

09.13.09 / Colossians 1:15-23

This section of Colossians comes quite early in the letter, and establishes the position of Christ. Whether this is praise or an attempt to lay down a foundation for later arguments is unclear, although some scholars think this passage follows a poetic style consistent with a hymn.

Several terms here have additional cultural resonances. “Image of the invisible God” echoes Genesis 1:27, while simultaneously denying the pagan implications of that word, where image would literally mean a statue. Obviously, if Jesus is the image of something invisible he is a reflection of that reality in a very different way than the statue of Athena in the Parthenon supposedly reflected Athena. Instead, image takes meaning through the Jewish route. Genesis 5:3 tells us that Adam fathered a son “after his image” and “in his likeness”, giving additional clarity to the term. Genesis 9:6 bases a command not to murder on the fact that humans are made in God’s image. For Jesus to be the proper image of the invisible God he must be taking this image-ness even further, and doing so properly, as we have not.

“Firstborn” also has some trickiness associated with it. It appears twice in this passage, once in verse 15 and once in verse 18. During the Arian controversies in the fourth century this passage was often used to suggest that Jesus was a created thing, the first created thing. This is one possible translation of firstborn. However, firstborn can also indicate inheritance or preeminence. The firstborn son inherits everything from his father in both Jewish and Greek cultures, and, as such, is a little patriarch in training, preparing to fill his father’s shoes. In verse 15 it is probably this sense of preeminence that Paul means, while in verse 18 chronological precedence is indicated. The fact that verse 16 discusses Jesus as the creator of creation would seem to support the idea that his firstborn-ness is authority over creation here.

In the list of things Jesus has created, “rulers/principalities” is worth noting. This word also means “beginning”, and appears, translated this way, in verse 18. Jesus creates the sources (rulers), and is, himself, the source.

The flow of this section is fairly straightforward. 15-17 make a number of parallels to Genesis. Jesus is the one Who makes the world, sustains it, and, with the already-noted similarities, is the image of God, done right. His creative acts are enumerated by the powerful things he creates. Because he creates authorities and powers he is, by default, more authoritative and more powerful. His authority reaches throughout heaven and earth, and includes both visible and invisible. In this manner Paul includes all things in Christ’s scope of creation. Finally, it is Christ who keeps the world together. He has complete authority over all created things.

Verse 18 stations him as the head (or source) of the Church. The Church is here also referred to as the body, which, in verse 24 (just beyond where we end this week) is Christ’s body. The Church is positioned as Christ’s appendages, as it were, in the world. Christ therefore has authority over creation, and his own standing army, as it were, within the world. His power over death is demonstrated as well. A lengthy explanation of what this resurrection talk means is provided in the Series Overview for this series and as such will not be repeated here.

Finally, Christ is the arbiter of peace between God and men. The phrase “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” is rather more passive-voice than we might prefer. However, we are primarily concerned with

making sure that we recognize Jesus as God. In Paul's world it would have been easy to accomplish that, and, in doing so, downgrade Yahweh to yet another Hellenistic god with arms, legs, grudges, lusts, and conflicts. Hitting the balance between "this man is God" and "God is nothing like a man" is hard, and only 2,000 years of enculturation in the West, where the word "God" inevitably refers to a big god and not one of the small gods of the polytheisms removes this difficulty from us. However, the phrase Paul uses echoes, again, Christ's image-ness of God, his fullness of God, and his position as God's agent, in an extremely stressed sense. Christ's final act of authority, then, is to bring all things back to God, acting as God.

(A long parenthetical note: the idea that Jesus was God, in the way we say this, probably took a while to sink in. For instance, Peter's first speech in Acts includes little to nothing about Christ's divine position. He's the Messiah, and lord, although it's unclear whether that's Lord or merely lord, but Peter doesn't go much further. Later, of course, people do. Why? Well, the fact is Jesus has clearly done things, like reconcile all creation to God, that are beyond human scope. It's possible that at some point the Spirit did some sort of information dump into the apostles' heads and told them. It's equally possible that they put things together over the course of months or years and eventually realized that Jesus was God, that he possessed power beyond that of any prophet, even beyond the expected human Messiah, and that his actions showed that God had, indeed, come among them. So when I say "acting as God" at the end of the preceding paragraph this is because Jesus acting as God is important. Nobody gets to act as God but God. It's one of a hundred smaller points that make the case that Jesus was God in a way that the few explicit ones don't.)

Finally, Paul links Jesus' person to his audience. Jesus' reconciling act includes them, provided they stay within the hope of the gospel. This section is familiar ground for most of us, and so it seems unnecessary to say much more than that Paul has worked Christ's dominion from the high end (all creation, death, powers, rulers) to the low (you and I).

Paul's last words in this section extend this a bit further. The gospel, which is the vehicle of this ministry of reconciliation, is moving onwards. It suggests a direction to go from here.

Questions

Given the larger amount of content being provided in the new Curriculum Guide design, the in context questions are going to be somewhat reduced. You have the resources needed to understand the passage, determine where your group needs help, and craft questions to lead them through the important points. However, if you're having trouble, here are a few suggestions.

- 1) What does it mean to be "the image of God"? What does it mean for Jesus? What does it mean for us, who were at least created this way? If Jesus did it right, and we didn't, what does this mean about Jesus as a role model?
 - 2) Why is Paul so interested in stressing Jesus' authority? Why is it important for him to be creator? Why of these things, specifically?
 - 3) Why is Jesus' role as head of the church important?
 - 4) Why is Jesus' role as "firstborn from the dead" important?
-

5) What is Jesus reconciling? What isn't he reconciling? How? To whom? How does this reconciliation come to us? What might it look like?