

Colossians 1:17-23 – Christ Above All

After a standard greeting, thanksgiving for the church in Colossae and a prayer for them, Paul began to refute the false teaching that was affecting the church. It was a problem that faces the current church. Somehow, Christ gets pushed to the background and other things are made a priority. Paul made the case that there is no church without Christ. There is no creation without Christ. There is no forgiveness without Christ. The glory of Christ and, in general, the glory of the triune God must be the top priority for the church. Nothing should ever overshadow the place and importance of Christ. If that happens, the church becomes a social hall and not a church.

Read Colossians 1:17-20.

In verse 17, what does it mean that Christ “is before all”? (1:17)

Some people have the view that God created the universe and then after that took a hands off approach. According to verse 17, what would happen to creation if Christ took a hands off approach? (1:17)

Note that verses 15-17 are about the creation of the universe and Christ’s preeminent role. Verses 18-20 are about the new creation and Christ’s preeminent role in it.

What does it mean that Christ is the head of the church? How does it manifest itself when a church does not believe that Christ is its head? (1:18)

In verse 18, what is meant by Christ “is the beginning”? Is this similar to the phrase found in Revelation, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end”? See Revelation 21:6, 22:13. (1:18)

In verse 18, what does it mean that Christ is “the firstborn from the dead”? The word “firstborn” was also used in verse 15, “firstborn of all creation”. The phrase “the firstborn of the dead” occurs in Revelation 1:5. (1:18)

At the end of verse 18, what is the result / purpose of Christ being the head of the church, the beginning and the firstborn from the dead? How has the visible church pushed Christ from his preeminent position? What has been the result? (1:18)

Verse 19 gives one of the reasons why Christ is preeminent. ESV has “in him all the fullness [of God] was pleased to dwell”. Other translations have something like “he [the Father] was well pleased for all the fullness to dwell in him. The meaning of the two translations is not far apart. The origin of the two translations comes from the fact that “all the fullness” can be taken either as the subject or the object. The original text leaves that open to interpretation. Which do you think is the better translation based on the context? See Colossians 2:9. (1:19)

Verse 20 states “and through him to reconcile to himself all things”. When we think of reconciliation we usually think of sinners being reconciled to God through the cross of Christ. What is the scope of reconciliation in this verse? Are only the elect part of this reconciliation? How does “whether on earth or in heaven” shed light on this reconciliation? Some take this passage to support universal salvation. Why is that unwise? See John chapters 6 and 10. How did Jesus accomplish this reconciliation, this making of peace? Did the cross of Christ affect more than just the elect? Did it affect creation?

Read Colossians 1:21-23.

Based on verse 21, how did Paul describe the Colossians’ previous lives?

Who was the object of reconciliation in verse 22? How did Christ reconcile them? What was the goal of the reconciliation? How does this reconciliation compare with the reconciliation in verse 20? This is a beautiful picture. Enemies of God, doing evil were reconciled by Christ and his death on the cross with the result that they will be presented before God as holy and blameless. They were no longer estranged from God but will be in his presence. They were no longer evil doers but were made holy and blameless and therefore can be in the presence of God, who is holy.

Verse 23 contained a warning. This beautiful picture will come true if they do what? Do they need to start doing something new or start believing something new? Do we ever graduate from the gospel message? The point seems clear. The Colossians shouldn’t view the gospel or Christ as baby food that they can grow out of and move on to more sophisticated things. Christ and the gospel are foundational. If you remove them, the church collapses.

The parallels between verses 15-17 and 18-20 are interesting. Some commentators believe that verses 15-20 made up a hymn. It also has a creedal quality like the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed.

Creation	New Creation
1:15 Christ is the image of the invisible God	1:19 All the fullness of God dwells in Christ
1:15 Christ is the firstborn of all creation	1:18 Christ is the firstborn from the dead
1:16 All things were created through him and for him (all things in heaven and on earth)	1:20 All things were reconciled through him and for him (all things on earth or in heaven)
1:17 Christ is before all things	1:18 Christ is the head of the church. Christ is the beginning. Christ is preeminent in all things.