

Colossians 1:15-28

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first born from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him – provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh, I am the church. I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to the saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

“To Be or Gnostic To Be”

Jesus Christ is the firstborn of all creation. He is truly unique. There is no other like him. Both in his relationship to God and in his being as God's revelation and redeemer of the whole world, he is stamped with a finality and completeness that knows no compromise. He is both the subject of creation, meaning that all things have been created through him and for him, and the cosmic reconciler, through whom God restores harmony between God and all of the creation. Lest anyone misunderstand, this community is marked as “Christian” because of its belief in these essential claims about Jesus Christ. It is a bold reminder of our purpose. The church is the body of Jesus Christ, and it is Christ whom we proclaim.

It is one of the facts of the human mind that people think only as much as they have to. It is not until we find our faith opposed and attacked that we really begin to think out its implications. It is not until the Church is confronted with some dangerous heresy that it begins to realize the riches of orthodoxy.

When Paul wrote Colossians, he was not writing in a vacuum. He was writing to meet a definite situation. In the early Church, there was a way of looking at the world called Gnosticism, its followers were called Gnostics, which means “the intellectual ones”. These people were dissatisfied with what they considered the unrefined simplicity of Christianity and wanted to turn it into a philosophy and to align it with the other philosophies which were popular at the time.

The Gnostics began with the basic assumption that matter was altogether evil and Spirit altogether good. They further held that matter was eternal and that it was out of this evil matter that the world was created. Christians, believed in creation out of nothing; the Gnostics believed in creation out of evil matter.

Now God was spirit; and, if spirit was altogether good and matter essentially evil, it followed, as the Gnostics saw it, that the true God could not touch matter and, therefore, could not himself be the agent of creation. So, the Gnostics believed that God put forth a series of levels, each a little further away from God until at last there was one so distant from God that it could handle matter and create the world.

The Gnostics went further. As the levels went further and further from God, they became more and more ignorant of God. And, in the very distant levels, there was not only ignorance of God but also hostility to him. The Gnostics came to the conclusion that the level who created the world was both ignorant of and hostile to the true God, and sometimes they identified that level with the God of the Old Testament. As the Gnostics saw it, the creator was not God but someone hostile to him; and the world was not God's world but the world of a power hostile to God. That is why Paul insists that God did create the world, and that his agent in creation was no ignorant and hostile level but Jesus Christ, his son. (Colossians 1:16). As the Gnostics saw it, Jesus Christ was by no means unique. We have seen how they put forward the belief in a

whole series of levels between the world and God. They insisted that Jesus was merely one of these levels. He might stand high in the series; he might even stand highest; but he was only one of many. Paul meets this by insisting that in Jesus Christ all fullness dwells (Colossians 1:19), that in him there is the fullness of the godhead in bodily form.

One of the supreme aims in Colossians is to insist that Jesus is utterly unique and that in him there is the whole of God, the fullness of God.

As the Gnostics saw it, if matter was altogether evil, it followed that the body was altogether evil. It followed further that he who was the revelation of God could not have had a real body. He could have been nothing more than a spiritual phantom in bodily form. The Gnostics completely denied the real humanity of Jesus. That is why Paul uses such startling phraseology in Colossians. He speaks of Jesus reconciling men and women to God “in his body of flesh” (Colossians 1:22); he says that the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in him “bodily”. Paul insisted on the flesh-and-blood humanity of Jesus.

The task of human beings is to find their way to God. As the Gnostics saw it, that way was barred. Between this world and God, there was this vast series of levels. Before the soul could rise to God, it had to get past the barrier of each of these levels. To pass each barrier, special knowledge and passwords were needed; it was these passwords and knowledge that the Gnostics claimed to give.

It meant that salvation was intellectual knowledge. Paul insists that salvation is not knowledge, it is redemption and the forgiveness of sins. Gnostic teachers held that the so-called simple truths of the gospel were not enough. To find its way to God, the soul needed the knowledge and passwords, which only Gnosticism could give. So, Paul insists that nothing more is needed than the saving truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ. If salvation depended on elaborate knowledge, it was clearly not for everyone but only for the intellectuals. So, the Gnostics divided people into those who were spiritual and those who were earthly; and only the spiritual could be saved. Full salvation was beyond the scope of ordinary people. It is with this in mind that Paul wrote the great verse Colossians 1:28. “It was his aim to warn everyone and to teach everyone, and so to present to everyone mature in Christ Jesus.” Against a salvation possible for only a limited intellectual minority, Paul presents a gospel which is for all, however simple and uneducated or however wise and learned they may be.

Paul says that Christ is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15).

Here, he uses a word and a picture which would waken all kinds of memories in the minds of those who heard it. An image can be two things which merge into each other. It can be a representation; but a representation, if it is perfect enough, can become a manifestation. When Paul uses the word, image, he declares that Jesus is the perfect manifestation of God. To see what God is like, we must look at Jesus. He perfectly represents God to men and women in a form which they can see and know and understand. The Old Testament and the intertestamental books have a great deal to say about Wisdom. In Proverbs, the great passages about wisdom are in chapters 2 and 8. There, wisdom is said to exist in eternity with God and to have been with God when he created the world. Now, in the wisdom of Solomon 7:26, wisdom is the image of the goodness of God.

It is as if Paul turned to the Jews and said: “All your lives you have been thinking and dreaming and writing about this divine wisdom, which is as old as God, which made the world and which gives wisdom to men and women. In Jesus Christ, this wisdom has come to us in bodily form for all to see. Jesus is the fulfilment of the dreams of Jewish thought.

Their minds would go back to the creation story. There the old story tells of the final act of creation. God said, “Let us make humankind in OUR image . . .” So, God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them” (Genesis 1:26-27). Human beings were made that they might be nothing less than the image of God. That is what men and women were meant to be; but sin came in and they never achieved their destiny. By using this word of Jesus, Paul in effect says; “Look at this Jesus. He shows you not only what God is; he also shows you what you were meant to be. Here is humanity as God designed it, Jesus is the perfect manifestation of God and the perfect manifestation of what it is to be human. There is in Jesus Christ the revelation of godhead and the revelation of true humanity.

We will remember that, according to the Gnostics, the work of creation was carried out by an inferior god, ignorant of and hostile to the true God. It is Paul’s teachings that God’s agent in creation is the Son. He is

first-born of all creation. (Colossians 1:15). First born meaning “favored child of God” or “Messiah”. In Psalm 89:27, the promise regarding the Messiah is: “I will make him the first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth”. It was by the son that all things were created. (V. 1:16). This is true of things in heaven and things in earth, of things seen and unseen. It was for the son that all things were created. (V. 1:17). The Son is not only the agent of creation, he is also the goal of creation. Paul uses the strange phrase; “In him, all things hold together.” This means not only that the son is the agent of creation in the beginning and the goal of creation in the end; but also, between the beginning and the end, during time as we know it, it is he who holds the world together. That is to say, all the laws that which govern and sustain order in the universe are an expression of the mind of the Son. The law of gravity, and the rest, the laws by which the universe hangs together, are not only scientific laws, but also divine.

PRAYER:

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, ruler of all creation.

We praise you for the abundance of your blessings, to those who ask, you give love; to those who seek, you give faith; to those who knock, you open the way of hope. Help us to serve you in the power of the Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Savior. AMEN.