

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 5/25/97 Bradley S. Brandt

Colossians 1:15-20 "The Supremacy of Christ"**

Proposition: We learn why it is essential to affirm the supremacy of Christ in Colossians 1:15-20. There we're told that Christ is supreme over two things.

I. Christ is supreme over creation (15-17).

A. We need to know what He's like (15).

1. He reveals what God is like.

2. He reveals what God intends.

B. We need to know what He does (16-17).

1. He created everything.

2. He preceded everything.

3. He sustains everything.

II. Christ is supreme over the Church (18-20).

A. He has a special relationship with His people (18).

1. He is our Head.

2. He deserves our allegiance.

B. He has a special relationship with His Father (19-20).

1. He reveals God's fullness (19).

2. He reconciles all things (20).

Response: Is Christ supreme in your life?

1. Resolve to know Christ.

2. Resolve to make Christ known.

What makes Christianity *Christian*? What are the non-negotiables that are so essential that if a person doesn't believe them, he cannot be a Christian? That is the question which has prompted our current series. It was such an issue that brought about what is known as "Fundamentalism" nearly a century ago.

At the turn of the century in this country, biblical Christianity faced three subtle challenges: liberal theology, Darwinism, and German higher criticism. Leading "Christian" pastors and seminary professors were abandoning historic, biblical truth in favor of what they deemed as modern, enlightened ideas. The danger of Modernism threatened to divide and conquer the Church.

Bible-loving conservatives responded by taking pen in hand. Between the years 1910 and 1915, a series of twelve volumes of articles was published to articulate the central doctrines of true Christianity. This publication was called *The Fundamentals*, and was subtitled "A Testimony to the Truth." The authors represented a broad selection of Presbyterians, Anglicans, Baptists, Independents, and others.

I mention this not as a mere history lesson, but to point out a vital truth. Genuine Christianity has always been under attack--sometimes by opponents *outside* the Church, and sometimes by opponents who slip *inside* the Church. No wonder, God commanded His Church to be on guard and contend for the faith (Jude 3).

What are the fundamentals that we must never forsake as a church? In 1910, orthodox church leaders affirmed five essential doctrines: the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth of Christ, the substitutionary atonement of Christ, Christ's bodily resurrection, and the historicity of miracles.

I admire and thank God for those men. They knew their enemy, they knew God's truth, and they responded by clarifying the fundamentals. We must do the same. Yet the enemy we face today wears different masks than he wore in 1910. A century ago, the Church faced Modernism. Now it's *post*-Modernism. Then it was liberal theology, Darwinism, and German higher criticism. Now it's pluralism and tolerance, New Age pantheism and fatalism. That's why we need to wrestle with the question--what makes Christianity *Christian*? What are the key fundamentals we must affirm to be a biblical church?

In our current series, I am proposing five. The first, which we developed last week, is the Superiority of God. We'll consider the second this morning, the *Supremacy of Christ*.

We live in a day of tolerance. The spirit of the day is pluralism. In religious terms, pluralism says there are many ways to God, and no one has a corner on the market.

Why must we insist on the supremacy of Christ? There are several places in the Bible we could turn to answer that question--Hebrews 1, Philippians 2, John 1, the book of Hebrews, for starters. But perhaps the most revealing text is found in Colossians 1. In Colossians 1:15-20, we learn why it is essential to affirm the supremacy of Christ. It's there we're told that Christ is supreme over two things.

I. Christ is supreme over creation (15-17).

Paul wrote Colossians while under house arrest in Rome. The year was A.D. 60, the same time he penned Ephesians and Philemon. Paul had led a man named Epaphras to Christ, who in turn traveled to the city of Colossae, preached the gospel, and started a church there. Soon after, the church became the target of heretical attack. Epaphras took off for Rome to obtain Paul's counsel, which the Holy Spirit used to prompt the apostle to pen this epistle known as Colossians.

It's hard to tell exactly who the opponents were in Colossae. Paul doesn't tell us. But from analyzing the correction he gave in this letter, we can deduce the heresy was diverse in nature. It was a combination of the following: ceremonialism (they promoted strict rules), asceticism (they taught that matter was evil, which in turn meant Christ did not have a real body), angel worship, and secret knowledge. Basically, the heresy was a combination of extreme Judaism and early gnosticism.

Now how should we deal with false teaching like that? The same way Paul did--Put Christ in His rightful place! Show that Christ is completely supreme. In verses 15-17, Paul clarifies for us two things we need to know about Christ.

A. We need to know what He's like (15). "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." What is Christ like? We learn two things about Him here.

1. He (Christ) reveals what God is like. "He is the *image* of the invisible God." Remember the second command? No idols. God prohibited us from using images to represent Him. No created object can give an accurate presentation of the Creator. Instead, God imaged Himself in the Person of Christ.

Listen. If you want to see the unseeable, see Christ! He is the image of God (the term *image* was used of the head of a ruler minted upon a coin). You say, "But Christ is in heaven. How can we *see* Him?" His Spirit has preserved for us four biographies of His life--Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Indeed, all the Scriptures reveal Him to us.

