

Doctrinal Issues in Colossians
Part 2 (of 4 parts):

The Doctrine of Christ in Colossians

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The first article in this series suggested that the heresy in the church at Colosse was syncretistic, a hybrid born out of religious elements in that area. It was a mixture of Hellenistic cults and Jewish mysticism. This amalgam of religious views had infected the church to which Epaphras had faithfully brought and taught the gospel. To correct the heresy Paul emphasized the true doctrine of Christ. Orthodox Christianity depends on accurate Christology. Two passages in Colossians in which Paul placed great emphasis on the Person and work of Christ are 1:15-20 and 2:9-15. These passages speak directly to the false teachings in the Colossian church, while affirming the marvels of who Christ is and what He has done.

The Christ-Hymn

Colossians 1:15-20 has become known as the Christ-hymn. It is called a hymn because of its rhythmic prose and strophic arrangement.¹ The first strophe exalts Christ's supremacy in creation (vv. 15-17), and the second testifies to His preeminent role in redemption (vv. 18-20).²

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 55-56.

² Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 42.

CHRIST IN CREATION (COL. 1:15-17)

Christ is the **eikwn** of God (v. 15). **Eikwn** ("image") means more than mere likeness or similarity; it includes the ideas of representation and manifestation.³ This echoes Christ's own words found in John 14:9, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father." In Matthew 22:20, **eikwn** refers to a ruler's image on the face of a coin.⁴ Christ is described as the "radiance of [God's] glory and the exact representation of His nature" (Heb. 1:3), the image [**eikwn**] of God (2 Cor. 4:4), and the One who existed in the very form of God (Phil. 2:6). As the "image" of God, Christ is the "great and final theophany."⁵ As the personal revelation of the living God, Christ is "the 'projection' of God on the canvas of our humanity and the embodiment of the divine in the world of men."⁶

Christ is the **prwt ot okoj**, of all creation (v. 15). The phrase "the first-born of all creation" (**prwt ot okoj pa s hj kt is ewj**) does not mean that Christ is a created being, the first part of all that was created by God in the beginning. This view of the Arians and more recently of the Jehovah's Witnesses is clearly heretical when the title is seen in its context, particularly in the light of verse 16. "First-born" suggests supremacy, not temporality.⁷ Israel was designated as God's firstborn (Exod. 4:22), and yet many other nations existed before Israel became a nation. Israel was chosen by God to be supreme over all nations as His specially chosen people. As seen in Psalm 89:27 ("I will also make him My first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth"), Christ as the First-born is the Heir and Ruler over all.⁸ Hebrews 1:6 also refers to Christ as the **prwt ot okoj**.

Colossians 1:16 unfolds the meaning of Christ's role in creation: "For in Him all things were created that are in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions, or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him" (author's translation).

³ Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 567.

⁴ Robert G. Gromacki, *Stand Perfect in Wisdom: An Exposition of Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 61.

⁵ S. Lewis Johnson Jr., "Christ Preeminent," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 119 (January–March 1962): 13.

⁶ Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, New Century Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 57.

⁷ Gromacki, *Stand Perfect in Wisdom: An Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, 63.

⁸ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964), 72.

All things were created en a ut & (v. 16). The prepositional phrase "in Him" (**en a ut &**) may be either a locative-of-sphere phrase (dative of location) or an instrumental phrase (dative of agency). If the former is intended, the phrase emphasizes that creation is "centered" in Christ. In the latter meaning Christ is the direct Agent of creation ("all things were created by Him"). Several factors suggest that the first view is preferable. First, Paul regularly used the words "in Christ" (76 times) or "in Him" (20 times) to indicate that Christ is the embodiment of reality, whether of creation or the redemption of mankind. Second, the latter portion of Colossians 1:16 refers to Christ as the agency, though indirect, of all creation ("all things were created through Him"). It would seem redundant to have the idea of agency stated twice in the same verse. Third, when the instrumental case indicates agency it normally does not have the preposition **en**. This preposition more naturally (though not invariably) is locative in meaning.⁹ Personal agency is more often expressed with **upo** and the genitive.¹⁰ The phrase "in Him" carries more emphasis than "through Him." In His role as Creator, Christ was the "location" from whom all came into being and in whom all creation is contained. This idea is also suggested in verse 18, "He is the beginning."

