

Who Is Jesus Christ?

Introduction. Although secular society continually attempts to exclude Him, He still seems to be everywhere. We see Him as a plastic dashboard statue in a passing car. We watch Him portrayed in Hollywood productions. We observe Him in many variations as the manger baby for Christmas. In spite of all of this attention, we sometimes neglect to ask the most crucial question: "Who is Jesus Christ?"

Paul's letter to the Colossian church was sent primarily to combat a growing threat of heresy within that group of Christians. Paul never says exactly what the heresy is, but we can see that he refers to it as a type of "philosophy" (Colossians 2:8); it appears to have been an early form of Gnosticism. Gnostics taught that the way to God was barred by a series of emanations. Getting past these emanations to the true God was through knowledge and a series of passwords which only the Gnostics could supply. This meant that salvation was limited to only a few intellectuals. The series of emanations in their totality were called the Pleroma (fulness). In most Gnostic systems the Pleroma consisted of 30 beings ranging from the highest God at one end to Sophia (wisdom) at the other end. They considered Jesus as only one of the many intermediaries between God and man. They frequently denied that He died on the cross (1 John 5:6-8), and some of them even denied that Jesus came in the flesh (1 John 2:23; 4:2-3). The Gnostics would have turned the gospel into a philosophy of which only a select few could be a part.

This text comes on the heels of Paul's opening prayer for the needs of the Colossian church. Paul has asked God that the Colossian Christians would be spiritually wise (1:9), live upright lives (1:10), be strong in the face of persecution (1:11), and be thankful for the glorious salvation through Jesus Christ (1:12-14). Having ended his prayer on this high note, he then proceeds to discuss the true nature of Christ and what this means to his readers.

I. ***The Divine Christ For Creation***

A. He is the image of God (vs. 15).

1. This is one of the most profound doctrinal statements in the entire New Testament. Yet it is susceptible to misunderstanding in at least two ways.
 - a) Paul did not mean that Jesus was some kind of "copy" of God. With copy machines, the copying process always causes degradation. Paul means that Jesus is the visible expression of God (John 1:18; 14:9; Hebrews 1:3).
 - b) When Paul describes Jesus as the "firstborn of every creature," he is not saying that Jesus Himself is a created being. Rather,

this is his way of saying that Jesus is the ruler over all creation (Psalm 89:27).

2. Thus Paul begins with a robust statement of the divinity of Christ. He affirms two mighty characteristics of Jesus: His role in revealing the true God and His authority over creation.

B. He is the creator and sustainer (vss. 16-17).

1. Paul expands on Jesus' role as creator by giving an inclusive statement with important implications.

a) With the statement "by him were all things created," Paul emphasizes that there are no exceptions.

(1) Christ created the physical universe.

(a) The sheer size of the universe is staggering. For instance, scientists estimate that the number of stars in the universe is roughly equal to the number of all the grains of sand on all the world's beaches. Moreover, the star Betelgeuse has a diameter of 100 million miles, which is larger than the earth's orbit around the sun.

(b) Scientists now speak of the "Anthropic Principle" which states that the universe appears to be carefully designed for the well-being of mankind.

i) A slight change in any one of the parameters of the existence of the earth would be catastrophic (the composition of the elements of the atmosphere, the distance of the earth from the sun, the rate of rotation of the earth, the distance of the moon to the earth, etc).

ii) Max Planck, winner of the Nobel Prize and one of the founders of modern physics, wrote, "According to everything taught by the exact sciences about the immense realm of nature, a certain order prevails -- one independent of the human mind ... this order can be formulated in terms of purposeful activity. There is evidence of an intelligent order of the universe to which both man and nature are subservient."

(2) Christ also created everything in the spiritual realm.

(a) "Thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers" refer to the various ranks of angels (Ephesians 2:1).

(b) Far from being an angel, as the Colossian errorists taught, Christ created the angels (Hebrews 1:7-8; 1 Peter 3:22).

b) Paul also said that "all things" were created "for him." This further excludes Jesus from the realm of created beings. The

false teachers maintained that Christ, being only an emanation, could not be the final consummation of the universe.

2. Christ holds our world together.

- a) The affirmation that Jesus is "before all things" tells us that the divinity of Christ is not limited by time or space (cf. John 8:58).
- b) Furthermore, Jesus is not only the creator but is also the sustainer of everything. "Consist" means "to continue to exist." It denotes continuous stability.

(1) Scientists have known for years that like charges of electricity and like magnetic poles repel each other. This law also applies to atomic nuclei. That being the case, how can an atomic nucleus of positively and neutrally charged particles exist?

(2) Physicist George Gamow, one of the founders of the Big Bang Theory, wrote, "The fact that we live in a world in which practically every object is a potential nuclear explosive, without being blown to bits, is due to the extreme difficulties that attend the starting of a nuclear reaction."

(3) Physicist Karl Darrow said, "You grasp what this implies. It implies that all the massive nuclei have no right to be alive at all. Indeed, they should never have been created, and, if created, they should have blown up instantly. Yet here they all are ... Some inflexible inhibition is holding them relentlessly together. The nature of the inhibition is also a secret ... one thus far reserved by Nature for herself."

- c) One day God will dissolve this elemental force, and the universe will literally explode (2 Peter 3:10). Until that time, Christ is involved in the ongoing affairs of the created universe (Hebrews 1:3).

