

"HE IS"

God declared to Moses: "I AM" (Exodus 3:14). Jesus declared to a group of angry Jews, "Before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58). It is scarcely possible to read Colossians 1:17 and its immediate context without the unmistakable echo of this divine declaration.

Nevertheless, spiritual blindness abounds, and those who reject the proper worship of their Creator perform exegetical gymnastics to inject into this text something other than our Lord's eternal existence and sovereignty. In modern times, the Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin cites Colossians 1:17 repeatedly in his attempt to merge Christianity, pantheism (or monism), and the evolutionary ascent of mankind.¹ He insists on moving from the "cross of expiation" to the "cross of evolution,"² understanding his "universal Christ" to be a "synthesis of Christ and the universe."³ The statement that "in Him all things hold together" is divorced from its context and read (actually misread!) by Teilhard as a declaration of "Christian pantheism." As we shall see, Teilhard is not alone in efforts to extract paganism from this text. First, however, we must focus on a clear reading of this verse *in its context*.

¹ Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution*, p. 44, 88, 143, 179, 191, 235.

² *Ibid.*, p. 216.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

The immediate context (1:15-20) is a beautiful poetic passage that leaves no doubt as to the all-encompassing majesty and deity of Christ as both Creator and Redeemer, *distinct from* His creation. It forms the backdrop for Paul's response (chapter 2) to heresies creeping in to the Colossian church, heresies not unlike that of Teilhard! Furthermore, it is essential background for Paul's statement of his unique calling as apostle to the Gentiles, including those he addresses in this epistle. The exhortations to these new people of God, provided in Colossians 3 and 4, must also be viewed in light of this basic doctrine of Christ.

Colossians 1:15-20. Most commentators agree that these six verses form a natural pericope. Exceptions are Lohse, who groups 1:12-20 as an introduction to the instructional portion of Colossians,⁴ and Calvin, who treats 1:12-17 as a unit but comments on each verse individually.⁵ Moule groups 1:15-23, explaining that prayer and thanksgiving have merged into a description of Christ, leading back to a contemplation of the reconciliation He has effected and its specific impact on those addressed in the letter.⁶

Hymn or Poem? Much ink has been spilled in speculations about the genre of this passage. Some have insisted on its being

⁴ Lohse, p. 3.

⁵ Calvin, p. 149ff.

a pre-Pauline hymn inserted into the epistle, perhaps with redaction and interpolation to fit the purpose. Both stylistic and linguistic considerations have influenced this conclusion. Paul uses vocabulary here that differs from both the immediate context and his other epistles.⁷ It should be noted, however, that no textual variants exist to support the imaginary reconstructions. There is only one minor variant in 1:15-20, the possible addition of another "in Him" in verse 20, which hardly alters the sense.

There is, indeed, remarkable parallelism and repetition of key words/phrases evident in this text. Some see the parallels as Semitic rather than Greek.⁸ Various chiasms have been located. The twin themes of creation and redemption (*new creation*), in vv. 15-17 and vv. 18-20 respectively, do stand out. Christ's mediatorial office encompasses both the physical creation and the new, spiritual creation.⁹ The Colossians are reminded about their redemption in vv. 13-14, as Paul moves into his majestic statements about the Person and work of Christ.¹⁰ The repetition of "all things" six times highlights the universal significance of what Paul is teaching about Christ. "Δια αὐτοῦ" is found three times (vv. 16 and 20), and "ἐν αὐτῷ" appears twice (vv. 16 and 19),

⁶ Moule, p. 58.

⁷ O'Brien, p. 32.

⁸ O'Brien, p. 33 (citing Masson). See also Baugh's article.

