

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF CHRIST  
COLOSSIANS 1:15-19

I.

In the 1920s several states passed laws banning the teaching of evolution in public schools. Tennessee was one of them. In 1925 a high school teacher by the name of John Scopes (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN SCOPES) in the small town of Dayton intentionally broke the law and taught a science class using a textbook that included a chapter on evolution. In the famous trial that followed he was found guilty and fined \$100. The Tennessee Supreme Court later upheld the validity of the law. (PROJECTOR OFF) By the 1960s, however, the US Supreme Court ruled that a similar Arkansas law was unconstitutional.

Twenty years later Louisiana passed a law requiring that creationism be taught in public schools along with the theory of evolution. The US Supreme Court ruled that such a law was unconstitutional. In less than sixty years the nation moved from making the teaching of evolution in public schools illegal to making the teaching of creationism illegal.

In October of 2004 the Board of Education of Dover, Pennsylvania, voted to add the following statement (PROJECTOR ON--- STUDENTS WILL...) to their biology curriculum: **“Students will be made aware of the gaps/problems in Darwin’s theory and other theories of evolution including, but not limited to, intelligent design.”** In December 2005 that required statement was also ruled unconstitutional in federal court.

In the recent May 7 issue of *Science* magazine (SCIENCE) researchers from The American Museum of Natural History summarized their findings about the state of human evolution with this headline: “Most Human Origins Stories Are Not Compatible with Known Fossils.” According to the lead author of the study, **“When you look at the narrative for hominin [the biological classification which includes humans and apes] it’s just a big mess--- there’s no consensus whatsoever...”** In other words, the top evolutionary scientists cannot come to any kind of agreement about the origin of us human beings. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Despite the official government endorsement of the theory of evolution many Americans remain unconvinced. The Gallup Poll found in 2019 that about 40% of all Americans agreed with the statement, **“God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years.”** Another Gallup Poll survey found that only 10% of Americans believe that life evolved strictly by chance and natural forces.

Obviously this is a subject of controversy, and there is much at stake. Who, if any one, or any thing, is in charge of the universe? Are we simply the products of chance? Or are we the products of divine design? French scientist Jacques Monod (PROJECTOR ON--

- CHANCE AND NECESSITY), who won a Nobel Prize for medicine, writes, **“Chance alone is at the source of every innovation, of all creation in the biosphere. Pure chance, absolutely free but blind, is at the very root of the stupendous edifice of evolution: this central concept of modern biology is no longer one among other possible or even conceivable hypotheses. It is today the sole conceivable hypothesis...”** The experts in human evolution, however, have not been able to make it work.

The passage before us this morning says that the source of our creation lies elsewhere. (PROJECTOR OFF) The Apostle Paul argues that Jesus Christ is the Creator and that He is in control of everything that happens in this world. We are going to examine his argument.

We have seen so far in our study of Colossians that the Apostle Paul was probably writing this letter when he was a prisoner in Rome between 60 and 62 AD. (PROJECTOR ON--- COLOSSAE MAP) He got news from a small church in western Asia Minor that there were false teachers who were seeking to lead the Christians there astray from the truth. Though Paul had never visited these Christians in Colossae, he cared about them. He prayed for them regularly. He commended them for their faith and hope and love. Now he begins to address the issues that they were confronting. He speaks about the sovereignty of Christ. Let's look at what he says and see what implications it might have for us.

I.

Verses 15-17 of Colossians #1 deal with CHRIST'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE UNIVERSE. (I. CHRIST'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE UNIVERSE.) There are different ways in which the supremacy of Jesus Christ could be described. In our passage Paul describes it in terms of Christ's relationship to the universe and then in terms of His relationship to the church. In vv. 15-17 (p. 983 in the black Bibles) he writes, **“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him 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. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”**

A.

In relationship to the universe Paul provides three descriptions. In the first part of v. 15 he speaks about THE BASIS OF HIS AUTHORITY. (II. CHRIST'S RELATIONSHIP... A. THE BASIS OF HIS AUTHORITY) Paul says, **“He is the image of the invisible God...”** One hundred years after the time of this letter there are writings that we have which indicate that there was a philosophy being promoted in Colossae called Gnosticism--- G-N-O-S-T-I-C-I-S-M. This Gnosticism said that matter is evil and spirit is good. God is spirit, and the earth is material. Between God and the earth there are a series of spiritual beings that become increasingly corrupt as they get closer to earth. The Gnostics said that Jesus was one of these spiritual beings.

We don't know how much of this Gnostic philosophy was around in Colossae in the first century. We do know that there was the belief in parts of Greek philosophy that matter is bad, and spirit is good. The idea that Jesus was one of these spiritual beings that was somewhat removed from God may explain why Paul here declares that Christ is the image of the invisible God.

