

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

Christ, Head and Source Colossians 1:18-20

Intro: After Paul's initial greeting to the Colossian believers, he declares that he's been interceding to the Father for them regularly and then he begins to describe to them exactly how and, more importantly, what he's been praying for on their behalf. As he lists off the wonderful blessings that are readily available to all believers, not just Colossian, Paul eventually comes to a discussion of the redemption and forgiveness that is found in Christ. This subject then elicits a joyful hymn of praise from Paul that focuses on the supremacy of Christ. This isn't just an exclamation of joy; it constitutes the greatest revelation of theology about Jesus Christ in the entire NT. While it is a beautiful passage, it refutes every false doctrine or religious concept that attempts to make Jesus Christ less than He truly is.

If this were a hymn, then our last study would be considered the first stanza (15-17). The theme of this section focuses on Christ as source of all creation, victor of all powers, and Lord over all of God's created order. These verses praise Jesus as being not just the entire sphere of creation but also the preserver and controller of creation and ultimately, He is creation's aim – everything will find its conclusion in Him. Every part of the created cosmos, both visible and invisible, was created in Him, by Him and for Him. But Paul's not satisfied to exalt in heavenly, and spiritually abstract terms only. He continues his praise of Jesus by bringing this cosmic Christ down to earth where blood flows from a body strung up on a cross. (18-20)

18- The truth in this section, the 2nd stanza of Paul's hymn (as it were) is but the logical progression of the truth that was revealed in the 1st stanza. Where before, Christ was seen as the Lord over all of God's created order; here, He is also seen as Lord over God's new order – the church – where sinners are brought into salvation and God's family. Just as every part of the universe was created in, by and for Christ; so every part will be touched by His reconciling work on the cross. And as glorious as everything that Paul speaks of here is, it's not just pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye; it has real meaning for all believers in this life too. Christ's universal supremacy, which encompasses the entire cosmos, supports and backs up the status and power of those who have been brought into His kingdom.

As Christians, we know the supreme Creator and Sustainer of all things as the crucified and resurrected Lord. Paul anchors Christ's universal supremacy within salvation history and in His Lordship over the church. In Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible God entered into the plane of human existence in order to reconcile all things in heaven and on earth by means of His humiliating death. Christ is now seen in Paul's day, establishing His Lordship in house churches, prison cells and families, as well as in the furthest reaches of the heavens. The universal supremacy of Christ parallels the universal reach of the gospel seen in v6 and it assures every believer of the sufficiency of Christ, both in this life and in the life to come. In our text, Christ also reveals more of the ultimate goals of this invisible God.

This 2nd stanza begins by declaring Christ as the head of the body. It was not uncommon for philosophers at that time to compare the cosmos to a body, but Paul flips the script and applies the metaphor to the church. What this means is, if Christ is the head of the church, then the destinies of creation and the church are bound together and that God's purposes for all creation are conceived and carried out within the congregational life of the church. Our regular times of coming together, as wonderful and encouraging as they may be, serves a greater eternal purpose. The church doesn't exist simply to meet the needs of its members or to ensure its own survival; it exists to fulfill the redemptive purposes of Christ, its head. As such, the church should naturally reflect the image of the divinely ordered universe as it bears fruit all over the world through its preaching of the gospel and living worthily of Christ.

But, Paul's primary focus here is not on the church itself but on Christ, its head. When used as a metaphor in Greek, the term head generally refers to primacy of place, such as a leader or ruler. But, less commonly. It can also mean source or origin, the one from which something flows or proceeds such as the headwaters of a river. Paul likely has both ideas in mind as he describes Christ as the head; certainly both ideas appear in the rest of v18. Paul's use of the terms head, beginning and firstborn all derive from the same root word in Hebrew. Each of them affirms Christ's sovereignty over the new creation and the old. Christ is both supreme over the church and the source of its life. In the image of a living body, the head not only directs and governs the body, it gives life and strength.

Paul goes on to call Christ the beginning, which tells us that Jesus Christ has priority in time as far as His church is concerned. The term beginning can also be translated as originator. Every Christian is a member of this spiritual body and Jesus Christ is the Head. The church not only has its origin in Him, it has its very operation in Him. As the Head of the church, Jesus Christ supplies it with life through His Holy Spirit. He gives gifts to all believers and then places these gifted people in His church that they might serve Him where they are needed.

As members of the body, no believer on earth can be the head of the church. This position is reserved exclusively for Jesus Christ. Various religious leaders may have founded individual churches or denominations but only Christ is the Founder and Originator of the church that is His body. This church is composed of all true believers and it was born on Pentecost. It was then that the Holy Spirit came and baptized the believers into one spiritual body. But, the fact that there is one body in this world ([Eph 4:4](#)) does not eliminate or even minimize the need for local bodies of believers. No single Christian has the capacity to minister to the whole church but every believer can strengthen and build up the whole church by ministering to, for and with God's people in the local assembly.