⁹ Lightfoot, p. 115.

with "εις αυτον" occurring once. "Αυτος εστιν" and "ος εστιν" each are used twice. The emphasis on *Him* -- on *Christ*, Creator and sovereign Lord -- can hardly be overlooked:

"Thus creation and reconciliation, cosmology and soteriology are dealt with in order to praise Christ as the Lord of the cosmos, who is the head of the body and whose reign encompasses all things."¹¹

Πρωτοτοκος. This key term is used twice to introduce statements about Christ as Creator and heir to the Father of all things. Although the ancient Arians took the following genitive ("creation") as partitive, concluding that Christ was merely the first to be created, we must not follow them. The explicit statements in vv. 16-17 clarify that He is *Creator*, not *created*.¹² The term *πρωτοκριστος* would have been more appropriate had the latter been intended.¹³ When the Septuagint uses this term (130 times), it does so "mostly in genealogies and historical narratives, to indicate temporal priority and sovereignty of rank."¹⁴ We can hear echoes of Psalm 89:27, where "firstborn" refers to the Davidic king.¹⁵ Genesis 49:3 uses "firstborn" along with "beginning" to describe the founder of a people.¹⁶ In the New

¹⁰ F. F. Bruce, p. 55.

¹¹ Lohse, p. 42.

¹² Helyer, "Arius Revisited," p. 63.

¹³ Lightfoot, p. 147.

¹⁴ O'Brien, p. 4.

¹⁵ Bruce, p. 59; O'Brien, p. 44; Ridderbos, p. 56.

¹⁶ O'Brien, p. 50.

Testament, the term in the singular is always a reference to Jesus Christ.¹⁷

The repetition of the word in *πρωτοτοκος εκ των νεκρων* highlights the parallel between Christ's relation to the natural creation and His originating role in the new creation. We hear it again in other Pauline writings, Romans 8:29 and 1 Corinthians 15:20.¹⁸ The description of Christ as "heir of all things" (Hebrews 1:2) is a similar expression, with the concept of "heir" implying sovereignty over the inheritance.¹⁹ We might well summarize the general sense of this term as indicating both "prior to" and "supreme over."²⁰

Εικων. This word includes the thought of representation, but the word does not necessarily *always* imply perfect representation. When used of Christ, it involves not only representation but manifestation of the unseen Father, whether incarnate or pre-incarnate.²¹ The representative image of a ruler on a coin is an *εικων* in Matthew 22:20. In John 14:9, Christ equates Himself with the Father when He states that whoever has seen Him has seen the Father.²² He is the *perfect* image of God, in contrast to carved images, "blasphemous counterfeits" that are "abhorred by the

¹⁷ O'Brien, p. 44.

¹⁸ Ridderbos, p. 56.

¹⁹ Helyer, "Arius Revisited," p. 66.

²⁰ Moule, p. 65.

²¹ Lightfoot, p. 145.

²² House, "The Doctrine of Christ," p. 181.

Jews."²³ Paul uses the term also in 2 Corinthians 4:4-6, perhaps in reference to his Damascus road encounter, to describe "an all-surpassing manifestation of His everlasting power and divinity."²⁴ Here, as in Colossians 1:16 as well as Philippians 2:6, Christ is both identified with God, bearing divine glory, and distinguished from God the Father.²⁵

The phrase "image of God" certainly brings to mind the creation of man. Used in conjunction with the strong statement of deity in Colossians 1, we are also reminded of His full humanity. The image of God, destroyed at the Fall by sin,²⁶ is renewed in the believer (Colossians 3:10). Since *all* men, not merely the Jews, are created in God's image, we have here a hint of the Gentile inclusion (to be discussed later).

Αρχη. As the "beginning," Christ is indeed "before all things" (verse 17).²⁷ Similarly in Revelation 22:13, He is called the Alpha and the Omega. Looking from verse 18 back to verse 16, we see that all things were created *εν αυτω*; thus it is suggested that "Christ is the beginning 'in' which, according to Genesis 1:1, 'God created the heaven and the earth.'"²⁸

²³ Moule, p. 62.

²⁴ Bruce, p. 57-58.

²⁵ Ridderbos, p. 4.

²⁶ Not in every sense, but certainly in terms of moral righteousness and truth. A full discussion is beyond the scope of this paper!

²⁷ Calvin, p. 153.

²⁸ Bruce, p. 61.