Christ's creative work was all encompassing, for it includes all created things "in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible." These inclusive qualifiers are significant in light of the problems facing the Colossian church. The entire physical creation, which was distasteful to the incipient Gnostics and ascetics, nevertheless had its origin in Christ. The Incarnation, in which God was manifest in the flesh, was abhorrent enough. But the concept of Christ's having been so closely involved with the physical world as its very Creator was especially repulsive to the heretics. On the other hand Paul affirmed in Colossians that the creation is good, not evil (cf. Gen. 1:31). In contrast to the practice of giving homage to mediatorial heavenly beings, which prevailed in Hellenistic cults and Jewish mysticism, Paul boldly affirmed that everything "invisible"—including angels—is part of the creation that is in Christ, that is, is contained in Him and by Him. This clearly removes them from any position worthy of worship. If the Colossians believed in the so-called "heavenly ascent" (as in Merkabah mysticism),¹¹ then

⁹ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 534, 590.

¹⁰ C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 76.

¹¹ See H. Wayne House, "Heresies in the Colossian Church," part 1 of "Doctrinal Issues in Colossians," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (January—March 1992): 45-59.

Christ's having created the angels clearly makes angel worship illegitimate and heretical (Col. 2:18).

The supremacy of Christ in both arenas of reality—the heavenly/invisible and the earthly/visible—stands in direct contrast to false teachings in Colosse that detracted from the glory that belongs to Christ alone. "Thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities" (1:16) are all part of creation. Included in these forces were the evil powers who sought dominion over humanity and were conquered at the Cross (2:14-15). The terms may also include all angelic creatures. In Jewish literature (2 Enoch 20:1) "thrones and dominions" refer to angelic powers.¹² Whether good or evil spirits, all were subject to Christ, the Firstborn. Angelic beings cannot add to His creative work, nor can evil spirits separate Christ from His creation.¹³

Colossians 1:16 ends with the affirmation that "all things have been created by Him and for Him." The perfect tense **ektis t ai** ("have been created") conveys the idea of the permanent "createdness" of creation. All created things remain in created existence through Christ (as the Agent of creation, **di autou**) and for Christ.¹⁴ As Eadie writes, "the phrase 'for him' seems to mean every aspect of His being, and every purpose of His heart. He is, as Clement of Alexandria says, 'teloj' as well as 'arxh'"¹⁵ The phrase **eij auton** ("for Him," or more literally "to Him") also points to Christ as the goal of creation. Moving toward this goal the world will someday fully recognize the preeminence and sovereignty of Christ (1 Cor. 15:25; Phil. 2:10-11; Rev. 19:16).¹⁶

Christ presently upholds the universe (v. 17). In verse 17 Paul wrote, "He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together." The present tense, **est in** ("He is"), rather than "He was," speaks of Christ's unchanging being.¹⁷ In addition the statement that Christ is "before [**pro**] all things" clearly conveys the fact of His preexistence.¹⁸ This reference to His preexistence relates naturally to the previous reference to Christ as the Firstborn of all creation.¹⁹ Christ Himself spoke of His preexistence in connection with

¹² Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, Hermenia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 51.

¹³ Hendriksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, 74.

¹⁴ Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 45.

¹⁵ John Eadie, *Colossians* (London: Richard Griffin, 1856), 56.

¹⁶ Homer A. Kent, *Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 48.

¹⁷ Eadie, *Colossians*, 58.

¹⁸ Rienecker and Rogers, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, 568.

¹⁹ Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 52.

His claims of deity, as in John 8:58, "Before Abraham was, I AM." And, as He prayed in His high priestly prayer, He was with the Father "before the world was" (John 17:5).

Besides existing before creation, Christ upholds (**s unes t hken**) it. He is the cause of creation, and He also is the bond that holds it together. As the author of Hebrews wrote, He is upholding all things by His power (Heb. 1:3). For Christians this is an encouragement, since "He is not their Cause only, in an initial sense; He is for ever their Bond, their Order, their Law, the ultimate secret which makes the whole universe, seen and unseen, a cosmos, not a chaos."²⁰

Some suggest this verse refers to immaterial, not physical creation. This view is usually held by those who deny the deity of Christ. If the clause refers to some new spiritual creation, then Colossians 1:18-20 would be redundant, since it speaks directly of the spiritual realm in the context of the church and Christ's victory over, death at the cross. Since He upholds "all things" in heaven and earth, the physical universe is certainly included.²¹

CHRIST IN REDEMPTION (COL. 1:18-20)

Following his discussion of Christ's divine nature and its significance, the apostle wrote of Christ's role in the spiritual realm, especially His relationship to His body, the church. Paul spoke of Christ as the Head of the church, the Beginning, and the Firstborn from the dead.

