



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Our Capable Redeemer

Colossians 1.15-23

David Anguish

Introduction

The teacher in the Christology course I took made the point that *the* issue in the first three or four centuries of church history was what to make of Jesus. Documents from the period, both those of individuals and collaborative statements by the wider church, support his contention.

For example, the statement of belief composed in a meeting in 325 AD in the town of Nicea in northwestern Turkey affirmed belief in one almighty God, the Father, and in the Holy Spirit. But the overwhelming majority of its words were devoted to affirming belief in and explaining the nature of the “one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”¹

New Testament writers also offer such explanations, though usually in summary statements that are less concerned with formal doctrinal declarations (though they do that) than with applying the nature and work of Jesus to the nitty gritty of real-life service. One of the most important is our text, where Paul explains why Jesus is the one “in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1.14).

It would be time well spent to devote our entire study (and more) to verses 15-20, but we need to see those verses in light of Paul’s application of Jesus’ lofty nature in verses 21-23.

Firstborn of Creation (1.15-17)

As we prepare to examine this text, we need to appreciate some things about its background and structure. First, Paul uses language that calls to mind the Old Testament idea of personified wisdom as God’s agent of creation (see Prov 8.22-33; esp. vv. 22, 27, 30). Regarding structure, the two sections, beginning in verses 15 and 18 respectively, are connected by the repetition of the word “firstborn” (πρωτότοκος, *prōtotokos*).²

As we turn to an analysis of the text, we note that verse 15 reveals two things about Jesus’ nature. First, “he is the image (εἰκών, *eikōn*) of the invisible God.” The oldest known uses of this word included references to statues (Kuhli, 389), and its use to refer to an image on a coin is found elsewhere in the New Testament (see Mark 12.16). It’s apparent that Paul does not intend to refer to a physical depiction of the face of God since he says that God is “invisible” (ἀόρατος;

aoratos). At the same time, we recall that humans are created in God's image (Gen 1.26-27; the LXX uses *eikon*). We conclude, then, that when he says Jesus is in the image of the invisible God, Paul intends to say that "Jesus had, in his very nature, been the 'image of God', reflecting perfectly the character and life of the Father" (Wright, 70).

Second, he expands on the idea of Jesus being in the image of God by adding that he is "the firstborn of all creation." The idea, which draws on Old Testament phrasing regarding the unique relationship between God and Israel (Exod 4.22; Jer 31.9) or the coming Davidic Messiah (Psa 89.27), is not that Jesus was the first one created (Wright, 71).³ Rather, as used in Colossians 1, the word has to do with rank, with the rights and privileges conferred on a firstborn son.⁴

Verses 16-17 tell us about the Son's status and work, but before we can unravel the complexities of these verses, we must decide how to best translate the initial phrase of verse 16, translated in the ESV: "For by him all things were created, ..." At issue is whether the Greek preposition *ἐν* (*en*) should be translated "by" (ESV) or "in," (NIV and others).⁵ N. T. Wright concludes that "in" is the better option, commenting, "To say 'by', here and at the end of verse 16, could imply, not that Christ is the Father's agent, but that he was alone responsible for creation" (Wright, 71).

"In," "by means of," or "through" (NLT) better represent Paul's point in verse 16, that Jesus was the agent of creation, creating all things, even the unseen supernatural powers and realities working in the world through pagan religion, astrology, or magic.⁶ Paul is not interested in giving a precise definition of these powers, or in distinguishing between them; he simply wants to assert that Christ is superior to all of them, individually or together.

The change from the aorist tense of "created" (κτίζω; *ktizō*) in the first part of verse 16 to the perfect tense in the last phrase emphasizes Jesus' ongoing supremacy; he was not only superior to the various dominions and authorities prior to creation, he remains superior to them now.

Verse 17 reinforces the truth of Jesus' sustained supremacy, emphasizing that, "he is before all things, and in him all things hold together."⁷

Firstborn from the Dead (1.18-20)

Beginning in verse 18, Paul turns "from creation to new creation" (Wright, 73). As in verses 15-17, he again tells us something about Jesus' nature.

