

"THE FIRSTBORN"

I. Introduction

- A. This is one of the greatest texts on Christology in all of Scripture.
 - 1. That is, these verses have played an important role in the formulation of the doctrine of the person of Christ.
 - 2. It is interesting to note that this comes at the beginning of a letter that Paul wrote in order to warn Christians against being led astray by the false teaching that was circulating in their midst.
 - 3. As Paul saw these believers being tempted to put their trust in something other than Christ, he directs their attention to who Jesus is.

- B. The literary style of these verses is highly poetic, much more so in the Greek than in the English translations.
 - 1. In the standard critical Greek New Testament in use today, these verses are set apart in versified form, just like the Psalms, Proverbs, and other poetic portions of the Old Testament.
 - 2. This has led many to conclude that Paul is quoting an early Christian hymn or a creedal statement of some kind.
 - 3. That certainly could be true, or it could be that Paul composed this on his own for this particular occasion.
 - 4. Regardless of its origin, this is indeed a rich passage that is worthy of deep reflection.
 - 5. As we study it this evening, we will consider it under its two chief sections: Christ's supremacy over creation; and Christ's supremacy in the church.

II. Supreme Over Creation

- A. The passage opens by referring to Jesus as “the image of the invisible God.”
1. This means that Jesus is the most complete and perfect revelation of God.
 2. The same idea is expressed in the prologue to John’s Gospel, where it says, “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” (John 1:18 ESV)
 3. Jesus was saying the same thing when he told Philip, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9 ESV)
 4. And the writer of Hebrews conveys the same notion when he writes in the opening chapter of his epistle, “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.” (Heb 1:3 ESV)
 5. Because of this, any attempt to find God apart from Christ is doomed to fail.
 6. As the Puritan Thomas Mallery once put it, “In the works of creation, God is above us; in his works of providence, he is outside us; in the law, he is against us; in himself, he is invisible to us. Only in Christ is he Immanuel, God manifested in our flesh. He is God in us, God with us, and God for us. Therefore, no man ever did or ever can understand anything of God truly, that is, upon a saving account, except in and by Jesus Christ.” [cited in *Voices of the Past*, 171]
- B. The word “image” also brings to mind the creation account, where man is made in the image of God.
1. While Christ’s identity as the image of God is unique, there is a connection between Christ as God’s image and man’s identity as divine image-bearer.

2. To see this, we need to understand that the notion of Christ being the image of God is not limited to Christ in his incarnate state but also has to do with to his eternal person.
 3. Because Jesus has existed for all eternity as the Son, theologians ascribe the notion of procession to the Second Person of the Trinity.
 4. The Son eternally proceeds from the Father.
 5. In the words of contemporary theologian Michael Reeves, the Son “is the going out — the radiance — of the Father’s own being.” [Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, 27]
 6. The fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nyssa explained this by using the metaphor of a lamp: “As the light from the lamp is of the nature of that which sheds the brightness, and is united with it (for as soon as the lamp appears the light that comes from it shines out simultaneously), so [we must consider] both that the Son is of the Father, and that the Father is never without the Son; for it is impossible that glory should be without radiance, as it is impossible that the lamp should be without brightness.” [cited in Reeves, 27]
 7. When we consider how this relates to man’s identity as the image of God, we can say that man is a copy of the God the Son, who is the archetypal image of God.
 8. This is what made it proper and fitting for the Son to become incarnate as a man.
- C. The next thing that Paul says about Christ in this text is that he is “the firstborn of all creation.”
1. You will probably not be surprised to hear that this verse was used by Arius and his followers in 4th century, and by Jehovah’s Witnesses today, to say that Jesus is a created being.

2. Arius reasoned that if Jesus is the firstborn among all created things, then there must have been a point when he did not exist.
 3. Arius famously declared of Jesus, "there was when he was not."
 4. One reason why the church did not agree with Arius on this is that his teaching contradicts what Paul says of Christ elsewhere in these verses.
 5. Jesus is not a part of the creation, but is the one by whom and through whom and for whom all things were made.
 6. He is distinct from the creation.
 7. The name "firstborn" is not being used here to say that Jesus came into existence at some point.
 8. It is being used metaphorically to refer to the principle heir.
 9. The word is used in the same manner in Psalm 89:27 in reference to David, saying, "I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth."
 10. David was not the firstborn in any kind of literal sense.
 11. He was neither the firstborn son of Jesse nor the first of Israel's kings.
 12. God is simply saying that he will make David first in rank and privilege.
 13. And God says this because David is a typological foreshadowing of Christ.
- D. The next part of the poem declares that all things, whether in the invisible spiritual realm or in the material world, were created by Christ.
1. Because he is God, he is the agent of creation.

2. Paul specifies that Jesus is the source of the various classes of angelic beings, referred to by the names throne, dominions, rulers, and authorities.
3. The reason for this emphasis is because of the false teaching that was being disseminated in the Colossian church.
4. These teachers seem to have been saying that it was necessary to look to the mediation of angelic beings in order to have a full experience of God.
5. Paul's words here confront this by stating that all these beings have their existence through Jesus and for Jesus.
6. They do not replace Jesus.
7. They serve Jesus.
8. All creation exists for the sake of his glory.
9. And he holds everything in the universe together, sustaining it by his word of power.
10. What an immense comfort this is for us!
11. It assures us that Jesus really is sufficient to sustain us.

III. Supreme Over the Church

- A. We turn now to the second half of the poem, where the focus shifts from Christ's supremacy over all things to his supremacy in the church.
 1. Paul says that Jesus is "the head of the body, the church."
 2. This is a metaphor that Paul uses elsewhere in his writings to describe Christ's relationship with the church.