N. T. Wright has resurrected for us an earlier theory (Burney) concerning the four possible meanings of *bereshith* in Genesis 1:1, "made possible by the identification of *reshith* with Wisdom implied in Proverbs 8:22." He summarizes the theory that Christ fulfills every possible meaning of this term:

"The *be* of *bereshith* is expounded in its three possible forms by *εν αυτω, δια αυτου,* and *εις αυτον...*the *reshith* by *προ παντων, τα παντα σηνεστηκε, κεθαλη* and *πρωτοτοκος.*" Thus, "Christ fulfills every meaning which may be extracted from *Reshith.*"²⁹

An intriguing chiasm, encompassing vv. 15-18, can be constructed from the four meanings of *reshith*:

A	He is the image, the firstborn	(verse 15)
B	He is supreme	(verse 17)
B	He is the head	(verse 18)
A	He is the beginning	(verse 18)

From Burney's thesis, Wright conceives of Colossians 1:15-20 as "within the Jewish monotheistic celebration of creation and election."³⁰ Certainly, the terms *πρωτοτοκος, κεφαλη, αρχη,* along with the summarizing statement of verse 17, all point unmistakably to Christ's preeminence as both Creator and Redeemer. In each case He is rightly called the *beginning.*

Κεφαλη. The statement that Christ is the "head" marks a transition from soteriology into ecclesiology. He is unique both as Creator of all things and as the sole mediator between God and man. In each case He is prior in time, supreme in rank, and the

²⁹ Wright, p. 456.

originating power. "Head" may refer to source (origin),³¹ or to authority.³² Certainly both are true; He is *Organic Head* and *Ruling Head*.³³ The Old Testament Hebrew concept of corporate personality is helpful in understanding this particular aspect of Christ's Lordship,³⁴ bringing to mind His role as second Adam, covenant Head of those He represents (Romans 5:12-21).

Πληρωμα. It is scarcely possible to imagine a stronger piling up of superlatives to reinforce the deity of Christ! Although some have misunderstood this word in terms of its technical Valentinian Gnostic use, we must look rather to other *Scripture*. In the Old Testament, God Himself, or His glory, is said to fill the whole universe.³⁵ In the same book of Colossians, we have an expanded statement of the same truth (2:9), where clearly it is the *fullness of deity* that dwells in Christ.

In concluding our statements concerning the immediate context of 1:17, we should note that Paul's cosmic christology is one that without a doubt affirms Christ's deity as fully equal to that of the Old Testament Yahweh:

"As a comprehensive explanation for the hymn as we have it, however, one must resort to *Kyrios* christology whereby Christ assumes the predicates and prerogatives of Yahweh in the Old Testament...cosmic christology was implicit from the

³⁰ Wright, p. 457.

³¹ Bruce, p. 68.

³² House, "The Doctrine of Christ in Colossians," p. 185.

³³ Hendriksen, p. 77.

³⁴ O'Brien, p. 50; Bruce, p. 69.

³⁵ O'Brien, p. 51.

beginning of the primitive church by virtue of the resurrection."³⁶

The New Testament. Colossians 1 presents a powerful, majestic statement of the deity and eternal preexistence of Christ. No doubt it was startling to the original readers, in that "preexistence is predicated of a man who had lived and died in Palestine within the preceding half-century."³⁷ But Paul's appraisal is by no means unique within the New Testament. John makes equally awesome pronouncements in both the prologue to his gospel (John 1:1-4) and throughout Revelation:

"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 adoration."³⁸

The author to the Hebrews, similarly, paints a magnificent portrait of Christ as eternal God and Creator in his opening chapter. Paul himself, in passages such as Philippians 2:5-10, does not hesitate to boldly reaffirm this awesome doctrine of Christ.

Influence of Pagan and Jewish Thought. There seems no end to the creativity abounding in pagan reconstructions of this text.

Forward Evolution! Teilhard de Chardin is not alone in this bizarre sort of theory. Helyer notes the approach of Nigel

³⁶ Helyer, "Recent Research on Colossians 1:15-20," p. 58.

³⁷ Bruce, p. 61.

³⁸ House, "The Doctrine of Christ in Colossians," p. 192.