Christ is also referred to as the firstborn from the dead. Just like the statement firstborn over all creation, Paul is not implying that Jesus was the first to be raised from the dead. There were a few individuals that experienced this prior to His resurrection: the son of the widow of Nain ([Lk 7](#)), Lazarus ([Jn 11](#)). There was even a fellow who died in the OT and when his friends went to bury him, they saw a band of raiders heading their way so they just tossed him into the sepulchre of Elisha. Hey, with friends like that... We may badmouth their actions but their friend was already dead and they were just trying to ensure that they didn't join him in his unfortunate and irreversible condition. But, as soon as he touched the bones of Elisha, the Bible says he revived and stood on his feet ([II Kings 13:21](#)).

While each of these events are miraculous and require the supernatural power of God, they still differ greatly from the resurrection of Christ. In each instance, these people were raised from the dead only to face death again at a later date. But, when Jesus was resurrected, He was raised in a new, glorified body and raised victorious over death, never to experience it again. As such, He's truly the firstborn. Just as Christ is prior to creation, He's also

prior to the church. In fact, the church came into being as a result of His resurrection. He rose from the dead and called it into being. He is its only builder, its constant preserver and its present Lord.

Apparently, the Colossians were somehow doubting the sufficiency of Christ either for their salvation or for spiritual enlightenment and experience. Paul's showing them that no other resources in creation can compare with the One who is the origin and goal of both the original creation and the new creation. So, if the Colossians were looking for any greater spiritual experience or any further degree of perfection, it must only be found in Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, while Christ's resurrection was the source of life for the church, it is also the source of new life for those who believe on Him. Paul himself became a Christian as a result of a vision of the risen Christ. Jesus wasn't the first person raised from the dead but He is the most important of all who have been raised for without His resurrection, there could be no resurrection for others. Paul said as much in [1 Cor 15:20](#), "But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." His resurrection is the first event in a sequence that opens new possibilities for others to follow. As He said in [John 14:19](#), because I live, you will live also.

It may seem odd that Paul uses the word born in connection with death, for the 2 concepts seem opposed to each other. But the picture here is that the tomb Jesus was buried in was actually a womb from which He came forth in victory, for death could not hold Him. The Son was begotten in resurrection glory ([Ps 2:7](#), [Acts 13:33](#)). But, the goal of the resurrection wasn't just to give believers the hope that they might also defeat death. The Father is not satisfied for Christ to be head only over a small band of devoted followers. The goal expressed at the end of v18 is far more comprehensive: Christ is firstborn from the dead so that in all things He may have the preeminence.

The word preeminence is used nowhere else in the NT and, as it is related to the word for firstborn, it magnifies the unique position of Christ. But it also poses a paradox. Doesn't Christ already have supremacy as the firstborn over all creation ([15b](#))? The apparent discrepancy is the result of sin. Christ has always been supreme over creation but that same creation is now out of harmony, fallen, disorder and fractured because of sin. Although Jesus was always Lord over creation by right, He needed to become Lord over creation

in reality, in fact; and He did this by defeating sin and death by His resurrection. So it's not just believers but all creation awaits the final consummation, when it will be drawn into complete harmony with the Father. Christ's death and resurrection were all part of the divine purpose to accomplish this end. But in the meantime, Jesus Christ exercises His worldwide rule within His body – the church.

19- Paul now takes a giant step forward as he declares that all fullness dwells in Jesus Christ. The Greek manuscript of v**19** doesn't identify of what this fullness actually consists but most English translations agree that it is the fullness of God Himself, as will be explicitly stated in **2:9**. The Greek word for fullness is *pleroma*. It was actually a technical term used by the gnostic false teachers. They used it to refer to the sum total of all the divine power and attributes. Since it was one of their favorite words, Paul uses it some 8 times in this letter. He was determined to meet these false teachers on their own ground and use their vocabulary against them.

This fullness is in fact the totality of the nature and character of God. Just as Christ is the image of the invisible God, so too does the fullness of God dwell within Him. Jesus is the full embodiment of God, which is just another way of saying that Jesus Christ is God. Again, Paul is driving home the sufficiency of Christ. God has nothing to offer the Colossians, or anyone else, that is not already found in Christ because the fullness of God Himself is in Christ. There is no way that anything can be added to Christ, because there's nothing that's not already in Him.

The word dwell is also important. It means much more than just to reside temporarily. This form of the Greek verb means to be at home permanently. Paul's use of this verb indicates that this fullness wasn't something added to Christ's Being that was not natural to Him, but that it was part of His essential Being, part of His very constitution and it was that permanently, from eternity past into eternity future. Paul is emphasizing yet again that Jesus wasn't just temporarily God, He was God permanently.