3. It tells us that Christ has the place of supreme authority in the church.
 4. While Christ governs his church through the ministry of the men whom he calls to the office of rule in the church, this ministry is only authorized to declare and enforce what Christ has commanded in his royal Word.
 5. Some Christians have argued that this metaphor of Christ as head and the church as body means that the church is an extension of Christ's presence in this world.
 6. This is a serious confusion for a variety of reasons.
 7. Jesus is divine, but the church is human.
 8. Jesus is without sin, but the church will not be without sin until it is in glory.
 9. Jesus is presently absent from this world, being seated at God's right hand in heaven, although he is present with his church by his Spirit to empower her for her ministry.
- B. While Jesus is head over all things, he is head over his church in a unique manner.
1. He is a covenant Mediator who stands in a vital and organic union with the church as his body.
 2. Moreover, he puts his universal headship in the service of his headship in his church.
 3. This is what Paul is saying in Ephesians 1:22 when he writes that God "put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church."
 4. Contrary to what many Christians these days seem to assume, the church does not exist for the sake of the world.

5. It is the other way around.
 6. The world exists for the sake of the church.
 7. Christ governs everything that takes place in this world in such a manner that everything is serving the interests of the building up of the church.
 8. As it says in the Westminster Confession of Faith, "As the providence of God doth, in general, reach to all creatures; so, after a most special manner, it taketh care of his church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof." [WCF 5.7]
- C. The next thing that Paul says about Christ in our text is that he is "the beginning, the firstborn from the dead."
1. This is a clear reference to Jesus' resurrection.
 2. Christ's resurrection on the first Easter Sunday marked the beginning of the new creation.
 3. Through his resurrection, he overcomes all the forces that hold fallen man in bondage.
 4. As the firstborn from the dead, he is the founder and head of a new mode of human existence.
 5. This results in his having preeminence in everything.
 6. In other words, it is God's plan to subdue all creation under Christ's rule.
- D. Jesus is also the one in whom all the fullness of God is pleased to dwell.
1. The use of the term "fullness" confronts the claim of the false teachers in Colossae when they said that fullness could only be found by adding something to Christ.

2. In addition, the use of the terms “fullness” and “dwell” in such close proximity to each other identifies Jesus as the dwelling place of the divine glory.
 3. In other words, he is the true temple, the only place where God is pleased to make his presence dwell with man.
- E. This leads into the final verse of the poem, where it says that God reconciles all things to himself through Christ, making peace by the blood of the cross.
1. There is no possibility of being restored to God apart from Christ.
 2. Once again, this confronts notion of the false teachers, who contended that angels had a vital role in reconnecting us with God.
 3. Anyone who claims that something else other than Jesus is needed in order to be reconciled to God is diminishing the work of Christ.
- F. The assertion that God is reconciling all things to himself through Christ has sometimes been interpreted in problematic ways.
1. Some claim that this teaches universal salvation.
 2. This is a popular notion in our age, and it has found a variety of proponents throughout church history.
 3. One of the earliest of these was the church father Origen.
 4. We know that this is not what Paul is saying here because he makes it clear in 2:15 that the spiritual beings who are in rebellion against God are not reconciled to him through Christ but are vanquished by Christ.
 5. It is true that God has secured eternal peace through Christ’s sacrifice, but this does not mean that all men and even the fallen angels will be saved.

6. Even in this world, it is possible for people to be subjected to terms of peace against their will.
 7. This was certainly the experience of first century Jews.
 8. They lived under the *pax Romana*, the Roman peace, but they didn't like it.
 9. The peace that Christ has secured through the blood of his cross is the peace of the new creation, which will be consummated on the last day.
 10. By God's grace, some are being granted faith to accept this peace.
 11. But for the rest, the peace will imposed upon them against their will.
- G. Another mishandling of this text comes when Christians cite it in support of the claim that the church's central task is not merely to make disciples but to engage in the redemptive transformation of culture.
1. Such Christians contend that the church is called to usher in the new creation through its various cultural endeavors.
 2. This position has come to be referred to as "neo-Calvinism," and its roots can be traced to a twentieth-century Dutch philosopher named Herman Dooyeweerd.
 3. Unlike universalism, this is not a matter of heresy, but it can easily lead to a whole host of misguided ideas and efforts.
 4. The basic problem with this line of thinking is that, while Christ's redemptive work certainly is cosmic in scope, the mission that he has given to his church has a much narrower focus: to make disciples by proclaiming the gospel.
 5. We cannot conflate the church with Christ.

6. Nowhere does the Bible give us a mandate to build the kingdom of God through our cultural endeavors.
7. Of course, we should strive to be salt and light in this world.
8. God does bring many common grace blessings through the participation of Christians in the civil sphere.
9. God even uses the efforts of non-Christians to bring common grace blessings to the world.
10. But none of this is a matter of building Christ's kingdom.
11. We always have to remember that a day is coming when this world will be removed in judgment to make way for the new creation.
12. As the writer of Hebrews reminds us, God "has promised, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.' This phrase, 'Yet once more,' indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken." (Heb. 12:26–28 ESV)

IV. Conclusion

- A. God's purpose in Christ is indeed to renew the entire creation.
- B. All things will be made subject to King Jesus.
- C. At present, the church is the place where we see this happening.
- D. The church is like a part of the future that is breaking into the present.
- E. It is a foretaste of the new creation that will be consummated when Jesus returns.
- F. Let us be thankful for receiving the blessing of being a part of this body.