Turner, who sees a partitive genitive ("of all creation") in 1:15, like the ancient Arians, but leaps to the conclusion that:

"Christ is an 'Archetype of a fresh stage or leap forward in the collective evolution of all the creatures of God, in the onward march towards the goal of achieving what Christ is himself--the 'icon of the invisible God.'"³⁹

Christ indeed *represents* those for whom He died, but here we have a leap which *identifies* Him with man and erases the Creator-creature distinction so strongly affirmed in Colossians 1.

Christology Reduced to Anthropology. Some modern interpreters see Paul employing "the language of mythology...groping for ways to explain to significance of Christ." But all he really intends is to show "God's ultimate intention for creation, especially human beings."⁴⁰ Thus the majestic, God-centered statement of this passage is diluted so that the creature is exalted and the Creator dethroned.

Stoic Pantheism. Norden's form critical analysis envisions a Stoic "all" formula in this passage. Various commentators have noted the linguistic correspondence between Paul's language here, both in his use of "all" and in the prepositions *ἐκ, εἰς, ἐν*.⁴¹ Stoicism posits a "world soul," seeing the cosmos as a living entity, a "body" (*σῶμα*). The Creator-creature distinction is obliterated in this monistic system, popularized in Hellenistic

³⁹ Helyer, "Arius Revisited," p. 63.

⁴⁰ Helyer, "Cosmic Christology," p. 236.

philosophy. Paul's use of similar terminology hardly implies an equivalent theology. The context, in fact, destroys any such equality.

Plato. Besides Stoicism, Norden's form critical analysis sees a Platonic division of the universe in this passage, where the "things unseen" (Plato's forms) are distinguished from what is seen.⁴² Plato viewed the cosmos as a living entity, a "body" pervaded by reason and led by a divine "soul." Philo envisioned the world as a "body" presided over by the Logos.⁴³ Again we are faced with *linguistic* similarities to the current pagan world.

Gnosticism. Amazingly, even Gnostic interpretations of this passage have been attempted! Kasemann, who rejects "through the blood of His cross" (1:20) as an interpolation, views 1:15-20 as:

"...a pre-Christian Gnostic text which deals with the supra-historical, metaphysical drama of the Gnostic redeemer. Creation and redemption are related constituents in the myth of the primeval man and redeemer who breaks into the sphere of death as the pathfinder and leader of those who belong to him."⁴⁴

However, the phrase "firstborn from the dead" (no textual variant supports the omission of these words!) strikes the death blow to such fantasy. Frankly, Paul affirms here exactly what Gnosticism

⁴¹ O'Brien, p. 45; Lohse, p. 45, 51, 53; Lightfoot, p. 151. These commentaries note the similarity of language but deny equality in concepts!

⁴² O'Brien, p. 33.

⁴³ O'Brien, p. 48-49.

⁴⁴ Lohse, p. 45; see also O'Brien, p. 37.

wished to deny. Christ ushers in a *renewed creation*, not the Gnostic deliverance *from* creation.⁴⁵

More recently, Fossum has attempted a revival of Gnosticism in the interpretation of this passage. He sees a common underlying tradition to Christianity and Gnosticism. Rejecting the presence of Sophia-Christology in this text, he sees rather the Gnostic "heavenly Man of light," a demiurge who came into being prior to the rest of creation. This "man" is equated with the "light" of Genesis 1:3.⁴⁶ It is hard to take this sort of exegesis seriously, but it ought to be counted among the pagan perversions of our text.

Universalism. Man's Fall into sin had cosmic consequences, and so does his redemption. However, the cosmic impact of Christ's atoning work has been wrongly read in terms of an absolutely universal reconciliation. This erroneous view, where even the devil himself is reconciled to God (!), most likely dates back to Origen.⁴⁷ (In today's pagan world, M. Scott Peck reiterates the fallacy in *People of the Lie*.) Such an interpretation blends well with the monism of much pagan philosophy, but it hardly fits the text. Rather than an *absolute* universalism, we will see how this

⁴⁵ Wright, p. 451.

⁴⁶ Fossum, p. 201. Fossum says that the Greek $\phi\omega\varsigma$ can either mean "light" or "man." He relies heavily on the claimed equation of words.

