**The Letter to the Colossians**

**The Gospel in Heathen and Multi-Religious Society - #3**

**Old Hymn in Colossians**

**Colossians 1:15-20**

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(*This section is picked up from Class Notes #2 last week*)

**The Old Hymn in Colossians – First part**

[***15***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-15.htm) *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.* [***16***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-16.htm)*For byhim 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.* [***17***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-17.htm) *And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* [***18***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-18.htm)*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.*

[***19***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-19.htm) *For in him all the fullness of (God) was pleased to dwell,* [***20***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-20.htm) *and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*

**Fighting false teaching**

Christ means life eternal but this seems to have been threatened by the false teaching at the city of Colossae. Here we can sense the pain of Paul who in a sharp way presents to his readers before dealing specifically with the false teaching, the doctrine of Christ in a form of a hymn in Colossians 1:15-20.

This was written in six verses. It was only in modern NT studies that NT scholars recognized here the Paul has used of the established forms of both Hebrew and Greek poetry. Here in Colossians 1:15-20 we can see rhythmical prose with a strophic arrangement such as is found in much early Christian hymnody and was used also in a "Christ hymn" in Philippians 2: 6-11. This rhythmical prose does not appear in the English translations

**The First Strophe (1:15-16)**

*He who is the image of the invisible God, Firstborn before all creation,
because in Him all things were created*

*things in heaven and things on earth, things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions, whether principalities or powers, they have all been created through Him and for Him.*

This first strophe celebrates the role of Christ as Creator of the Cosmos whose being is the Wisdom of God. This early Christian theme has been the foundation of faith and confession of Jesus as Lord and has been fundamental in the Church's Christology. It was not confined to the Pauline circle nor it did not originate in it. It finds expression in the opening chapter of Hebrews (Heb 1:2-3), in the prologue of the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1-5) and in the Apocalypse (Rev 3:14).

**The Image of the invisible God**

Christ, then, is introduced as "the image of the invisible God." This has been mentioned before and has been affirmed already by Paul (2 Cor. 4:4) in a context which was related to Paul’s conversion experience. Paul recognized the One revealed to him on the Damascus Road as Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In his Jewish background was what Paul recognized Him also as the image of God enthroned at the heart of the rainbow-like brightness "a likeness as it were of a human form" (Ezek 1:26). This was expressed later on when Paul recognized "*the glory of God in the face of Christ*" (2 Cor 4:6). He is not merely echoing someone else’s words but he is expressing what his own experience confirmed as true.

To call Christ the “image of God” is to say that He is the One who represents God to reveal the Unrevealed God. The use of “image” certainly belongs to the Revelation of God who is revealed to “Represent” the Hidden God not by word but in His being and so in this Image God have been perfectly manifested in Christ Jesus.

Here in this new Revelation the invisible has become visible. Paul declared this Revelation, that it has its place since the creation of the world as the everlasting power that has created everything (Rom. 1:20). But now, manifested by His "everlasting power and divinity,” it has been granted to us to see. "The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" is now shining into His people's hearts through the same creative Word that first called light to shine forth out of darkness at the creation of the world (2 Cor. 4:4-6).

In addition to being the image of God, lest this be confused with man as the “image and likeness of God” in (Gen 1:26), Paul declared that Christ is the "Firstborn before all creation." This rendering is designed to clarify the force of the genitive phrase "of all creation." To understand the wording as though He Himself were the first of all created beings is to run counter to the context, which insists that He is the One by whom the whole creation came into existence.

This construction is similar to that in John 1:30, where John the Baptist says Jesus was before John the Baptist. Jesus revealed the "everlasting power and divinity'' of God the Father for, "The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" has shone into His people's hearts through the same Creator Word that first called light to shine forth out of darkness (2 Cor 4:4-6).

**The Firstborn**

The construction denotes not only priority but also primacy. The title "Firstborn" perhaps echoes the language of Psalm 89:27, where God says of the Davidic king, "I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." Now the meaning is clear for it belongs to Christ not only as the Son of David but also as the Wisdom of God. In the wisdom books of the Old Testament wisdom is at best the personification of a divine attribute or of the holy law, but when the New Testament writers speak of Wisdom in personal terms, they consciously refer to One who brings not the Law but life. For Paul, Christ was the personal (not personified) and incarnate Wisdom of God for He became man. The Wisdom of God is actually Christ who lived on earth as Man, who died and rose again, "*whom God made for us our wisdom*" (1 Cor 1:30) is the One who was before all creation, in spite of being Son of Man (as in the Parables) yet He has been before His incarnation. Colossian 1:15ff is not the only place in the Pauline letters where the preexistence of Wisdom is stated or implied. Paul speaks of the Son not only as preexistent, but also as the Lord of the cosmos had already used language of this kind; in 1 Corinthians 8:6 he said that Christians acknowledge "*one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we through him*" (and in Romans 8:19-21). The fact is that our redemption was not the work of a creature but of the Creator Son of God.

