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Why It All Matters: Appreciating the Universal Scope of Colossians 1.15–20

RONALD COX

“Getting away from it all” captures a desire that many of us experience as we try to manage the stressors in our lives. It expresses in a phrase our desire for a relaxing vacation, a few hours of escape at the cinema, or perhaps just a long soak in a warm bathtub. It also captures a stereotype we Christians too frequently live into, where we pine for our heavenly reward, the ultimate escape from this frustrating and forlorn world. Rather than get away from it all, Colossians encourages us to take everything (and it means *everything*) more seriously and to embrace all of it lovingly.

Look especially at Colossians 1.15–20 where the Greek word *pas* (“all” or “every”) occurs eight times with all but one of them denoting the totality of the cosmos (the exception is verse 19, which refers to “the *whole* fullness” of God, emphasis added). Verse 16 makes the scope of *pas* emphatically clear: everything means what is heavenly or earthly, visible or invisible (of which Paul stresses thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities—entities the Colossian Christians appear especially concerned about, see below). Paul’s point about everything is at first glance pretty simple: Christ is superior to, brings about, and is ultimately responsible for dealing with all created things. A closer look will show that Christ has a powerful and wonderful relationship with *all things*—one that is connected with his humanity and, by no great extension, with ours. Colossians 1.15–20 may not help us escape everything but it will help us value our place in the created order and value the created order itself. In fact, it will encourage us not to flee this world but embrace it, to reconcile ourselves to everything and find peace through that which we have in common with it all, namely, Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote the Colossians because they were beset by anxiety resulting from a false belief that that they had to appease spiritual powers (the aforementioned “rulers and authorities”) in order to secure heavenly benefits. They had been (or were at risk of being) misled into thinking that they themselves must overcome their flesh through ascetical self-denial and, as a result, they had turned their attention away from Christ and what he had accomplished. To pull their attention back to Christ, Paul recites Colossians 1.15–20, which was quite likely a pre-existing hymn.¹ The hymn, which Paul includes in the letter’s opening thanksgiving, celebrates the supremacy of God’s Son over everything, a claim that is integral to Paul’s thesis that the Colossians only need Christ to attain salvation. He will refer back to the hymn in Col 1.21–22, 2.10, 15, 19, 3.10, applying what it says to his intended readers and their circumstances. But the hymn says more than what Paul needs, especially in its focus on “all things.” The apostle only refers to the hymn to emphasize that Christ is superior to the rulers and authorities and that his death on the cross has reconciled the Colossians to God. Missing in the larger letter is any discussion of the Son as creator and sustainer of *all things* (vv. 16–17) or the Son’s reconciliation of *all things* (v. 20). Fortunately, what we find in these few verses offers ample testimony to the importance of our world to our Lord and, by extension, to ourselves.

1. For more on the message of Colossians as a whole and on Col 1.15–20 in particular, see my “Christ, the Creation and You” (*Leaven* 15:4 [2007]):221–226. In particular, on pp. 223–224, I describe Col 1.15–20’s use of parallelism, strophic division, repetition, and other syntactical matters that set it apart from the letter’s immediate context (vv. 12–14 and 21–23).

The subject of the hymn is God's Son (see Col 1.12–14). In verse 15, Paul refers to the Son as both “the image of the invisible God” and the “firstborn of all creation,” a coupling that expresses the essence of the hymn's genius. Jesus is the point of connection between God and the world, for in him the divine mystery is made manifest and with him we have the unfolding of that mystery's creative intent. The uses of *image* (*eikōn*) in the New Testament and contemporaneous literature evoke more than a visible depiction, suggesting something substantive, like a divine stamp which impresses God's influence. It is a hefty metaphysical term that tells us the Son mediates God's presence.

Firstborn (*prōtokos*) is a little more problematic. As the English translation implies, the Greek term typically suggests the first in a sequence (as in v. 18, “firstborn from the dead”). If that is the meaning here in verse 15, then the Son might be understood as the first of all creatures. Arius, the fourth-century Egyptian bishop and namesake of Arianism, had this understanding when he claimed Christ was God's first creation, the foremost being after God but by no means a participant in God the Father's divinity. But *prōtokos* also can connote superiority, which is more appealing to readers with a Nicene sensitivity. Undoubtedly, Paul was not thinking of this debate when he recited the hymn to his audience. Still, given that verses 16–17 emphasize how *all things* are totally dependent upon him, it is likely Paul would affirm that Christ is, in his being, distinct from everything else (verse 19's claim that “all the fullness” of God dwells in the Son solidifies this conviction). However, if we force a separation toward either the Son's divinity (*image*) or his creatureliness (*firstborn*), we miss what I think is the inherent and intended paradox of verse 15. John of Damascus perceives this paradox when, equating the word image in our passage with John 1.14's *unique* (*monogenēs*), he writes: “If then the Son of God was called first-born, but was not called *monogenēs*, we could imagine that He was the first-born of creatures, as being a creature. But since He is called both first-born and *monogenēs*, both senses must be preserved in His case.”² In holding together both these senses, Colossians 1.15 makes clear that the Son, though divinely superior, still has something significant in common with everything else—namely that they originate with God. “We say that [the Son] is first-born of all creation since both He Himself is of God and creation is of God.”³