⁴⁷ Hendriksen, p. 81; Calvin, p. 157; Bruce, p. 75. All comment on the existence of this particular error.

text supports the *universality* of the gospel through the inclusion of the Gentiles.

Judaism. Besides the purely pagan interpretations, we also encounter an exegesis that highlights similarities between this text and certain Old Testament passages, notably Genesis 1 and Proverbs 8. Some have attempted to find a christological interpretation of Wisdom, personified in Proverbs 8, here in Colossians. However, Ridderbos wisely points out that while Proverbs 8 personifies the attribute of wisdom, Christ actually *is* the divine Person.⁴⁸ Certainly *creation* is a prime consideration of the text, but it is not specifically intended to be an exegesis of Proverbs 8:22. N. T. Wright sees a "Christological monotheism" in this passage, an OT monotheism and election "redefined by means of Christology."⁴⁹

Redaction. Redactional theories seem to abound in biblical studies! Here we encounter a four-stage redaction theory proposed by Cesare Marcheselli Casale. The passage is claimed to originate in a pre-Pauline, early Christian community. Our verse 17 is missing, at this point, as it is in the second Hellenistic-Jewish stage, linked with Philo. Paul's teaching enters the scene in the

⁴⁸ Ridderbos, p. 79.

⁴⁹ Wright, "Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20."

third stage, and verse 17 arrives, only to be cast out in the final fourth stage, written by Paul himself!⁵⁰

Heresy in the Colossian House. We must not overlook the larger context, where Paul is concerned to confront heresy creeping into the Colossian church. Doctrinal formulations precede polemics in this well designed epistle. A strong doctrine of Christ, encompassing both creation and redemption, is structured to devastate the many heresies created by the minds of men. Such heresies inevitably involve errors concerning the Person and work of Christ.

While heretics proclaimed the *insufficiency* of Christ, Paul boldly proclaims His *all-sufficiency* as sovereign Creator and Redeemer.⁵¹ The precise nature of the heresy, and the identity of the heretics, remains shrouded in mystery. Possibilities include Hellenism, incipient Gnosticism, Merkabah mysticism, pagan mystery religions, Essenism, or some combination.⁵² What we do know is that both theology and morality are involved, probably stemming from a dualism that regards matter as evil.⁵³ There is apparently misunderstanding about the role and power of angelic beings, which Paul confronts in his affirmation that Christ *created* them, and that His redeeming work encompasses all of creation.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Helyer, "Recent Research on Colossians 1:15-20," p. 59-60.

⁵¹ Hendriksen, p. 71.

⁵² House, "Heresies in the Colossian Church," presents a helpful survey.

⁵³ Lightfoot, p. 114.

⁵⁴ O'Brien, p. 46, and Lightfoot, p. 159, both note this aspect of the heresy.

Perhaps it is best that we are left to wonder about the specifics of the heresy. Heresies have emerged throughout the history of the church, continuing in our own time. Modern psychology and New Age theology, like this ancient heresy, claim a special *gnosis* beyond the access of the average Christian.⁵⁵ Both must answer to the stern warning of Colossians 2:8. Whatever the particular heresy, this magnificent text sounds the death knell by proclaiming the absolute sufficiency of Christ, Creator-Redeemer.

Colossians 1:17. "In Him all things hold together," including the christological passage at hand! This is a key verse, central to the text in its succinct summary of who Christ is.

Morphology and Syntax. The phrase *ἐν αὐτῷ*, as in verse 16, should clearly be taken as instrumental in nature. In biblical Greek, the dative with the preposition *ἐν* is characteristically used in this manner.⁵⁶ (The pantheism of Teilhard is scarcely a possibility in the Greek!)

The preposition *πρὸ*, with the genitive *τῶν πάντων*, is cited as an example of positional precedence, rather than locative.⁵⁷ However, while Christ is certainly "before all things" in this sense, the *temporal* use here expresses His preexistence and

⁵⁵ Someday, Lord willing, I want to explore the christological errors underlying the claims of modern psychology! Like the Colossian heretics, modern psychologists claim that Christ's work needs supplementation.

⁵⁶ BDF, p. 118; Zerwick, p. 22, 40; Porter, p. 158.

