

We Believe – The Work of Christ

Colossians 1:15-23

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



Last Sunday, Pastor Taylor walked us through the “Christ Hymn” in Colossians. He did a wonderful job in helping us to see the beauty of the person of Jesus in this extraordinary passage of Scripture. This week, we are back in the “Christ Hymn” to hear what Paul has to say about the work of Christ. Taylor put before us one of life’s most central questions, “Who is Jesus?” Paul tells us all about Jesus: he is creator, sovereign, supreme, and the one who defeated death. In fact, in the Gospels, Jesus asks the question of himself, saying to others, “Who do you say that I am?” This question moves us from an academic or historical reflection to a matter of personal response and conviction. We hear the question phrased this way, “Who is Jesus to you, to me?” So, who do you say that he is?

Famously, we might think of answering this question along the lines of the trilemma, that Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic, or that he is Lord. C.S. Lewis might be the name we think of when we think of the “Liar, lunatic, or Lord” quote. Yes, Lewis employed that argument in *Mere Christianity*, but it was not his original idea.¹ It was **John Duncan (1796-1870) who formulated what he called a “trilemma.”** This is that **Christ either [1] deceived mankind by conscious fraud, or [2] He was Himself deluded and self-deceived, or [3] He was Divine. There is no getting out of this trilemma. It is inexorable.**² One more author prior to Lewis expressed this same idea. In 1936, Watchman Nee made a similar argument in his book, *Normal Christian Faith*. A person who claims to be God must belong to one of three categories: Liar, Lunatic, or God.³

All three of these theologians and scholars are on to something; these really are the only options for the answer to the question, “Who is Jesus to me?” This question is so profoundly important because if Jesus really is who he says that he is, which Paul thought he was, then **Jesus has the power to change the trajectory of my life.** If he is Lord over all, including death itself, then he is the one who can truly give me new life. If he is the creator who has spoken everything into existence (from nothing – ex nihilo), then he is the one who can reorder and restore the broken creation experience I’m living in now. And if he is God incarnate, that means that he is not indifferent or distant to my suffering, pain, or problems. Instead, it means that he is a personal God who actually sees me, knows me, and cares for me. If all of this is true, I must take seriously the reality that **Jesus has the power to change the trajectory of my life.**

¹ Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*. (London: Collins, 1952.) 55-56.

² John Duncan - In *Colloquia Peripatetica* (p. 109) 1859-1860

³ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/is-c-s-lewiss-liar-lord-or-lunatic-argument-unsound/>

1. Representative and Substitute

- a. **Preeminent & Firstborn** – Positional, not biological.
 - i. Taylor gave us this helpful framework for thinking about the statements of Paul in regard to Jesus in this section.
 - 1. Paul is trying to drive home a point to the Colossian believers about who Jesus is in time and rank, not in matters of biology. It would be silly for Paul to try to connect that Jesus is both creator and the first thing that was made in creation. That is faulty logic at its best. Or to say that Jesus was the first person who came back from the dead, when Jesus himself brought Lazarus back from the dead!
 - 2. What Paul is doing here is explain that Jesus precedes everything because he is the creator. And that Jesus, unlike every other person in Biblical history, has received a fully glorified body in his victorious resurrection.
 - a. We will one day also receive glorified physical bodies, but we wait on that till Jesus returns (in his glorified body, btw).
 - ii. There were a few issues at play in the Colossian church, but primary among them was false teaching that was becoming increasingly widespread.
 - 1. They were a young church in terms of having been recently planted and were young in their faith.
 - 2. False teachers came in and taught something along the lines that Jesus was a good place to start, but they needed to move on to something more. This is why Paul goes on to address angel worship in chapter two. (cf. 2:18)
 - a. **What are the ways that we can easily buy into this idea?**
 - i. **Jesus is a really good place to begin, but then we need this thing or that thing to really make our lives complete?**
 - ii. **Or maybe this way, I've the Jesus thing settled, now I need to focus on building or preparing or cultivating these other things.**
- b. **What we believe about Jesus: EFCA SOF Article #5**
 - i. **"We believe that Jesus Christ, as our representative and substitute, shed His blood on the cross as the perfect, all-sufficient sacrifice for our sins. His atoning death and victorious resurrection constitute the only ground for salvation."**
 - ii. Let's focus for a second on two words, representative and substitute.
- c. **Representative – Where Adam failed, we needed one who would succeed.**
 - i. Jesus in his incarnation and humanity successfully walked the road that Adam failed. He is in this way our new representative.
 - ii. Regarding the representative role of kingship in Israel, the law of Moses demanded that the king of Israel be chosen "from among your fellow Israelites" (Deut. 17:15), and that his subjects could be said to have a share in him (cf. 2 Sam. 20:1). The king could represent the people, either bringing them God's blessing or involving them in God's curse (cf. 2 Sam. 24:1–25). Jesus as Israel's Messiah identifies himself with his people (cf., e.g., Matt. 3:13–15) and dies as their King (cf. Matt. 27:37). In this way he saves "his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21).⁴
 - iii. Finally, just as Paul could speak of our solidarity with Adam as our representative head, so it is with Christ (cf. Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:22). Each acts in a way that affects those bound up with them. In our union with Adam by nature, his sin brings death to us; in our

