he teaches and admonishes them with this hymn (see 3.16). An exploration of the hymn's two stanzas will unpack what Paul is teaching us about Christ.

“IN HIM ALL THINGS WERE CREATED”

The first stanza of the hymn describes the relationship between Christ and the created order. It begins with the bold claim that the Son is “the image of the invisible God,” suggesting that knowledge of the Father is mediated through him. To look upon the Son, to consider him and his actions, is to perceive the God who otherwise is beyond our ken. But the term “image” (Greek *eikōn*) perhaps implies something more than just a visual representation of God (as if that were a small thing). The theological imagination of Greek-speaking Jews of the time had been piqued by statements such as Gen 1.27 which in Greek translation says God created humankind “according to the image of God” (*kat' eikona theou*). The apocryphal writer of *Wisdom of Solomon*, inspired by Greek philosophy as much as Israelite wisdom, claimed Lady Wisdom (*Sophia* in Greek) was “an image of God's goodness” (Wis 7.26). And Philo of Alexandria, the Jewish philosopher from the early first century, frequently says that this “image of God” refers to the divine Logos.⁵ Perhaps the Colossian hymn has received its cue from thinking like this (though probably not from these particular writers). Regardless, it demonstrates that the Son has a very close relationship to God from the outset. Yet, the focus of the hymn is clear—it is on the Son alone. Indeed, God (the Father) is not mentioned again in verses 15–20.

The Son's close relationship with the invisible God is set in balance with his place vis-à-vis the created order. He is “the firstborn over all creation.” This might be taken to mean that he himself is the first creature of several, but the next line shows that “all things” find their origin in him. It is more likely that here “firstborn” means not just that he exists before all things but that his being is of a higher rank. He alone is the image of God, he alone is of directly divine origin; everything else is secondary, connected to God only by dependence on God's Son.

The stanza seeks next to describe the Son as agent of creation. “In him all things were created . . . all things have been created through him and to him.” Surprisingly, given the magnitude of this claim, Christ's role as creator is not explored very much in Paul's writings or the New Testament as a whole (it is mentioned here and in 1 Cor 8.6 as well as John 1.3, 10 and Heb 1.2–3). Colossians 1.16 is, in fact, the most elaborate NT description of this doctrine. The curious thing about the description is how much freight

5. See, for instance, *Allegorical Interpretation* 3.96, *On the Confusion of Tongues* 146–47, and *On Dreams* 2.45.

is carried by the prepositions, which are notoriously frustrating to nail down in Greek. (This is why the English versions translate the prepositions differently.) It is best to see “in him” as describing Christ’s role as the means of creation in general, while “through him” focuses on the fact that all things originate with him and “to him” focuses on the fact that all things have their ultimate goal in him. The Son is the origin and *telos* (ultimate aim) of the universe—and the verse makes clear it means the whole universe: the visible and invisible, the earthly and heavenly, and any power structure one can imagine inhabiting these realms.

The last three lines (vv. 17–18a) of the first stanza serve as a coda clarifying Christ’s current status with respect to the creation. To say that the Son “is before all things” is to say that even now he currently exists as pre-eminent in the universe. At the same time, the universe would not exist apart from him since it “holds together in him.” Again, notice how boldly Paul hymns Christ. The Son is like the Stoic Logos, that force that pervades and sustains the cosmos. Notice also that the hymn points to the great boon of believing in Christ, since this One who sustains all things is “the head of the body, the church.” Having echoed the Stoics, the hymn now sets up a clear distinction. Where Stoics would have seen the cosmos as God’s body, Paul (or the hymn writer) sees that intimate relation reserved for the elect holy ones of God, the church of Christ.

“IN HIM ALL THE FULLNESS WAS PLEASED TO DWELL”

The formal characteristics discussed above caused us to think that there may be a shift at verse 18b to a second stanza. Where the Son was the firstborn of all creation, he now is “the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.” Where it was in him all things were created, now it is in him all the fullness dwells. Where it was through him and to him that all things had been created, now “through him all things are reconciled to him, making peace....” In truth, the content of verses 18b–20 leaves no doubt that there is a substantive shift of thought between the stanzas. Even as we hear that the Son is “the beginning” we see that there is the existence of death, strife and disunion on a cosmic scale in this stanza. After all, by telling us of Christ’s bringing resurrection, pacification and reconciliation, the hymn implies such things were necessary. What happened between the glorious picture of Christ the pre-eminent creator presented in the first stanza and this stanza, where Christ has to (again) “become in all things pre-eminent” (v. 18c)? Creation seems to have gotten away from the Image of God, degenerating into violence, despair and death. How?

The Colossians, troubled as they were by the new “philosophy,” would have pointed to its rulers and authorities, those elemental forces of the universe, and said that they were the culprits here. Though they might not be so forthright in saying so, it seems clear they thought such rulers and authorities capable of dethroning Christ and making a spectacle of him (at least, they were doing so in the lives of some Colossians). This may be the basis for Paul’s concern that the Colossians were tempted with reservations about Christ’s superiority and open to looking elsewhere to solve their problems.

Yet this is why Paul recited the hymn in the first place. Verses 16–17 make clear that the rulers and authorities, the powers that govern the cosmos, are no less dependent on Christ than the Colossians themselves. *All things* were created in, through, and to him and he is before *all things*. It seems impossible that such forces might be able to rebel against their creator.

While the second stanza does not say explicitly what happened, it does provide a significant clue when it says “since in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell” (v. 19). Paul explains what this means later in Col 2.9: “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” Hence, the solution to the implied cosmic upheaval was the incarnation, the fullness of God existing physically in Jesus Christ. And perhaps the reason for this incarnation is simply that God was, as the cliché goes, fighting fire with fire. Somewhere along the line, perhaps at the very beginning of the line, humans had opened the door to this chaos. In their rebellion they had ushered in the rebellion of the universe. In their rejection of the Lord they had failed to master anything and came instead to be mastered by everything. And to put a stop to this, the Image of God whom humanity had foolishly forfeited became human himself. And what is more, as a human he did not force his

will upon the cosmos but rather surrendered his will by “making peace through the blood of his cross.” In surrendering, he did what human beings would not do. And through the indignity of a bloody crucifixion he restored to humanity its divinely-bestowed dignity.

AND YOU...

Having sung out about greatness and the great humility of Christ in his creating and reconciling of things upon the earth and things in heaven, Paul turns to matters at hand. “*And you* who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds...” (Col 1.21). This seems to confirm our understanding of the hymn as placing the blame at the feet of human beings. It also shows that Paul sees the hymn not as an abstraction but as specifically addressing the Colossians’ problem. That problem, however, lay not with the rulers and authorities they were tempted to focus upon but with the Colossians’ own hostility toward God and its consequent actions (cf. 2.13).

It bears repeating that this problem, the problem of their (and our) own humanity, which seems so intractable, has been taken care of by Christ. Hence, Paul repeats what he said in the hymn, now applying it to his audience: “He [Christ] has now reconciled you in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him” (1.22). We do not need to conjure up human remedies for bridging the chasm between the earthly and heavenly realms; God, through Christ, has provided the divine remedy, transferring us from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of his beloved Son. We need only stay where we have been placed, “rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as [we have been] taught, abounding in thanksgiving” (2.7; cf. 1.23).

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