**In Him**

"In Him" that all things were created means a “personal” relationship between the Creator and Creation. Please notice that it was the Revised Version which appeared in 1881 with this rendering in place of the King James Version's "by Him.

The Son does not create from “far away” since there is no distance that can actually exist between God and creation. Christ is not identified with the beginning "in" of Genesis 1:1, because "the beginning" in Colossians 1:18 is totally different, for Christ is the Lord Creator who created everything. He is viewed as the sphere within which the work of creation takes place. And as in Ephesians 1:4, the people of God are chosen "in Him" even earlier, before the world's foundation. God's creation, like His election, is accomplished "in Christ" and not apart from Him.

**Through Him**

The preposition is changed to “through Him” to put emphasis on creation having taken place "through him”, and is not alien or far from Him. In verse 16, He is denoted as the One by whom God brought the universe into being (also Heb 1:1-3 and John 1:1-3) affirms that through the Son all were created. God made the world” in Him” (Heb 1:2), and "all things came into being through him – through the Logos, who is the Son, and apart from Him none of the things that exist came into being" (John 1:3).

Although the Logos-Wisdom was known before Paul and John in the Greek circles of Philo and the Stoics, yet two important facts must be remembered:

1. The Logos-Wisdom is a Person not a principle.
2. He became human and the Incarnation was utterly unacceptable for the body was given as a form of punishment.

 Thus Christ through whom the divine work of redemption has been accomplished (Col 1:14) is the One through whom Creation came to be. His Mediation is part of his work as Creator for He provides and maintains the being and the function of the whole creation, but now He is the Planer and the One who executes the plan of salvation.

The immediate result is that the Gospel is not alien to the created order and that was a great help to those who were living at the beginning to see that life and their faith is part of the divine plan. So the Redeemer is also Creator — the Origin and Goal of all.

**All were by Him and for Him**

What Paul was saying is this: it does not matter what the others say about the powers they deal with in fear or in worship. Addressing the "Colossian heresy," Paul then emphasized that if Christ created all things such as “Thrones, principalities, authorities, powers, and dominions" they probably represent the highest orders of the spirit world and, like the rest of creation, are subject to Christ as the One in whom, through whom, and for whom they were created.

**The Eternal Image (1:17-18)**

[***17***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-17.htm) *And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* [***18***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-18.htm)*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.*

The first strophe is recapitulated here in a twofold reaffirmation of the preexistence and cosmic significance of the Image of the Invisible God: "*He indeed is before all things, and they all cohere in Him.*" The phrase "before all things" sums up the designation of the "Firstborn before all creation" and excludes any possibility of interpreting that designation to mean that He Himself is part of the created order. Since the word” *all things*“denote priority in importance, this signification, as well as the idea of priority in time, is well be presented here.

It would have been meaningless to preach a Savior who is a creature like us:

1. He will be under the created order of the universe like the rest of creation

2. He has nothing new to offer to creatures like himself

The statement "all things cohere in Him" adds something to what has been said about the “divinity of the Lord.” He is the Creator who preserves Creation for He has brought it to be. The same teaching is maintained in the letters to the Hebrews, where the Son is not only the One through whom the worlds were made but also the One who upholds all things by His almighty and enabling word (Heb 1:2-3). Paul the living Christ, who died to redeem His people, is the Sustainer of the universe and the unifying power of its life and existence.

**Christ the Head of the Church**

Christ is the Head of his body the church (1:18). That is a repeat that He is above “every principality and power” (2:10). This puts the Church at the center of Ruling Christ being the Body of the One who rules and sustains creation.

The Church is the Body of Christ appears also in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Romans 12:4-5, and Ephesians 5:28-33). This is the identity of this new community which has its origin in the Creator of the Cosmos.

**The Second Strophe (1:19-20)**

[***19***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-19.htm) *For in him all the fullness of (God) was pleased to dwell,* [***20***](http://biblehub.com/colossians/1-20.htm) *and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*

**Notes and studies**

Jesus Christ is the beginning, “*Firstborn from the dead, that He might be preeminent in all things, because in Him it was revealed that all the fullness of (God) should dwell in Him and that through Him, [God] should reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross, (through Him) whether those on earth or those in heaven*.”