Christ is the **ke f a l h** of the church (v. 18). Existing as the Head (**es t in h ke f a l h**), Christ alone is the Leader of the church. In the last decade the meaning of the term **ke f a l h** has received much attention in theological discussion. Evangelical feminists have adopted an understanding of the term that differs from the ordinary, historic view. The meaning of "head" as authority or leader challenges their attempt to establish egalitarian thought in the church and home and to bring about the obliteration of gender-specific roles. They have adopted a meaning for **ke f a l h** which, Bedale argued, means "source or origin."²² However, their position would destroy God's design in which He created men and women to complement each other. The evangelical feminists also attack (often unknowingly) the biblical teaching on the lordship of Christ which is found

²⁰ Handley C. G. Moule, *Colossians and Philemon Studies* (London: Pickering & Inglis, n.d.), 78.

²¹ Eadie, *Colossians*, 62.

²² Stephen Bedale, "The Meaning of **ke f a l h** in the Pauline Epistles," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 5 n.s. (1954): 211-15.

in the word **ke f a l h**. Grudem has responded with a thorough and definitive analysis²³ and a view that is attested by all standard Greek lexica,²⁴ including the semantic studies of Nida and Loew.²⁵ The evidence, as Grudem demonstrates, overwhelmingly indicates that **ke f a l h** in the New Testament means "leader or one in authority," not "source." Accordingly Christ is the authoritative Leader of the churches (Col. 1:18). True, He originated the church, but that idea does not seem to fit the context. His body, the church, is helpless without His authoritative direction. His leadership is not burdensome or arbitrary; it is liberating and with purpose (1 Cor. 11:3).²⁶

Christ is the **a r x h** (v. 18). As "the beginning" (**h a r x h**) Christ was the origin of creation. Also by His death on the cross He established a new beginning, the beginning of redemption for mankind. His death and resurrection signaled the dawning of an age in which individuals could enjoy a closer, more personal relationship to Him than ever before.²⁷ Some teach the heresy that this title of Christ means He had a temporal beginning. But if that were so, He would also have an end, for Revelation 21:6 refers to Him as "the beginning and the end." If Christ were only a created being, how could He be both first and last?²⁸

Christ is the **prwt ot okoj** from the dead (v. 18). As "the first-born [**prwt ot okoj**] from the dead," Jesus Christ possesses authority and dominion over yet another aspect of this world. As "the first-born of all creation" (v. 15), He is supreme over the created world and as "the first-born from the dead," He is supreme over death. Having conquered death by His resurrection, He now holds "the keys of death" (Rev. 1:18). Paul pointed out the purpose of all this—that

²³ Wayne Grudem, "The Meaning of **ke f a l h**: A Response to Recent Studies," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1991), 425-68. Also see Grudem's article, "Does Kephale (Head) Mean 'Source' or 'Authority Over' in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples," *Trinity Journal* 6 NS (1985): 38-59. Fitzmyer further substantiated Grudem's study (Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "Another Look at **KEF AL H** in I Corinthians 11:3," *New Testament Studies* 35 [October 1989]: 503-11).

²⁴ Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book, 1889), 345; Hermann Cremer, *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895), 354; Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 431.

²⁵ Eugene Nida and Johannes P. Loew, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 1 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 739.

²⁶ H. Wayne House, *The Role of Women in Ministry Today* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 158.

²⁷ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 71.

²⁸ Gromacki, *Stand Perfect in Wisdom*, 68.

Christ would have first place in everything" (Col. 1:18). In the church, in creation, in salvation, and even in death, Christ holds the title and privileges of the Firstborn. He is preeminent over all.

All **plhrwma** of salvation dwells in Christ (v. 19). Paul wrote, "For in Him all the fulness [**pan to plhrwma**] of God was pleased to dwell" (RSV). One view on the meaning of this verse is that it affirms the deity of Christ, with the understanding that **pan to plhrwma** refers to Christ as the One who represents all that God is.²⁹ A second view is that **plhrwma** speaks of intermediary beings between God and man. The second-century school of Valentinius used the word **plhrwma** to describe such divine entities or emanations.³⁰ In this view Christ encompasses and/or replaces all these emanations. Though Gnosticism had not yet become part of the Colossian heresy, this idea of emanations could have germinated in Colosse before Gnosticism took root as a full-orbed system.