Initially this word "image" may not communicate a lot to us. The original word is *eikon*, (EIKON- ICON) from which we get our English word "icon." In some places in the New Testament the word is translated "idol." If we know the Bible a little bit, we remember that God declared in Genesis #1 that man was created in the image of God. The implication is that we humans bear godlike qualities. So this declaration may not seem all that significant to us. But sometimes "image" means more than that. At times it means "exact representation." The rest of the passage would seem to indicate that this is the case here.

(HEBREWS 1:2-3A) Hebrews #1 vv. 2 & 3 reflect this idea. The author says, **"...in these last days he [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint [or, exact representation--- different Greek word] of his nature..."** This image cannot have anything to do with that which is physical. For the Bible is very clear that God is spirit. So the image must involve attributes and characteristics.

Jesus became a human being to display this nature, these divine characteristics to mankind. Thus it is that the Apostle John (JOHN 1:18) writes in #1 of his Gospel v. 18, **"No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known."** (PROJECTOR OFF)

We humans can exhibit some godlike characteristics. We are capable of love and creativity and relationships and mercy and goodness and reflection and joy and so on. The theologians call these communicable attributes. But there are some godly characteristics that we don't possess to any extent. These include unchangeableness, omniscience (which means all-knowing), omnipotence (which means all-powerful), eternity, and omnipresence (which means being present everywhere). Theologians call these incommunicable attributes. Jesus Christ has these attributes. He is the full representation of God. He is God in the flesh. He is in charge. We are required to do business with Him.

B.

In the second part of v. 15 we are exposed to THE PRIMACY OF HIS AUTHORITY. (I. A. B. THE PRIMACY OF HIS AUTHORITY) Paul says that He is **"the firstborn of all creation."** The New International Version uses "over" instead of the word "of." Either one is permissible. I think that "firstborn over all creation" gives a better sense of Paul's meaning.

The key word is *prototokos* (PROTOTOKOS), translated here as “firstborn.” The English translation implies that there is a birth, or a creation. If you ever get into a discussion with Jehovah’s Witnesses or Mormons, they may take you to this verse to argue that Christ is a created being, that He is less than fully God. They will argue that Christ was the first created being of God’s creation. To be fair, it should be noted that “firstborn” can refer to physical birth. It is frequently used that way in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. In Luke #2 v. 7 Jesus is called “the *prototokos* son” of Mary.

The word, however, has other uses. It can have reference to time. It can refer to someone being around before someone else. Most importantly, it can refer to supremacy in rank. The Greek translation of the Old Testament uses the word to describe Israel, the patriarchs, and David in his role as king. (PSALM 89:27A) In Psalm 89 v. 27 God is speaking about David. He says, “**And I will make him the firstborn...**” In what sense could David be a firstborn? He was the youngest son of Jesse, not the firstborn son of Jesse. He was not the first king of Israel. Saul was the first king.

The second line of Psalm 89 v. 27 (PSALM 89:27B) says, “**...the highest of the kings of the earth.**” This line describes what “firstborn” means here. It is talking about supremacy. In our passage in Colossians Paul is saying that Christ is supreme over the created world, and that He existed before it was created. Jesus Christ is sovereign over this world. We are answerable to Him.

C.

Verses 16 & 17 go on to describe HIS PERSONAL CONNECTION TO THE UNIVERSE. (I. A. B. C. HIS PERSONAL CONNECTION OF THE UNIVERSE) Verse 16 says, “**For by Him [or more likely ‘in Him’] all things were created, in heavens and on earth, visible and invisible...**” The Jehovah’s Witnesses New World Translation inserts the word “other” between “all” and “things” four times in these two verses. It is not in the original text. Everything in the universe that has been created has been done so through Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself was not created.

How does God the Father fit into the picture? (HEBREWS 1:2) Hebrews #1 v. 2 says, “**...in these last days he [God] has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, through whom also He created the world.**” God the Father is the originating cause. The Son is the efficient cause. He is the One who carried out the divine plan.

This world and this universe are not the result of chance. Something does not come from nothing. Something as orderly and complex and intricate as our universe and the life in it are not the result of blind chance. Time plus chance plus laws of physics and chemistry are insufficient to produce the vast universe around us. This universe testifies to the sovereignty and majesty of this God. (PSALM 19:1) According to Psalm 19 v. 1, “**The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.**”

As a result of the work of the Hubble Space Telescope (HUBBLE SPACE TELESCOPE) astronomers now believe that there are hundreds of billions of galaxies in our universe. (WHIRLPOOL GALAXY) Each galaxy has between ten million and one trillion stars. (CROWN OF THORNS) What a vast and powerful God we have!

At the same time life in this world can be small and intricate. (INSECT) Scientists have catalogued a total of 800,000 different kinds of insects. As children, my parents learned in school that the smallest particles are atoms. (ATOMS) I learned in school that the smallest particles are electrons and neutrons and protons. (ELECTRONS) My children learned in school that there are even smaller particles. (QUARKS LEPTONS) There are quarks and leptons and bosons. It is a powerful and amazing God who has created this universe.