The paradoxical relationship between the Son and creation is essential for us to appreciate why and how God values the world. Even if qualitatively different, the Son and the cosmos share the same source, the Father, connecting them both to the Father's generative love and the enacting of his will. Moreover, the Son's primacy does not separate him from everything but rather shows that it is he who facilitates God's presence to the created order. The Son, uniquely God's image, does not overshadow everything else but rather illumines all things as we come to appreciate in him their divine source. His superiority exists not as a detriment to all things but for their benefit.

The Colossian hymn communicates the nature of this benefit through, of all things, prepositions. “For *in* him all things were created...all things have been created *through* him and *to* him...he is *before* all things and all things hold together *in* him” (vv. 16–17, emphasis added). As unexciting as prepositions might seem at first, each of these spells out a distinct aspect of the Son's relationship to everything (recall from above that *all things* entails every possible thing, earthly, heavenly, visible, invisible, etc.). Of the four different prepositions mentioned in these two verses, only *before* (*pro* in Greek) repeats what has been said in verse 15. And as with *firstborn* there, *before* in verse 17 is ambiguous, implying either sequential precedence or greater status. With the Son, both are true and this preposition reminds us that, no matter what else may be said, the Son is always *other* (prior to and more than).

Such a reminder is important because the other three prepositional phrases (*in him* [twice], *through him* and *to him*) make emphatically clear that this *other* is intimately intertwined with everything. Of course, we mustn't forget that these are prepositional *phrases*; the identity of the *him* is all-important for us to appreciate the significance of what Colossians is saying and what it means to us. *Him* refers to God's Son, the one whom we identify as our own Lord and Savior, our Jesus, whom we worship, to whom we pray, upon whom we

2. John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 4:7 (translation from Schaff and Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 2, volume 9).

3. *Ibid.*

depend; him who we say rescued us from darkness, who guides us toward our divine goal, and sustains us along the way (cf. Col 1.11–14). We know *him* as our own *through*, *to*, and *in*—and in Colossians 1.15–17, it is brought home to us that we share *him* with all things.

The *in* of *all things were created in him* and *all things hold together in him* is translated from the Greek *en*. Typical of many Greek prepositions, *en* may not be reduced to one precise meaning and *in him* may be locative, instrumental, or relational. So, the phrase may tell us that *all things are created and exist in the sphere of the Son's influence and presence* or that *all things are created and exist by the Son's agency* or *all things are created and exist in relationship to the Son*, or perhaps it tells us all three. This potential polysemy only serves to emphasize the intimate association between the Son and everything else. He cannot be divorced from the origin of all things nor from their continued existence. We'll talk more about the Son's role as instrument of creation in a moment. The fact that all things hold together in him tells us that the same providence and potency that we rely upon when we make our prayers through the name of Jesus is at work sustaining the whole cosmos. The hymn "No one ever cared for me like Jesus" is true not just for you or me, but for every atom and every nebulae and everything in between.

Jesus cares for creation not as one who receives someone else's work. Rather, he cares for all things from their inception for "all things have been created through him." Even if *in him* did not imply instrumentality, *through him* most certainly does. Indeed, this phrase is early Christian shorthand for communicating the decisive role of Jesus in creating everything. First Corinthians 8.6b says of the Lord Jesus, "all things were created through him and we exist through him"; John 1.3, 10 say that "everything came to be through him and without him not one thing came to be... the world came to be through him"; and Hebrews 1.2 tells us that it was Jesus "through whom" God created the universe (literally "the worlds"). We have again a word, *through* (*dia*), that captures the Son's relationship to both God and to created things. The Colossian hymn does not say that all things come *from* the Son, but *through* him. *From* should be attributed to God the Father (compare 1 Cor 8.6a, Rom 11.36); the Father is the ultimate source of everything but he brings it all about through his Son. This puts all created things in a beautiful light since, though God could have assigned creation to a myriad of angels, he rather creates by means of his own Son.