This verse also declares that it pleased the Father for this fullness to dwell in Christ. This echoes OT descriptions of God dwelling in the temple. **Ps 68:16** says God desires (is pleased) to dwell in it. In the NT, Christ replaces the temple as the "place" where God is now pleased to dwell. All the attributes and activities of God – His Spirit, word wisdom and glory – are

revealed in Jesus. This is now where all that can be known and experienced of God is to be found. We especially see God's redemptive power in Christ. **Is 53:10** reminds us that once it pleased the Father to bruise Him; but He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities (**5a**). That wasn't some spiritual emanation from God that endured this punishment; it was God Himself in the Person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is the rationality, the creativity and the saving power of God made present and made flesh. He is the image of God (**II Cor 4:4**), the form of God (**Phil 2:6**), the radiance of God's glory and the imprint of His being (**Heb 1:30**). The NT writers were striving to express this new concept of Christ as best they could, drawing on the traditions and biblical vernacular that was available to them at the time. They were trying to express both the identity of Christ with God while still maintaining His clear distinction from God the Father which ultimately gives rise to the doctrine of the Trinity. But, this description of Christ leads us to the opening of **vs20**, where His role in salvation is seen as similar to His role in creation.

20- This beautiful passage is critical to understanding the ultimate goal of creation and Christ's role in accomplishing it but, in lieu of serious consideration, it can be just as confusing as it is profound. Just as in the beginning, God created everything through Christ; so too, in the end, God will reconcile all things through Christ. Christ's majesty is rooted in God's love and it is shown in the earthly, historical reality of the cross. Christianity wasn't founded on some mystical salvation drama, as was true of many of the other mystical religions of Paul's day. Agonizing suffering in history achieved our redemption.

The death of an obscure Jew on a seemingly God-forsaken hill in a backwater town of the Roman Empire attracted no attention from the historians of the era, but it was the singular event that reconciles heaven and earth. The world may be corrupted, disordered and ravaged by sin, but God still loves it and intends for it to fulfill its destiny in Christ. Sin has defaced Christ's work in creation but Jesus came to undo the consequences of sin and to bring order into a universe that is out of harmony with God.

The grim reference to Christ's blood and cross bring us down from the lofty heights of fullness and preeminence to the squalid depths of human pain and suffering. These 2 words combine to express cost and violence. Blood

refers to death by violence; the cross refers to humility and shame. The Head of the church is the One who was shamefully crucified. Paul also uses blood to refer to Christ's atoning sacrifice. The cross establishes the possibility of a new relationship between God and humanity. It overcomes the consequences of the rupture of sin – estrangement from God, from other humans and from created things. This peace Christ's sacrifice brings can only be found in His body. It is not yet an accomplished fact with in the cosmos, but God's purpose, means and manner of making peace has already been established

Still, we must guard against the mistaken belief that this implies a doctrine of universal salvation. Did Paul believe the whole universe would automatically be saved? The dedication of his life to preaching the gospel and the intensity of his evangelism efforts at the expense of his health, freedom and eventually his life would suggest otherwise. Granted, the appearance of reconciliation in most of the NT refers to the restoration of fellowship between God and sinners but that's not the gist of its use here. Here, the term is used to indicate the natural conclusion of all things.

The pacification of all things, human and nonhuman, doesn't mean the enemies of God are won over in obedience to Him. Paul's not referring to a peace among equals but rather, a peace that's forcefully brought about by a triumphant victor. In his letter to the [Philippians \(2:10-11\)](#), when Paul promises that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow and...every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, he means that every being, in heaven, on earth and under the earth, will finally acknowledge Who is the true Lord of the universe. They'll either do it with rejoicing and with praise in their hearts or they'll do it through clenched teeth and scowling faces. Either way, it will be done by all.

Reconciliation will take place but a joyful reconciliation is a 2-sided affair. The creation will be renewed and there will be a place for it for all, some in the New Jerusalem and some in sheol (or hell). The glorious destination won't come automatically, it must be taken up and accepted, the gospel still needs to be preached and God's work in Christ must be made our own.

We can take an illustration of this from our own world history. The unconditional surrender of the Axis powers in WWII brought a cessation to the hostilities of war, but that wasn't the end of it. The war crimes tribunal

still awaited all those who had perpetrated evil on the civilian populations of Europe and Asia. This reconciliation in Christ will be no different. The hostilities will be brought to their conclusion but there will still be a reckoning for all who rejected the work of Christ on the cross and His free gift of salvation.

The fullness is in Jesus Christ. It's not in a church, not in a priesthood, not in a building, not in a sacrament, not in the saints, not in a method or program but in Jesus Himself. This fullness is in Jesus as a distribution point – so those who want more of God and all that He is can find it in Jesus Christ. 😊