⁵⁷ Porter, p. 171.

relates naturally to the term *πρωτοτοκος*. God is "before the world" in Psalm 90:2. His foreordination of events in salvation history is expressed using *προ* at numerous points in the New Testament (Ephesians 1:4, 1 Peter 1:20; Titus 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:9, to name just a few!).⁵⁸

The specific inclusion of the pronoun *αυτος*, which might have been implied in the verb *εστιν*, is reminiscent of the "I AM" passages such as Exodus 3:14 and John 8:58: "HE IS." The present tense of *εστιν* underscores the unchanging divine being of Christ. Both His *Person* and *preexistence* are emphasized.⁵⁹

Key Words. The verb *συνιστημι* is a key concern to our exegesis. It occurs sixteen times total in the New Testament. In an active, transitive sense, it may mean to unite or collect (no such uses in the NT), to present, introduce, or recommend (2 Corinthians 5:12, 4:2, 6:4, 3:1, 10:12, 10:18), to demonstrate or show (Romans 3:5, 5:8; Galatians 2:18). In the middle voice it may mean to put together or establish, but again there are no such uses in the NT.

The intransitive use is by contrast a rarity. In Luke 9:32, the term is used in the sense of standing with or by someone. The sense of continuing, enduring, existing, or holding together is

⁵⁸ Kittel, p. 936.

⁵⁹ Lightfoot, p. 155.

found only twice, in 2 Peter 3:5 where the heavens exist by God's Word, and in Colossians 1:17.⁶⁰ It should be noted here that not only did Christ *create* the heavens and the earth; He also causes them to continue to exist and to hold together. The universe is not ruled by chance, nor are the "laws of nature" independent powers to which God is subject, but rather their origin is in Him.

Even Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics testify to the basic meaning of this word as indicating a sustaining, regulating function.⁶¹ Hellenistic Judaism used this word to express the firm establishment of God's creation.⁶² However, while linguistic similarities might have formed a bridge for Gentiles previously immersed in pagan philosophies (like *λογος* in John), Paul expressly denies the pantheism involved in these alien worldviews.

The perfect tense of this verb is a key point to note. The historical fact of creation was described using the aorist in verse 16, but here the continued cohesion and existence of the universe is expressed by the perfect. What Christ created in the beginning He continues to hold together.⁶³

Transition or Climax? A particularly compelling case has been made, by our friend Steve Baugh, for considering vv. 17-18a the central, summarizing climax of a chiasm written according to

⁶⁰ Bauer, p. 923; Kittel, p. 1120.

⁶¹ Lightfoot, p. 156.

⁶² Lohse, p. 52. He, too, notes that Platonic and Stoic philosophy both used the verb to mean establish, continue, exist, or endure.

Hebrew poetic canons. The typical two-stanza and three-stanza approaches fail to highlight the significance of this focal point. Baugh sees 17b as the "central pivot" of the passage, stating that "in the sphere of creation and in the sphere of redemption all things find their unity in Christ."⁶⁴ Greek poetry would have followed a strict metrical pattern, which we fail to find here. The chiasm, typical of Hebrew poetry, associates either synonymous or antithetical elements, providing variation while building the poem around this reiteration.⁶⁵ What we find here is a symmetry between *creation* and *new creation* centered in Christ the Lord.

Other Scriptures. Particularly striking is the similarity of Colossians 1:17 to Hebrews 1:3. There Christ is again identified as fully God, the exact representation of the Father's nature, upholding (φέρων) *all things* by the word of His power. Statements of Christ Himself in John 8:58 and 17:5 affirm His preexistence.

Commenting on Ephesians 1:10, Ridderbos says that "everything exists together in Him as in a summary." It is not merely that He will receive dominion over all things. Ephesians 1:10 may be seen as "the eschatological counterpart of the συνέστηκεν of Colossians 1:17, which starts from the creation."⁶⁶

⁶³ Zerwick, p. 97.

⁶⁴ Baugh, p. 237.

⁶⁵ Baugh, p. 231, 233.

⁶⁶ Ridderbos, p. 83.