A third view is that **plhrwma** refers not to essence but to redemptive power. Following verse 18, which affirms Christ's victory over death, verse 19 may suggest that salvific power is what dwells in Christ. This seems most plausible, because it inherently includes the idea of the deity of Christ, and yet, flowing from the thought in verse 18, it points to Christ as Redeemer. God the Father was pleased to have all redemptive power dwelling in Christ.

Christ is the agent for and goal for reconciliation (v. 20). The last verse of this second strophe ends on a redemptive note also, thus providing additional evidence for the view suggested for verse 19. "And through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross."

Apokatastasi ("to reconcile") means to exchange hostility for friendship.³¹ The prefix *drro* conveys the idea of complete reconciliation.³² God's reconciling of man to Himself is necessary because of the enmity of sinners toward God in their natural mind (Rom. 5:8-11). In what sense, however, does Christ reconcile "all things" (**ta panta**) to Himself? If all things are reconciled by the blood of the Cross, does this teach universal salvation? Either the Bible is in error in numerous places or universal salvation is not what is intended in Colossians 1:20. The reconciliation in this verse points instead to

²⁹ C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 70.

³⁰ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 73.

³¹ Rienecker and Rogers, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, 568.

³² S. Lewis Johnson, "From Enmity to Amity," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 119 (April-June 1962): 143.

the Great White Throne Judgment at the end of the millenium when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father (Phil. 2:10; cf. Rom. 14:11). Through Christ all intelligent beings—both obedient and disobedient, and both human (those "on earth") and angelic (those "in heaven")-- will acknowledge the sovereignty of God.³³

Also a distinction must be made between reconciliation and salvation. Reconciliation removes the barrier between God and man and opens the potential for a new type of relationship between the two,³⁴ All redeemed and unredeemed will acknowledge His sovereignty, and in that sense there will be reconciliation. But this does not mean the unredeemed will be given salvation. The price paid to make possible this peace is "the blood of His cross" (Col. 1:20). Jesus' vicarious death is the means of this peace.

The Christ-hymn of Colossians 1:15-20 is a powerful statement about the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Christ's supremacy is seen at every turn. The first portion focuses on His preeminent role in creation, while the second emphasizes His work as Redeemer. To any Christian, in Colosse then or elsewhere today, who may have been or is confused about Christ's role in the world, these six verses testify to Christ's absolute authority, which is not to be shared with any person, angel, or demon.

Christ as the Answer to All the Colossians' Concerns

In Colossians 2:9-15 Paul specifically answered the heresy present in the Colossian church. Christ is presented as the antidote to the philosophy and empty deceit denounced in 2:8. Three truths are included: All the fulness of deity dwells in Christ, believers are complete in Christ, and He is the authority over all angelic beings.

ALL THE PLHRWMA OF DEITY DWELLS IN CHRIST (2:9)

Colossians 2:9 includes the most concise statement in the Scriptures about the hypostatic union of the God-man: "For in Him all the fulness [**plhrwma**] of Deity dwells in bodily form." In the discussion of 1:19 it was suggested that "fulness" there referred to all redemptive power being in Christ. Here in 2:9 "fulness" clearly and strongly affirms His deity. Possessing full "deity" (**qeot ht oj**, a strong term), the Son has complete equality of essence with the Father and the Holy Spirit. This **qeot ht oj** dwells (**ka t oikei**) permanently in Christ.

³³ Gleason L. Archer, *The Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 409.

³⁴ Kent, *Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Colossians and Philemon*, 51.

Kat oi kei, an intensive form of **oi kei**, is a timeless present tense, indicating continual dwelling.³⁵

In Christ deity dwells continually "in bodily form" (**s wma t ikwj**). This adverb must have caused consternation to those ascetics in Colosse who had relegated the body to a lower realm, surely not to be tampered with by anything spiritual, much less by the one true God. Five views on the meaning of **s wma t ikwj** have been suggested: (1) organized body, organic unity, suggesting that the fulness of the Godhead is centralized in Christ, not scattered; (2) essence, a view held by Calvin and some Greek church fathers; (3) actuality, grounded in concrete reality (Augustine's view); (4) fulness expressed corporately in His body, the church; and (5) the Incarnation, in which Christ assumed bodily form.