In Charles Darwin's day scientists were convinced that cells were comprised of a single, simple substance called protoplasm. (CELL DARWIN) Today we know that the simplest living cell, invisible to the naked eye, is a complex manufacturing center. It has software based upon DNA that Bill Gates calls "**far, far more advanced than any software ever created.**" (Gates, *The Road Ahead*, 188) It has a hardware system that applies that software. The simplest cell has proteins, enzymes, cytoplasm, amino acids, DNA, mitochondria, ribosomes, RNA and so on. It has an extremely complicated system by which it reproduces itself.

Living cells are dependent upon proteins and DNA. Where did proteins and DNA come from? (DNA REPLICATION) In order to make proteins, you must have DNA and proteins. In order to make DNA you must have DNA and proteins. How did these things ever arise? French biologist Jacques Monod, whom I quoted earlier about the supposed role of chance, confesses that it is "exceedingly difficult to imagine." (Monod, *Chance and Necessity*, p. 143) (PROJECTOR OFF) "**For in Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible...**"

What are these invisible things? Paul speaks of "**thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities.**" Jewish writers of this time used these terms to describe angelic beings. The false teachers at Colossae may have been using the terms to describe their angelic beings. Paul asserts that Jesus Christ created all of these spiritual beings. He was not simply one of them.

Furthermore, Paul says in v. 16 that these things "**have been created through Him and for Him.**" This entire created universe was intended to serve Christ and to reflect His glory.

In v. 17 Paul specifically says that Christ "**is before all things...**" Christ was before the creation of the universe. He adds, "**...and in Him all things hold together.**" Jesus Christ is also the unifying principle of the universe. Physicists since the time of Einstein and before have been trying to develop a unified theory that would explain the physical forces in the universe. They have reduced these forces to electromagnetism and the weak force and the strong force and gravity. The Bible says that the real unifying force

is Jesus Christ. It is He who holds the universe together. (PROJECTOR ON--- HEBREWS 1:3) Hebrews #1 v. 3 says, “...[He] **upholds all things by the word of His power.**”

Many scientists today marvel at something that they call the fine tuning of the universe. There are certain constants in the physical world that are essential to life and would be destructive to life if they were just a little bit different. The famous English physicist Stephen Hawking said, “**The laws of science, as we know them at present, contain many fundamental numbers, like the size of the electric charge of the electron and the ratio of the masses of the proton and the electron. ... The remarkable fact is that the values of these numbers seem to have been very finely adjusted to make possible the development of life.**” (*A Brief History of Time*, pp. 7, 125) Who was the adjuster?

In relationship to the universe, Christ is One who existed before the created world. He is supreme over it. He is the One who created it. He is the One who sustains it and holds it together. If that is true, perhaps he can hold my life and your life together in the face of the challenges of the world around us.

II.A.

(II. CHRIST’S RELATIONSHIP TO THE CHURCH) In vv. 18 & 19 we have described for us CHRIST’S RELATIONSHIP TO THE CHURCH. In the first part of v. 18 He is described as THE HEAD. (II. A. THE HEAD) Paul says, “**And he is the head of the body, the church...**” From the very beginning of his Christian experience the Apostle Paul learned the close connection between Christ and His church. According to Acts #9 v. 4 (ACTS 9:4) the first audible words that Paul heard from the risen Christ were, “**Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?**” Paul’s persecution was directed against Christians, against the church. But Christ indicated that it was also done against Him. For He is the head of the church. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The primary implication of this truth is that Christ is the true leader of the church. That means that we should be getting our directions from Him. The pastor or the elders are not the leaders of a Biblical church. We should all be looking to Him primarily for direction. We should be following His principles in how we run the local church. We should be using the Bible as our guidebook.

When churches get away from doing that, they end up with big problems. They end up supporting and leading bloody crusades to the Holy Land. They start inquisitions in Spain. They start selling indulgences in Europe. They start institutionalizing racism in the United States. They lose a concern for bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth. They become more concerned about being popular in the culture around them.

B.

The second thing that we learn about Christ's relationship to the church is that He is THE BEGINNING. (I. A. B. THE BEGINNING) In the middle of v. 18 we are told simply, "...**He is the beginning.**" Just as He is the founder of the universe, so also He is the founder of the church. The basis for the beginning of the church was the death of Christ. The church began when He sent the Holy Spirit to indwell His followers on the Day of Pentecost. The founder of the church universal deserves special recognition and regular honor.

C.