⁴ Evangelical Free Church of America, *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America*, 2nd Edition (Minneapolis, MN: Free Church Publications; NextStep Resources, 2022), 103.

union with Christ by faith, his obedience brings us righteousness and life. These two are the great representative figures of the human race.⁵

- d. **Substitute – Our rebellion against God wasn’t momentary or incidental; it was cosmic, complete, and eternal. The only way to make right this eternal wrong was by one who had eternal power.**
 - i. **This is what makes God’s promise in Gen. 3:15 so crucial.** God knew this from the moment of the fall and promised to make it happen.
 - ii. Jesus, the Righteous One, died in the place of the unrighteous, paying the penalty that they deserved, thus satisfying God’s justice. God’s wrath is thereby appeased, reconciling sinners to a holy God, such that his forgiveness does not compromise his holiness. This process is God-initiated, and is, from beginning to end, an expression of God’s love and grace.⁶
 - 1. **In our modern Western world, we think in individualistic terms which often minimize real social solidarities such as nation, tribe and family.** Two institutions in Israel demanded such solidarity of the leader as the representative of his people: the role of high priest and of king. These show us how the actions of one can affect the many.⁷
 - iii. v. 20 - If “all things,” in heaven and on earth, were created through him (v. 16), and yet “all things”—“whether the things on earth or those in heaven”—have to be reconciled to God through him, it follows that all things have been estranged from their Creator.⁸
 - 1. This is what makes Paul’s statement about making peace by his blood so powerful.

2. Death and Resurrection

- a. **Atonement – A debt paid completely.**
 - i. **“Making peace by the blood of the cross.”**
 - 1. The universe has been involved in conflict with its Creator, and needs to be reconciled to him: the conflict must be replaced by peace. This peace has been made through Christ, by the shedding of his life-blood on the cross.⁹
 - 2. What, then, is the scope of this new creation? Because humanity plays the key role in the ordering of God’s world, human reconciliation will lead to the restoration of creation, just as human sin led to creation’s fall (compare Rom. 8:19ff.).¹⁰
 - ii. **What is the atonement?**

⁵ Evangelical Free Church of America, *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America*, 2nd Edition (Minneapolis, MN: Free Church Publications; NextStep Resources, 2022), 103–104.

⁶ Evangelical Free Church of America, *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America*, 2nd Edition (Minneapolis, MN: Free Church Publications; NextStep Resources, 2022), 97.

⁷ Evangelical Free Church of America, *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America*, 2nd Edition (Minneapolis, MN: Free Church Publications; NextStep Resources, 2022), 103.

⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 74.

⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 74–75.

¹⁰ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 81.

1. *Atonement* refers to God’s act of dealing with the primary human problem, sin. Both OT and NT affirm that sin has broken the relationship between God and humankind. According to Christian theology, God accomplished the way of restoration through Christ’s death.¹¹
 - a. One way of understanding the atonement comes from the marketplace, and it pictures our salvation in terms of a redemption in which we are bought out of our slavery to sin. This liberation comes at a great cost. We were captives to sin’s power and under its merciless control, but by his death, Jesus ransoms us, buying us back with his precious blood. We have been, at the same time, set free from the devil’s power and set under God’s rule, for he is now our new Master.¹²
2. **Penal substitution—Christ stood in the legal place of sinners, bearing the just punishment due us because we transgressed God’s laws.**¹³
 - a. The most prominent and promising understanding of atonement builds upon the Bible’s forensic (or legal) language of God as righteous Judge. Though found throughout Christian history, this view was developed most clearly by Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) in his book *Why Did God Become Man?* He stressed the ideas of satisfaction and vicarious sacrifice. Essentially Anselm contended that moral offense entails a moral debt which must be paid. Therefore, those who sin against God owe him either their own punishment or some restitution or satisfaction for their transgression of his law. God’s justice demands such payment, but human beings cannot make satisfaction since they are guilty and are deserving of God’s punishment. Satisfaction can be made only by one who is innocent, so God himself makes this possible by the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The God-man Jesus Christ is under no obligation to die, since he is sinless, but he willingly offers himself as the satisfaction for human sin. Atonement is thus seen as a payment of human debt to God by a substitute which God himself provides.¹⁴

b. Victorious resurrection – Power to save.

- i. The promise only matters if the one making the promise has the power and ability to come through on it.
 1. Someone who writes in this way wants his or her readers to stop and think. The most obvious point that the poem makes is the parallel between creation and new creation; hence the emphasis that is placed on the fact that each was accomplished by means of the same agent. **The Lord through whom you are redeemed (Paul is telling the Colossians) is none other than the one through whom you (and all the world) were created.**¹⁵

¹¹ Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 17.