As Moule concludes, views three and five are most likely intended here by **s wma t ikwj**.³⁶ Johnson holds basically the same view, that Christ's human form is definitely in mind here, but adds that Christ's humanity after the ascension is now glorified.³⁷

In the Incarnation, Jesus was fully God ("the fulness of Deity") and fully human. Neither His deity nor His humanity was at the expense of the other. His humanity was required in order for His work on the Cross to be sufficient for the atonement of humanity's sins. The vicariousness of the atonement was made possible because He fully identified with His creation. If this aspect of Christ's Person differed in essence from that of mankind, then His ability as the believers' High Priest to "sympathize with our weaknesses" (Heb. 4:15) carries much less force and comfort.

THE CHRISTIAN IS COMPLETE IN CHRIST (2:10-14)

After affirming the Person of Christ (2:9), Paul then addressed the Christian's relationship to Christ by using an interesting play on words. Christ possesses "fulness of Deity," and Christians have their fulness of life in Him ("in Him you have been made complete"). They are identified with Him who is "the head over all rule and authority." The perfect periphrastic phrase **es t e . . . pep- I hr wmenoi** ("been made complete," literally "are made full") accents the believers' completeness in their union with Christ.³⁸ In light of the Colossian errorists' view that identification with Christ is not sufficient for the Christian life, Paul's words have a special impact.

³⁵ Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 90.

³⁶ C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*, 92-93.

³⁷ S. Lewis Johnson, "Beware of Philosophy," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 119 (October—December 1962): 310.

³⁸ Rienecker and Rogers, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, 573.

In verses 11-12 Paul described God's purpose and plan for believers, those who are identified with His fulness. "In Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead."

In two analogies Paul showed the extent and nature of the believer's identification with Christ. The first is circumcision (v. 11), which held great meaning to those familiar with the Mosaic Law, for it was a seal of membership among the covenant people of the Old Testament.³⁹ To have been "circumcised with a circumcision made without hands" points to the conversion experience of the Colossians.⁴⁰ It also symbolized the stripping off, "in the removal of" (**a pekdu ei**), or more literally, "putting off of" the old self ("the body of the flesh") and the cleansing of oneself for a new relationship. This idea is also expressed in Romans 6:6, which mentions the crucifying of the old (unregenerate) self, with the result that believers partake of the nature of Christ.⁴¹

The second analogy Paul used is baptism. Being baptized with Christ is similar to the symbolism of circumcision. Having put off the old self, they were then identified with Christ in a new life. Water baptism was a public display of the change that had taken place in the inner man. Immersion depicts the believer's having died with Christ, and emerging from the water pictures being "raised up with Christ" in salvation to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4).⁴²

In Colossians 2:13-15 Paul wrote of the "transgressions" accrued by mankind and stated that Christ's death on the cross "cancelled the written bond, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; He took it away, nailing it to the cross" (v. 14, NIV). The "written bond with its regulations" that is, its legal demands, refers to the Mosaic Law, which exposed sin, thereby crying out for recompense or satisfaction. As Johnson noted, the word **xairo-raqon** ("written bond") was used "in papyrus documents for a certificate of indebtedness, something like our IOU."⁴³ Since no one could

³⁹ H. M. S. Carson, *Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 66.

⁴⁰ S. Lewis Johnson Jr., "The Complete Sufficiency of Union with Christ," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 120 (January—March 1963): 15.

⁴¹ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 104.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴³ Johnson, "The Complete Sufficiency of Union with Christ," 15.

fulfill the Law, this "bond" was the sinner's enemy.⁴⁴ It may be, as some have suggested, however, that **x eirogra qon** refers not to the Law but to God's indictments against sinners in the heavenly court. This view originated from an anonymous Jewish apocalyptic writer in the first century B.C., who wrote of an accusing angel writing down the offenses of sinners so that they need to have their transgressions blotted out (**ec a leiy a j**).⁴⁵ Christ's death at the cross was necessary to satisfy these indictments. The permanence of the believer's new relationship between God and man through the Cross is indicated by **hrken** ("has taken [it] out of the way"). Being in the perfect tense, it emphasizes the abiding result of His having put away this bond; it is still put away, never to separate man and God again.⁴⁶

CHRIST IS THE AUTHORITY OVER ALL ANGELIC BEINGS (2:15)

The tendency of the early Christians in Colosse to be enamored with angels is understandable in view of the important place of angels in the Old Testament and Judaism, especially mystic Judaism. Moreover, such beings were popular in Greek religion. Two verses in Colossians speak of Christ's relationship to these spiritual beings, namely 1:16, already discussed, and 2:15. In the first of these verses Paul wrote that Christ created all things, including the angelic hosts ("whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities"). In 2:15, however, Paul wrote that Christ triumphed over these created hosts at the cross: "When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him."