In him and *through him* stretch our imagination for they ask us to view everything as originating with and depending upon Jesus for its existence. This is why our relationship to the created world depends very much on our belief in Jesus. For one thing, we align ourselves with the cosmos when we confess "Jesus Christ as Lord"—which is to say, when we acknowledge we too originate from and depend upon the Son. For another, the more we believe in Jesus, the more we know him and love him, the more wondrous creation becomes. This must be the case. I gain so much when, standing in a museum and looking at a work of art, I hear a curator tell me about the work's artist, her experiences and influences, her technique and her ingenuity. The art comes to life the more I know the artist (even when, especially when I do not have an official interpretation of the work itself). And if I *love* the artist, the art has an even greater value. One of my sons worked for a month on a poem he gave me for one Christmas. To know him and his humor, to hear from his mother about how diligently he labored, and to know that he had such joy in doing this for me, the poem—which is pretty good in its own right (if I say so myself)—is precious to me. How much more precious should I find a tulip petal or the baying of a hound or an image of a distant galaxy knowing that the one who crafted them and even now sustains them is none other than my savior Jesus, he who gave his life for me. Again, the love of Jesus connects us to our world; it does not separate us from it.

Our last prepositional phrase is also at the end of Colossians 1.16, "all things have been created through and *to him*" (emphasis added). *To* (*eis*) provides all things a sense of direction. This preposition tells us that creation is on the move, like ivy vines that seek out sunlight or like grey whales that swim along the California coast, migrating north to feed in Alaskan waters in the summer and then south to birth their calves in the Baja peninsula in the winter. Yet the movement the hymn speaks of is more complex than simply the movement toward self-preservation or toward species survival. *Eis* may also be translated "for" or "toward," implying that Christ is the *telos* or goal of all things. The future of the cosmos is not, as some suggest, entropy or apocalyptic obliteration. In fact, the apocalypse will mean quite the opposite. It will be the unveiling of this

world, of everything, in its renewed, eternal form. “Behold, I am making all things new” (Rev 21.5; compare Rom 8.21). It is indeed impossible to escape this world because, like us, it is destined for Christ; it comes through him, is held by him, and he will bring it back to himself.

The sum effect of these prepositions (all things are in him, through him, to him) is kaleidoscopic, suggesting a kind of dance. At the center of this dance is the Son, holding, moving, and receiving everything to himself. The dance is truly dizzying because, since the Son does this for all things, he is present at everyplace and to every moment. Contrary to Luke Skywalker, no place is farthest from the bright center of the universe, for that bright center is actively, powerfully, and lovingly present everywhere. Just as we must not construe our own relationship with Jesus to mean he is not also in relationship with every other human person (even when they are ignorant of or shun his love), so also we cannot presume he is not graciously related to any single thing. He is, after all, the “one who fills all in all” (Eph 1.23).

Gazing at this cosmic, Christocentric kaleidoscope through the lens of Colossians 1.15–17, we are now truly able to appreciate the claim made about Jesus and all things in the hymn’s crescendo: “through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col 1.20 NRSV). This verse surprises us with its claim that somehow all things need to be reconciled and even pacified. *Pacification* was Roman jargon for obliterating the rebellious or those perceived to be so (the *Pax Romana* was brought about and maintained by anything but peaceful means). For some mysterious reason, the cosmos has come to be estranged from God and even, like humans specifically (1.21), at enmity against him, which may perhaps account for the inexplicable suffering and frustration that seem inherent in creation.

This sets up the another surprise in the verse, namely how God overcomes the estrangement of all things and puts down enmity. Roman pacification is turned against itself and the plotting and forcefulness of *every* ruler and authority is undone through the bloody death of Christ on the cross. The verse’s gory detail speaks volumes. How horrific the cosmic animus toward God that this should happen to the Son. How even more sublime the love of God that precisely in that crucified flesh “all the fullness was pleased [!] to dwell” (emphasis added, Col 1.19). And it appears to point to how, given that the divine remedy came in human form, the source of universal disharmony must have something to do with humankind. Whether we caused that disharmony at some primeval point or simply perpetuate it, God’s assumption of our nature restores us to a right relationship not just with him, and with each other, but with Nature itself.

The one thing that is not surprising about verse 20 is that God does, through his Son, reconcile *all things* to himself. At least it should not be surprising in the light of Col 1.16–17 and how all things were created in, through, and to the Son. Indeed, the true surprise would be if God were *not* to reconcile everything thing to himself, given how wondrously interwoven the cosmos is in the life of his Son.

Truly, a Christian cannot escape this world and should not desire to do so. It is sadly true that all things are not now as they are supposed to be. The suffering arising through natural calamities and disease dwarfs that which comes from the evil done by humans, no matter how hard humans try to compete. Yet were we to try to escape, we would be trying to flee Christ himself—the universe’s source, sustainer, and savior. Our faith in him should not make us yearn to fly away some bright morning; rather, it should ignite in us a longing, a groaning even, for the glorious redemption of this, our father’s world. And our faith in Christ means even more than that we share a common hope with all things. It means that we share a common love. If the love of Christ compels us to participate in his reconciling work when it comes to human beings (2 Cor 5), might it not also compel us to share in his reconciling of all things? At the very least, ought we not love everything (*pas*) Jesus so obviously and so wondrously loves?

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