The role of Christ is Creator in the new creation, especially His work of reconciliation.
The new creation came to existence by the death and the resurrection of Jesus, which now is the new order that came out of the old order; He is "the Beginning." the Beginning of a new life, in whom heaven and earth were first created, but also by His rising from the dead He is proclaimed the One in whom men and women who died in the first Adam are "made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22).

**The Head of the Body**

The RisenChrist is Head of the body, which is the church. The resurrection has marked His victory over all the forces that enslaved men and women. By His resurrection Jesus has brought new hope for humanity. Now Christ is "the Firstborn among many brethren" (Rom 8:29); He is "the First fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor 15:20); His own resurrection is the Beginning of the great forthcoming resurrection-harvest of His people. He who has been "proclaimed Son of God in power . . . by the resurrection of the dead" (Rom.1: 4) exercises universal primacy; the divine purpose is thus fulfilled "that He should be preeminent in all things" (Col. 1:18).

**The Firstborn from the Dead**

In Proverbs 8:22, wisdom was created at the beginning of God’s way. The Arians of the IV century had quoted these words always to deny the eternal being of the Son. The "Firstborn from the dead" appears also in Revelation 1:5 and the title was taken from Psalm 89:27. The fact is that here we are not back to the Old Creation of Genesis 1:1 but the New Creation because the narrative of the whole Hymn is not about what has happened in the past but what is happening now, where there is a church and redemption.

**Fullness**

In the hymn we can see clearly how God has revealed the preeminence of His Son Christ over every order of being, both in this age and in the coming age which is repeated in different words.

1 "*In Him it was revealed that all the fullness of God should dwell."* The word “God” is absent from the Greek. In Him it was pleased, but who or what was well pleased? The pleasure is God's? In the KJV, *"It pleased the Father that in Him should all fullness dwell."* On the other hand, an explicit subject for the verb is offered in the clause itself; "*the fullness was well pleased to dwell or to take residence in Him"* as in the (RSV): "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

2 What is the meaning of “fullness”? In Colossians 2:9: "It is in Him (i.e., Christ) that all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form." then, when we read Colossians 1:19 in the light of (2:9) "*in Him all fullness of deity was well pleased to take up residence or to dwell*” pointing to the time of His Incarnation, Death, Resurrection and His exaltation when He ascended to heaven. This is to say that God Himself, in all His fullness, was pleased to dwell in Him when He Jesus was acting.

3 Paul and other NT writers in a variety of senses use the word fullness.

a. John 1:16, “Fullness of Grace” means a complete gift

b. In Romans 11 Paul discusses the destiny of the nation of Israel, which has rejected her Messiah Jesus at the beginning with verse 11, then Paul explains God's purpose how God used Israel’s unbelief to bring about the salvation of the Gentiles, which in turn will provoke Israel to faith in their own Messiah. Then in verse 12, he contrasts the results of Israel's transgression/defeat for the world with the results of their "fullness" for the world. The conclusion of Paul's treatment of Israel's unbelief is presented in Romans 11:25-32. In verse 26 he clearly states that through God's plan the nation of Israel will be saved, brought to faith in Jesus. Israel's temporary unbelief will last only until the "fullness" of the Gentiles comes about (v. 25).

c. In Romans 13:10, Paul emphasized that the "fullness" or complete purpose of the law is love. He speaks of himself in Romans15: 29 as coming to the church at Rome in the "fullness of the blessing of Christ." Both are straightforward statements about the completeness of abundance that the word "fullness" implies.

d. To the church at Colossae, which was struggling against heretical teachings that weakened the union of the believers from the person of Christ, Paul stresses that all the fullness of God dwells in Christ (1:19; 2:9). This usage is also highly theological and intends to proclaim the divinity of Christ to exclude any other forms of gods who were less than other gods or great than others in the old mythologies. Here Christ has the “fullness” of divinity and is not less that than God.

e. In Ephesians, Paul speaks of the times or its periods leading to the completion or their fulfillment (lit. the "fullness of the times"). This eschatological statement affirms that human history will be brought to what God has ordained the purpose in Christ the head. In Ephesians 1:23 fullness is understood two different ways:

i. “Fullness” of Christ's body, in which case it would speak of the “completeness” of the church to Christ. It is the same completeness of the Head and in some way manifests Christ's presence on earth.

ii. “Fullness” might also be viewed as referring back to Christ. In this case it would affirm that Christ is the fullness or completeness of God who fills everything

f. In Ephesians 3:19 Paul expresses his prayer for the Ephesian believers, that they may be strengthened and come to understand Christ's love for them. Then the love of Christ will fill us with the "fullness" of God. Christ's love, which is in the Head of the body the church, will dwell in His “fullness” for God's presence is in His Church. Christ causes the body to be built up until each believer attains to the "fullness of completeness " of the perfection that is found in Christ ([4:13](http://www.biblestudytools.com/ephesians/4-13.html)).

g. The divine fullness of the supreme God does not permit the presence of any mediator between God and the world of humanity. God revealed Himself in His fullness in Christ. Therefore any communication between God and the world is in Christ alone. Christ is the One and all-sufficient Revelation and Mediation between God and the world where humans live, for all the attributes of God are disclosed in Christ.