Thirdly, Christ is THE FIRSTBORN FROM THE DEAD. (II. A. B. C. THE FIRSTBORN FROM THE DEAD) According to the second part of v. 18, "[**He is**] **the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.**" The word for "firstborn" is the same one as in v. 15. Clearly it can't be talking about physical birth or creation. For the subject here is resurrection. There is a time implication. Christ was the first one in time to be resurrected from the dead and to receive a resurrection body. Lazarus returned to earthly life prior to the time that Jesus rose again. But Jesus received a resurrection body when He rose from the dead. Also there is an implication of supremacy of rank. Jesus is sovereign because He rose from the dead. He conquered death. He deserves to be treated as God.

D.

Finally in v. 19 there is a description of Christ's relationship to the church in terms of THE FULLNESS. (I. A. B. C. D. THE FULLNESS) Paul says, "**For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him.**" The later Gnostics in Colossae said that the different spiritual beings who existed between God and the earth had varying degrees of power and abilities. Jesus Christ was thought to be simply one of these beings. Perhaps that kind of thinking is what Paul is addressing here. He claims that all of the fullness dwells in Jesus.

But just what is this fullness? In the next chapter in v. 9 the author writes, "**For in Him [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.**" The fullness has to do with deity. It has to do with the attributes of God. It is a clear claim in the Bible that Jesus is God.

The word that Paul uses for "dwell" is also worthy of note. There is a Greek word that means "to temporarily dwell." But Paul doesn't use that word. He uses a word that implies permanent dwelling. The qualities of deity dwell permanently in Jesus Christ. He is God. He is sovereign. (*katoikeo* vs. *paroikeo*)

III.

We come then to Roman numeral IV in the outline THE IMPLICATIONS FOR US. (III. THE IMPLICATIONS FOR US) What should our understanding of the sovereignty of Christ mean for us in our daily lives?

The first thing that comes to my mind is that when the hard challenges of life come across our path, we tend to have a reaction of fear. We recognize that hard things limit

our control. Getting fired, rejection by a friend, a cancer diagnosis, loss of a loved one shake up our world. The sovereignty of Christ over our world means that these hard things are not beyond His control. These things did not catch Him by surprise. In the midst of these hard things we should be prompted to entrust ourselves to His care.

Closely related to that, an understanding of the sovereignty of Christ should prompt us to pray. If Christ truly is sovereign over this world, and if He has encouraged us to bring our needs to Him and to our Heavenly Father, we should pray. The sovereign God is in a position to do something about the challenges that we have in life. His word tells us that our prayers make a difference. So we should make prayer a priority. One of the opportunities that we have to pray together as a church is on Wednesday afternoons at 1 PM. We have been doing that by Zoom. If any of you would like to join us, just give us your e-mail address, and we will help you to get set up.

We have a lot of people in our congregation who are closer to the finishing line of life than the starting line. The sovereignty of Christ should affect our attitude toward death. If Jesus Christ is sovereign over our creation, then He is sovereign over our passing out of this life. But this sovereignty means that when He told His followers that He was going to prepare a place for them, we Christians can have an assurance that we can really look forward to what lies beyond the grave.

George Washington understood something about the sovereignty of God. He lost more battles than he won. He had a fighting force that was by most measures inferior to that of the British. His army was underfunded. It was on the verge of disaster on several occasions. Yet somehow his army defeated the British and forced them to surrender.

In an address which he gave at Princeton, New Jersey, on August 25, 1783, he said, **“If in the execution of an arduous Office I have been so happy as to discharge my duty to the Public with fidelity and success, and to obtain the good opinion of my fellow Soldiers and fellow Citizens; I attribute all the glory to that Supreme Being, who hath caused the several parts, which have been employed in the production of the wonderful Events we now contemplate, to harmonize in the most perfect manner, and who was able by the humblest instruments as well as by the most powerful means to establish and secure the liberty and happiness of these United States.”**

He added a bit later, **“A Multiplicity of circumstances, scarcely yet investigated, appears to have co-operated in bringing about the great, and I trust the happy, revolution, that is on the eve of being accomplished. It will not be uncommon that those things, which were considered at the moment as real ills, should have been no inconsiderable causes in producing positive and permanent national felicity.”**

A number of years ago my mother's sister had back surgery that was unsuccessful. A surgeon did some things wrong, and she became a paraplegic. A couple of times she came down with pneumonia. Pneumonia is difficult for paraplegics because they can't cough to clear their throats or get stuff to come up their windpipe. So her body was very



sick, and yet she was alive. Her brain sent out signals, but her body didn't respond. It was a very sad situation. Eventually pneumonia did her in.

If we are followers of Jesus Christ, He is like our brain. He is sending out signals to us about what He wants us to do and be. Most of those signals are found in the Bible. It is a sad and pathetic situation when the body doesn't respond, when we Christians don't do what He is telling us to do. Let's all make sure that we are responding to the signals that Jesus Christ is sending to us. For He is indeed sovereign. We need to treat Him as such.