In a conversation with Philip one time, Jesus put it this way (Jn. 14:9), "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." Christ reveals what God is like.

2. He reveals what God intends. He is "the firstborn over all creation." Jehovah's Witnesses say that Jesus was merely a created being, and use a verse like this to support their doctrine, "Yes, Jesus is the creator, but he himself was

created by Jehovah. He is the firstborn."

The problem is, the term "firstborn" does not refer to time, but to place or status. *Firstborn* simply means "of first importance, of first rank." It can't mean that He is the first of all created beings since the very next verse says He is the one by whom the *whole* creation came into being.

Commentator Peter O'Brien offers this insight (44), "If 'image' emphasizes Christ's relation to God, then the second title, 'firstborn of all creation,'...designates his relationship to the creation." Christ is the standard as well as the Sovereign. We can look at Him and see what God intends. Let's apply this truth...

How do you respond to the guy who says, "I don't need organized religion. I can get to know God just fine out on the golf course enjoying God's creation." Take him to Colossians 1, which says this. Nature can reveal God's *existence*, but nature cannot reveal God's *essence*. Only Christ can do that! If you want to know what God is like, you need Christ. Paul clarifies something else we need to know about Christ in verses 16-17...

B. We need to know what He does (16-17). Here's where we see the supremacy of Christ in action. Christ does three things no one else can do.

1. *He created everything.* "For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him." Genesis 1:1 says that in the beginning, *God* created the heavens and the earth. Colossians 1:16 informs us which person of the Godhead performed the creative work. It was Christ, God the Son. He created *all* things.

Lest we miss the point, Paul states some specifics: things in heaven and earth, things we can see and things we cannot see, even thrones, powers, rulers, and authorities (designations of angelic beings?)--they were all created by Christ. He is the author and aim of creation, for all things were created *by* Him and *for* Him.

2. *He preceded everything.* "He is *before* all things (17)." As finite beings, we are restricted by time and space. Not Christ. He precedes time. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning."

3. *He sustains everything.* "In Him all things hold together (17b)." The Bible does not teach *deism*, that God created the universe and then let it go, like a clockmaker who started the clock but then left town. The Bible teaches that God is vitally involved in His creation. In Christ, all things consist. Right now, Christ is holding together what He made. He is both the Creator *and* Sustainer of the universe.

Do you see why it's imperative that we assert His supremacy? One of Satan's great tactics is to attack the Deity of Christ. His Deity was under attack when Paul wrote Colossians. His Deity is under attack in our day, too.

Answer this. If a person believes in Jesus, is he a Christian? Many think so. Yet there are many people in our day who believe in "Jesus" who are not Christian in the biblical sense of the term.

For instance, Mormons believe in Jesus but say Jesus is merely the spirit-brother of Lucifer, one god in a pantheon of gods, born through physical incest. Jehovah's Witnesses assert that Jesus is Michael the Archangel, the first creation of God, and that he came as a man, died, and rose again as an invisible spirit, then came back in an invisible form in 1914 to Brooklyn to head the Watchtower Society. New Agers refer to Jesus as an avatar or mystical messenger. Transcendental Meditation says he was an enlightened guru who never suffered for anyone. Christian Science says he was a divine idea. Sun Myung Moon teaches that he was a man who failed, that Moon himself is his second coming. Many of the so called Faith movement preachers of our day say that Jesus was no more an incarnation of God than is any believer.

What's wrong here? All these people believe in Jesus, yes, but in a *different* Jesus than the Bible presents. Don't be surprised. The Bible says that false teachers "transform themselves into the apostles of Christ."

We have a desperate need for discernment in our day. Just because a person says he believes in Christ doesn't

guarantee he is a Christian. The question is--does he believe in the Christ of the Bible?

True Christianity rests upon a commitment to the supremacy of Christ. Jesus Christ, Who is God, is supreme over creation. That's not all. Secondly...

II. Christ is supreme over the Church (18-20).

Let's read the text (18-20, NKJV), "And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross."

Remember, Paul is responding to first-century, false teachers who were spreading inaccuracies about Christ. He wants us to know the truth about Christ, that first of all, He is supreme over creation, and that secondly, He is supreme over the Church. What are the implications of Christ's supremacy over His Church? We're find two in this text.

A. He has a special relationship with His people (18). "And he is the head of the body, the church." Stop there. Notice that Christ has an intimate relationship with us. We are His Body. We are His people. What a marvelous privilege we have--to belong to Him! What's true of this special relationship? Two things according to verse 18.

1. He is our Head. "And He is the head of the body, the church." We don't have a 50/50 relationship with Christ. The church isn't a democracy. It's a Body, and there is *one* Head. That's Christ. To be a Christian you must be linked to Christ. You must belong to Him. You must submit to His control. He is our Head.

2. He deserves our allegiance. "He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy." What does Christ warrant? The supremacy! Our allegiance.

Why? Because He is the "beginning." He created the universe (16), and He created the Church (18). He originated both the natural and spiritual creations.

Don't miss the purpose clause at the end of verse 18. What's the goal of the church? Why do we exist? Why did Christ give His life and conquer death for us? Answer--so that He might be *supreme!* "That in everything He might have the supremacy."