Comparing translations of the terms **arxaj** and **ezous iaj** shows the various ways these are understood: "principalities and powers" (NKJV), "sovereignities and powers" (Jerusalem Bible), "angelic rulers and powers" (Moffatt), "Satan's power" (Living Bible), "rulers and authorities" (NASB), and "powers and authorities" (NIV). The Latin church fathers said these were evil powers which "could exercise their tyranny over man" and his body, which therefore was to be put off. This possibility seems remote in light of the context. Are these rulers and authorities human agents or supernatural forces, and if they are the latter do they refer only to evil angels or as in 1:16 to all angels, both good and evil? Ephesians 6:12 states that believers

⁴⁴ Carson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 69.

⁴⁵ Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 124.

⁴⁶ Curtis Vaughan, "Colossians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 11:201.

battle not with flesh and blood, but with **arxaj** and **ecous iaj** ("rulers" and "powers"). This contrast between the physical and the spiritual suggests that **arxaj** and **ezous iaj** are angels, not humans. Paul's reference to "worship of angels" (2:18) and the nature of the heresy in Colosse also point to their being angels.

Are the angels that were "disarmed" (literally, "stripped off"⁴⁷) good or evil or both? A common view is that they are evil angels. "Christ divested Himself at the cross of the evil powers which had struggled with Him so strongly throughout His ministry in attempts to force Him to abandon the pathway of the cross."⁴⁸ Others suggest that Christ was stripping good angels of their position as mediators of the Law (Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2). This interpretation fits with the Jewish preoccupation with angelic mediation and reverence, which distracted believers from Christ, the true object of the Christian's worship. Paul's emphasis in Colossians 2:8-10 on Christ's deity bolsters this view. However, in Colossians 2:15 perhaps both good and evil angels are included in the "rulers and authorities," since the point of verses 9-15 is the supremacy of Christ and His work of redemption and the fact that nothing earthly or heavenly was unaffected by His work on the cross. If evil angels (demons) are included in verse 15, then Christ's control over all His foes is a comfort to God's people in spiritual warfare against demonic forces. In addition to giving this comfort, verse 15 probably also points up the centrality of Christ, who is the only way to God.

Comparison of Pauline Christology in Colossians with the Johannine View of Christ as Creator

Paul's statements about Christ as Creator are strikingly similar to some of the Apostle John's writings. In John 1:1, 14 Christ is the **logoj**, a term well known to Greek philosophers of the day. The **logoj** of the secular Greek world meant world principle, ultimate reality, the source of all wisdom.⁴⁹ So as John began his letter, he used a term familiar to his readers, but he related it to Christ. In John's prologue he affirmed Christ's preexistence and deity, as did Paul in Colossians. Christ's work as Creator is similar in John and Colossians. "All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being" (John 1:3). "For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible

⁴⁷ O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 127.

⁴⁸ Johnson, "The Complete Sufficiency of Union with Christ," 20.

⁴⁹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 115.

and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created by Him and for Him" (Col. 1:16).

John and Paul were communicating to their respective audiences that Jesus Christ is God, equal in essence to the Father, and is the Creator, and therefore is worthy of worship and admiration. This was a concept difficult for polytheistic Greeks to accept, and it also shook the foundations of monotheistic Judaism. For a person to claim equality with the Yahweh of the Old Testament was considered blasphemy, which called for punishment by death. In the end, the Jews' refusal to acknowledge Christ as the Messiah, equal with God the Father, led to Jesus' death on the cross.

Even the Lord's disciples had a difficult time grasping the concept of who Christ is. As His earthly ministry was coming to an end, Philip asked Him for a glimpse of the Father (John 14:3). He wanted to see God. Jesus answered, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how do you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (v. 9). Similarly the Colossian Christians read that Jesus is the **eikwn** of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). Both John 14:9 and Colossians 1:15 focus on Jesus Christ as truly God, coexisting with the Father from eternity past. Anything that would dilute this doctrine detracts from and misrepresents Christ's Person and work.

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