¹² Evangelical Free Church of America, *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America*, 2nd Edition (Minneapolis, MN: Free Church Publications; NextStep Resources, 2022), 92.

¹³ Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 17.

¹⁴ Evangelical Free Church of America, *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America*, 2nd Edition (Minneapolis, MN: Free Church Publications; NextStep Resources, 2022), 96.

¹⁵ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 70.

- c. **Our hearts are idol factories** – What are the things that we look to with the expectation of having the power to save?
 - i. **Am I daily living in the power of the resurrection?** (v.18)
 - 1. It is to this Jesus Christ, none other, that the Colossians now belong in belonging to the church. This is the moment when, according to the careful structure of the poem, the thought moves from creation to new creation. Paul starts where the Colossians are, as members of the one world-wide people of God. If God's people are the new humanity, the metaphor of a human body is utterly appropriate to express not only mutual interdependence (as in Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12ff.) but also, as here, an organic and dependent relation to Christ himself.¹⁶
 - 2. This part of the poem refers particularly to Christ's rule over the final great enemies of mankind, sin and death. With Jesus' resurrection, the new age has dawned.¹⁷

3. Reconciliation and Peace

- a. We are reconciled to God through Jesus – We are now holy and blameless.
 - i. **“Only through God's saving work in Jesus Christ can we be rescued, reconciled and renewed.”** – This is the way that Article #3 ends in our statement of faith. It is a reminder that, as broken and fallen humanity, there is no other source of rescue than Jesus. In other words, he is our only hope!
 - 1. **This is again affirmed in our statement on the work of Christ, “His atoning death and victorious resurrection constitute the only ground for salvation.”**
 - ii. In this passage we hear these ideas over and over again from the Apostle Paul.
 - 1. Something now is in disorder that at one time was in order. Jesus has come, walked among us, died for us, and defeated death in his victorious resurrection so that it might all be put back in order.
 - iii. **The imputed righteousness of Jesus.**
 - 1. A transfer of benefit or harm from one individual to another. In theology *imputation* may be used negatively to refer to the transfer of the sin and guilt of Adam to the rest of humankind. **Positively, imputation refers to the righteousness of Christ being transferred to those who believe on him for salvation.**¹⁸
 - 2. What is now changed is that we have been given the righteousness of Jesus and with it a whole new way of living. Paul keeps pressing in to the idea of new creation here as he does in many other places.
- b. **Reconciled with God.**
 - i. From enmity to peace; the cessation of hostility in attitude or action.
 - 1. A change in relationship or attitude from enmity to peace; the cessation of hostility in attitude or action. Reconciliation is a central doctrine of Christianity. Specifically, in Christ God reconciled the sinful, hostile world to himself by

¹⁶ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 78.

¹⁷ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 78.

¹⁸ Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 65.

Christ's taking upon himself the cost of our hostility and enmity, thereby setting the world free to restored union with God (2 Cor 5:19).¹⁹

- ii. **When we experience reconciliation within human relationships, it often means that the relationship, while on much better terms, is still fundamentally changed. The hostility or conflict that once defined the relationship has passed, but the relationship moves forward in a different direction.**
 1. However, with God we experience something totally different. Our relationship with God is now made whole in Christ Jesus. Yes, we are living in the now, and there is something more ahead, but what is ahead is the fullness of what we're experiencing now. It isn't of a different kind; it is just more of the same thing without the static of sin.
- c. **We are brought into a state of shalom – what peace is and isn't.**
 - i. **Peace is wholeness.**
 1. **Shalom - The OT Hebrew word - שָׁלוֹם**
 2. **To be brought into a state of completeness or wholeness.**
 - a. This can be used as a verb, i.e., to bring Shalom (wholeness).
 - ii. **Peace isn't weakness.**
 1. Sometimes when we think of peace, we think that peace is just an excuse for weakness. However, that couldn't be further from the truth. The most peaceful people that we know are some of the strongest and most secure people. Just consider the example of Jesus. The strength that it took to not retaliate when he was being wrongly accused, arrested, and beaten was significant!
 2. As believers, the strength to be peaceful people doesn't come from within; it comes from the Holy Spirit. This is a significantly different perspective from the world around us.
 - iii. **Peace requires self-control.**
 1. Building on the idea of peace and strength, one visible reality of this is self-control. What was going on in Corinth was the absolute lack of self-control.
 2. Peaceful people are self-controlled people. They have thoughts, opinions, and perspectives, but they are mindful and measured when and how they share those things. Again, that isn't a lack of something important, but instead should be seen as an abundance of what is most needed.
 - iv. **Peace is a fruit of the Spirit.**
 1. Here is what Paul tells the church in Galatia -²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. – Gal. 5:22-23
 2. Peace is to be a natural outworking of living the abundant life of Christ and growing in conformity with Jesus. This means that peace isn't a bonus characteristic for believers; it is to be a defining characteristic.
 - v. The question we have to ask: Am I living in the peace that is now made real to me through Christ Jesus?

¹⁹ Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 100.