First, "he is the head of the body, the church" (v. 18). Since sin and death are inseparably linked in Scripture (cf. Rom 5.12-21; 1 Cor 15.12-18), to defeat death is to defeat sin. Once again, Paul connects the outcome to Jesus' status as "the firstborn." But in this verse, "firstborn" is used with a different nuance, referring to the beginning of a new series of beings who overcome death (cf. 1 Cor 15.20, 23; Acts 3.15; 5.31).

It is against the backdrop of his being "the firstborn from the dead" that we are to understand his preeminence and fullness (vv. 18-19). Once again, Paul's language echoes the Old Testament where God's glory is said to fill the temple (cf. Exek 44.4). As Arnold states,

Jesus not only bears God's glory, but all that God *is* also dwells in him. He possesses the wisdom, power, Spirit, and glory of God. To say that all this divine fullness dwells in Jesus is to say that he is fully God (see also Col. 2:9) (Arnold, 2294).

Being one with God, Jesus takes God's work to its intended goal. His nature and work in creation and new creation qualify him to be the redeemer who brings about the reconciliation we need (v. 20), as verses 21-23 explain more fully.

Reconciler of God and Man (1.21-23).

Verse 21 points to the past. The disciples had once been alienated from God, acting out the results of wrong thinking that led to vice and then, in turn, to further mental corruption that applauded evil, a point Paul develops more fully in Romans 1.21-32.

The first part of verse 22 talks about the present. Jesus, the one who reconciles all things (v. 20), had made them friends again with God.

The last part of verse 22 points to the future. The goal of reconciliation by the work of the only one qualified to make it happen is to enable people to be “holy and blameless and above reproach before him.” Used with the ideas of holiness and blamelessness, the words translated “present” and “before him” call to mind the language of Jewish sacrificial rituals and the unblemished animals that Levitical priests were to bring for a sacrifice to God.

Conclusion

What Paul has set before us in verses 15-23 is a grand vision that should lead us to celebrate our new status in Christ. The divine Wisdom was embodied in the man, Jesus, the Christ. God’s purposes for creation, for all time, are brought to full completion in him. His capability to accomplish this is found in his being the unique divine being through whom the universe was created. His superiority in nature and power extends over all other supernatural beings having an impact in the world. Furthermore, he is the one who effects the redemption God intends as he works through the Son to reclaim what is rightfully his from the spoiling effects of sin.

Wright summarizes, “The Lord through whom you are redeemed ... is none other than the one through whom you (and all the world) were created.”⁸ He is capable. We should rejoice!

www.davidanguish.com

Notes

¹ Alister E. McGrath, ed., *The Christian Theology Reader*, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 10. As McGrath explains, the Nicene Creed’s elaboration on Jesus answered Arius’s affirmation that the Son is a created creature like all other creatures and “Son” was intended only as a title of honor, not to mean “that the Father and Son share the same being or status.” In contrast, the Nicene Creed affirmed “that the Son was identical with the Father in terms of their being or existence—or, to put this more formally, that the Son was ontologically identical with the Father. This affirmation has since come to be widely regarded as a benchmark of Christological orthodoxy within all the mainstream Christian churches, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox.”

² For more on the Old Testament background, see Horst Kuhli, “εἰκών,” *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament (EDNT)*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 3:390. For discussion of verses 15-20 as a poem with a carefully developed structure, see N. T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 64-68.

³ See also Hugolinus Langkammer, “πρωτότοκος,” *EDNT* 1:190.

⁴ Clinton E. Arnold, “Study Notes on Colossians,” *ESV Study Bible*, ed. Lane T. Dennis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2294.

⁵ The ESV adds this note: “That is, by means of; or in.”

⁶ For additional discussion, see Wright, 72-73.

⁷ “Hold together” (συνίστημι; *synistēmi*) is, again, in the perfect tense, indicating that Jesus has and continues to hold all things together.

⁸ Wright, 66.