To be a New Testament church, we must commit ourselves daily to the supremacy of Christ. He has a special relationship with us. He's our Head, and deserves our allegiance.

B. He has a special relationship with His Father (19-20). Watch how verse 19 begins, "For God was pleased." Who was pleased? God, that is, God the Father. This is amazing. God the Father was pleased to do two things in relationship with His Son. Or to turn it around, in Christ we see two things that indicate He has a special relationship with His Father.

1. He reveals God's fullness (19). "For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him." The word translated "fullness" (*pleroma*) was a technical term the gnostics used that meant "the sum total of all the divine power and attributes" (Wiersbe, 117). Paul used the word eight times in this letter, and in so doing, he was confronting the heretics head-on.

My friend, if you want to see the fullness of God, look at Christ! God's fullness dwells in Him (the verb means "to be at home permanently"). The fullness of God dwells in Him. Not *around*, *upon*, or *under* Him, but *in* Him.

New Age proponent, Shirley MacLaine, spoke a couple of years ago in a public gathering (and charged \$300 to hear her). She was asked, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ?" Her answer, "Yes, we are all Christ...Just as Jesus evolved to godhood, so can we." Then she was asked, "Do you believe in being born again?" Her reply, "Yes, we can be reborn..." (see Ron Carlson, *Fast Facts about the Cults*).

Do you sense a problem here? What's happening? It's what we face all around us. We hear "Christian" words that have been redefined ("believe...Jesus Christ...born again"). Suppose I take an mayonnaise jar, empty out the mayonnaise, fill it with Crisco, and put it back on the shelf. Do I still have a jar of mayonnaise? No. But the *label* says mayonnaise! The label is wrong. It's what's in the jar that matters. The content.

What's the truth about the real Christ? He reveals God's fullness. He is divine.

2. *He reconciles all things (20)*. In verse 20, Paul uses a second infinitive to show what the Father was pleased to do through His Son. "And through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross."

Through Christ, the Father reconciled everything to Himself. The cross is the means of reconciliation. That doesn't mean that Christ's death saves everyone. Romans 8:19-22 indicates that sin destroyed harmony not only between God and man, but in the created order. Creation groans. But when Christ shed His blood on the cross, He reconciled all things to the Father, including the groaning creation.

Without the cross, there is no hope. "To reconcile" means "to change completely." In reconciliation, Christ removed the barriers. That's how sinful man can return to God. Warren Wiersbe tells the story of a man who came to see him once (118-9). According to Wiersbe, the fellow sometimes got his words confused as he did when he shared his problem. The man was having marriage problems, and said, "Pastor, me and my wife need a recancellation." He meant to say *reconciliation*, but the word *recancellation* was not a bad choice. There can be peace only when sin has been canceled.

That's what we needed as sinners before a righteous God. We needed a "recancellation." And that's what God provided for us in Christ. Our sins were canceled on the cross.

There's no question that Christ is the Supreme One! The Bible makes it clear that He is supreme over creation and over the Church. The question, however, is this.

Response: Is Christ supreme in your life?

Years ago, the Lord chastened His people for two evils in Jeremiah 2:13, "My people have committed two sins; They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water."

Would you rather have a drink of water from a broken cistern or a fresh spring? One summer when I was a child, we spent some time in Wisconsin near a place called Linwall Springs. It was a great treat to quench your thirst that came from the fresh water springs.

A few years later, my family moved to a farm that had an old, broken cistern, a collection basin for rain water. The water was black and filthy.

If you could choose to drink water from the Linwall Springs or from a broken cistern, which would you choose? God says when we forsake Him and try to find satisfaction anywhere else, it's like dipping a cup into the cistern and gulping down polluted water.

Beloved, Christ is supreme! Why would you not want to make Him supreme in your life? Perhaps you do, but are not sure how. Resolve to do two things.

1. *Resolve to know Christ*. Do you know Him? To know Him is eternal life (John 17:3). It was Paul's passion to know Christ, "that I may know Him" (Phil. 3:10). Is it yours? Perhaps you've been drinking from the cisterns of the world. Drink the Living Water today! Resolve to know Him. But don't stop there...

2. *Resolve to make Christ known*. Verse 28, "We proclaim Him." Why? "So that we may present everyone perfect in Christ."

In 1893, the World's Columbian Exposition was held in Chicago. More than 21 million people visited the exhibits, featuring one called a "World Parliament of Religions." Representatives of the world's religions met to share their "best points" hoping to come up with a new religion for the world. Evangelist D. L. Moody used the occasion as an opportunity for evangelism. He used churches, rented theaters, and even rented a circus tent to present the gospel of Christ. Moody's friends wanted him to attack the "Parliament of Religions," but he refused. Moody responded, "I am going to make Jesus Christ so attractive that men will turn to Him."

Moody knew what many are prone to forget. Jesus Christ isn't just one among many religious leaders. He is the preeminent Savior! Our task isn't to attack other religions. It's to make Christ known. Interestingly, the "Chicago Campaign" of 1893 was one of Moody's most fruitful evangelistic endeavors, as thousands came to Christ.