C. He is the preeminent one (vs. 18).

1. Having established that Christ is the creator and ruler of the world, Paul now discusses Jesus' role in the church.

2. Paul mentions three important concepts.

- a) Christ is the beginning or originator of the church. He founded the church (Matthew 16:18) and purchased it with His blood (Acts 20:28).
- b) His resurrection is the crucial doctrine of the church. Without the resurrection of Jesus, the faith of Christians and the church itself is useless (1 Corinthians 15:14).
- c) "Preeminence" means first place or highest rank. There is no authority in the church that exceeds the authority of Christ in any matter (Matthew 28:18; Ephesians 1:22-23). It is His

church, not ours. We exist as the church for His service and for His glory.

D. He is the indwelling of deity (vs. 19).

1. "Fulness" was a term used by the later Gnostics to refer to the divine powers and attributes, which they believed were divided among the various emanations.
2. Paul counters that false teaching by stating that all the fulness of deity is not spread out in small doses to a group of spirits, but fully dwells in Christ (cf. Colossians 2:9).
 - a) He did not have a "spark" of divinity, or a "more intense" relationship with God.
 - b) Christ was and is God (John 1:1, 14).

E. He is the peace offering for our sins (vs. 20).

1. There are many aspects to atonement, and Paul draws on three of them here.
 - a) The cross served as a type of peace offering to God.
 - (1) The biblical concept of peace can mean more than a lack of hostilities. In the Old Testament "peace" is used in the sense of "satisfaction of a debt."
 - (2) Christ was our peace, having breached the wall of separation between God and man, and man and man (Ephesians 2:11-18).
 - b) The death of Jesus was a blood offering for our sins.
 - (1) Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Hebrews 9:22).
 - a) Bloodshed was God's design for all Old Testament sacrifices. They were bled to death rather than clubbed or burnt.
 - b) God designed that sacrificial death was to occur with blood loss as a vivid manifestation of life being poured out (Leviticus 17:11; Deuteronomy 12:27).
 - (2) This fact is the essence of Paul's preaching -- the blood of Jesus serves as an ultimate, once-for-all sin offering (Hebrews 10:10).
 - c) The Old Testament term "atonement" is changed to the term "reconciliation" in the New Testament (1 Peter 1:18-19).
 - (1) "Reconcile" is one of the most significant terms in the Bible. It is one of five New Testament words used to describe the richness of salvation in Christ.
 - a) In justification, the sinner stands before God guilty and condemned, but is declared righteous (Romans 8:33).
 - b) In redemption, the sinner stands before God as a slave, but is granted his freedom (Romans 6:18-22).

- (c) In forgiveness, the sinner stands before God as a debtor, but the debt is paid and forgotten (Ephesians 1:7).
 - (d) In adoption, the sinner stands before God as a stranger, but is made a son (Ephesians 1:5).
 - (e) In reconciliation, the sinner stands before God as an enemy, but becomes His friend (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).
- (2) Paul uses an intensified word for "reconcile" in this passage and it means thoroughly, completely, or totally reconciled. He no doubt used this stronger term as a counterattack against the false teachers. Because they held that Christ was merely another spirit being emanating from God, they also denied the possibility of man's being reconciled to God by Christ alone.
2. "All things" must be understood in its context. It does not mean literally everything in the physical and spiritual realm, but everything which could be reconciled back to God. Every person has the chance if they will obey the gospel. Ultimately, everything will eventually be decisively subdued to God's will and made to serve His purposes.

II. ***The Human Savior For Humanity***

- A. He is the justifier and sanctifier (vss. 21-22).
1. Paul reminds his readers of our side of the problem: we are the ones who caused the alienation by our sin.
 - a) It was not merely by wicked deeds, or by an evil life; it was alienation seated in the mind, leading to wicked deeds. It was not the result of ignorance or lust; it was a deliberate, willful love of sin. It is this fact which renders reconciliation with God so difficult (Ephesians 4:18).
 - b) The wicked deeds, produced by alienation of the mind, is the public evidence of the sinner's condemnation (Ephesians 2:12).
 2. "The body of his flesh" means the body which He assumed in order to suffer in making an atonement (Hebrews 10:5, 10).
 - a) Reconciliation could have never happened unless He came in a body, for His divine nature could not suffer so as to make atonement for sins.
 - b) "Death" graphically denotes violent death, like that suffered by the sacrificial animals. The countless thousands of animals sacrificed under the Old Covenant pointed ahead to the violent, blood-shedding death the final sacrificial Lamb would suffer.
 - c) Christ died not only as our sacrifice, but also as our substitute (Romans 8:3). Once again Paul hammers away at the false

teaching of the Colossians heretics that Christ was a mere spirit being. On the contrary, He died as a man for men.

3. This reconciliation completely restores us before the throne of God. We are holy (cleansed of sin), unblamable (without fault), and unreprouvable (not accused of any wrongdoing).

B. He is the core of the gospel (vs. 23).

1. Of all of the marks of a true Christian presented in scripture, none is more significant than the one Paul mentions here. People give evidence of being truly reconciled when they continue in the faith (John 6:66; 8:31; Galatians 1:8).

2. Paul speaks of the faith as the body of doctrine that is to be believed by Christians.

a) If we depart from the fundamental doctrines of Jesus Christ contained in these verses, then we abandon the faith (1 Timothy 4:1).

b) So the danger that is in view here is not that we will quit believing altogether, but that our beliefs will become false as we drift into heresy (cf. 2 Timothy 2:17-18).

Conclusion. Although there are some elements about the church that have changed from the first century, the church of the Lord has no need for new, updated doctrines about Jesus. Those doctrines as taught in the New Testament were adequate for Paul's churches and they remain sufficient for ours.

Elders should always be on guard against the infiltration of such false teachings into the congregation (Titus 1:9). Church history tells sad stories of teachers who wanted to redefine what the church taught about Jesus. Until Jesus returns there will always be heresies. We have to fight these warped views of the nature of Christ and salvation.