**A Note from Philemon**

**On Fullness and Wrath**

Brother George,

When the holy Paul says that our Lord is the “Image of the invisible God” we have to clean up our minds from all “images” of God, even those who were manifest under the Old Covenant. What was not revealed in Jesus in His teaching, His ministry, death and resurrection, does not belong to this “Image.”

I know how hard is this, but God in the OT was dealing with “infants” but now after His Incarnation and being one living among us and in us, God the Father reveals His Personal love to the Body of His Son. Leave behind you all the narratives of God’s wrath and other narratives where God is displeased with Israel, for now in Jesus He in His fullness is pleased to dwell in our humanity to heal and to restore.

Have eternal peace in Christ.

Philemon

**God’s Pleasure is the Reconciliation all things**

We need to look at the declaration of Paul that it was not God’s anger or wrath but it was God's good pleasure, moreover, to "reconcile all things to Himself" through Christ. The fullness of divine life is manifested in Him in the work of reconciliation as it was manifested in creation.

Two basic new manifestations must be remembered:

1. The fullness was not a creative power undefined, for it is manifested in the Person of Jesus revealing Personal love.

2. We are called to “participate” in Christ not just to watch His power as Creator.

**Reconciliation (1:19-20)**

1. Reconciliation is the work of the Creator; it is God's eternal purpose (as stated in Eph. 1:10) that all things should be summed up in Christ.

2. To “reconcile” and “reconciliation” –***katalassō*** and ***katalaggē*,** were common words in Greek. Jesus says that if you are offering a gift at the altar and remember that your brother or sister has something against you, you should go and first be *reconciled* before offering your gift (Matt 5:24). “Reconciliation” was ordinary Greek used in daily life not as a “religious” term. That is to say, it does not appear in worship contexts where humans seeking to appease God by offering sacrifices. It is a word drawn from the sphere of *politics*; it refers to dispute resolution. So one could speak of the diplomatic reconciliation in time of war, or, in the sphere of personal relationships, the reconciliation of an estranged husband and wife as in (1 Cor 7:11.)

3. Paul uses the verb “reconcile” with God as its subject -- a remarkable paradigm shift – God comes to “reconcile us” in order to overcome our alienation and establishing new and peaceful relationships with Him. We can see this clearly in Romans 5, where reconciliation is God’s initiative, “*while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son*” (Romans 5:10). God has taken the initiative to overcome our hostility and alienation from him and to restore us to peaceful relationship with Him.

4. In 2 Corinthians 5:17ff, reconciliation is the driving force of establishing New Creation. Paul was writing to convince the Corinthians that the death of Christ has abolished the old standards of our social and religious way of life. The ministry is now taken by God and is confirmed by the cross. New Creation is where God has brought into being a new life from the old life, the Corinthians should stop their rivalry and boasting and conflict. They should be reconciled to one another.

5. Reconciliation in Colossians 1:19-20 is for "all things" (both in heaven and on earth) because all things were created through Him, and yet "all things" (whether on earth or in heaven) are to be reconciled to God through Him, it follows that "all things" have been estranged from their Creator. The universe has been involved in conflict with its Creator, and needs to be reconciled to Him; the conflict must be replaced by peace. This peace is a gift by God through Christ and has been has been by Christ, through the shedding of His blood on the cross.

6. The peace affected by the death of Christ I (Col 1:19-20) may be freely accepted, it was not imposed. The reconciliation of the universe spoken of here includes what could be pacification (*peace*). The principalities and powers whose defeat is described in Colossians 2:15 surrender to divine peace and as being compelled to submit to a power greater than their own. Everything in the universe has been made subject to Christ even as everything has been created for Him.

7. “*By His reconciling work that included sinful human beings on earth and celestial power have been resolutely subdued to the will of God to His purpose.*” This is parallel Christ-hymn of Philippians 2:6-11 It indicates that the Father's good pleasure is that all "*in heaven and on earth and under the earth*" shall unite to bow the knee at Jesus' name and confess that He is Lord. In fact both hymns are hymns of the “Triumph of Christ” which has given birth to the best Hymns of Triumph throughout our history.

***Pope’s Notes***

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