Paul and his ministry to the Gentiles. This whole text, and certainly the summary of Christ's creative, sustaining role in 1:17, provides the necessary background for the inclusion of the Gentiles in Christ's redeeming work. He is the Creator, not only of the Jews, but of all mankind. The comprehensive nature of His work, in creation and redemption, could hardly come to a fuller expression.

The Colossians are obviously a Gentile audience. As Paul addresses and describes them, we hear unmistakable echoes of texts in Ephesians that speak expressly of how Christ has abolished the Jew-Gentile distinction. In 1:21, for example, the Colossians are "formerly alienated," just as the Ephesians in 2:12ff were excluded from Israel and from the covenant of promise. They were at one time "dead in transgressions and uncircumcision of the flesh" (2:13), again like the Ephesians Gentile converts (2:1,5,11).

Paul's description of his own ministry, in Colossians 1:23-27, follows his glorious christological statement. He has been called to preach the gospel "in all creation under heaven" (1:23), the creation just described as holding together in Christ. In typical Pauline terms, he speaks of his *stewardship to fulfill* (1:25) the word of God, described as the *mystery* (1:26) hidden in past ages but now revealed to the saints.

The renewal of God's image in the believer is the theme of 3:10, similar to Ephesians 4:22-24. The image of the Creator is common to all mankind, Jew and Gentile alike. Note the connection with Christ, who as *fully man* is the perfect εἰκὼν (1:15), and as *fully God* is the Creator of both the original and the new, transformed image of God in man.

The theme of reconciliation, unique to Paul, is one that presupposes the rupture between Creator and creature. The reconciliation of the Colossians finds expression in 1:20 and 1:22. Again we are reminded of Ephesians 2, where Christ has abolished the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile, making one new man (2:15) as He reconciles *both* through His cross (2:16).

Conclusions and Implications. This brief verse is embedded in a context that brings into sharp focus Christ's work as the second Adam. He is the Creator of the first Adam, and indeed of all things. As the last Adam, He is the Redeemer, Creator of the new humanity. At the resurrection, He rises as the representative of that new humanity, inclusive of *all* the nations of the world. As in 1 Corinthians 15:46, pagan thought is reversed when Paul's instructs Gentile believers. The physical creation precedes the fall of man, and it is good. The natural is prior to the spiritual, not its prison.

Paul is the only New Testament author who draws a parallel between creation and *new creation*, or resurrection. He does so succinctly in the Adam-Christ typology of 1 Corinthians 15:45. In Colossians 1:15-20, he expands the comparison, bringing out Christ's co-eternity with the Father and His all-encompassing role in both creations. These two basic creative acts of God, and the associated aeons of redemptive history, are in the foreground in each of these important Scriptures. The "last Adam" description of Christ's eschatological work, explicit in 1 Corinthians 15:45, is implicit in the Colossians text. It is a foundational theme to the Gentile inclusion because it underscores the universal nature of Christ's redemptive work and lordship. In the creation of Adam, God inaugurated the original, physical creation. In the resurrection of the last Adam, Christ, a new creation--a total transformation--in inaugurated.

Heresies, both ancient and modern, tend to blur divinely ordained distinctions: Creator-creature (pantheism or monism), male-female (feminism), believer-unbeliever (religious pluralism). The gospel message is one where God Himself erases the temporary Jew-Gentile distinction, ushering in an age where He calls His elect from among all the nations of the earth. It is critical to differentiate between distinctions that are eternal and those that have been superseded by God's command. This text helps us do *both*.

Practical implications are not lacking in this text. Jay Adams reminds us that any person we counsel is "caught up in something powerful, something grand, something greater than himself and his problems." Such a perspective must be brought to the counseling room.⁶⁷ Similarly, Hendriksen reminds us that Christ's over-arching rule far transcends the modern threats that crouch at our doorstep--communism, bombs, bodily decay. We need not despair.⁶⁸ Bible believing Christian need not fear when old heresies emerge in new clothing. The sufficiency of Christ the sovereign Creator is no match for the devious minds of mere men. Teilhard de Chardin, and others like him, may twist texts for a time, but the eternal, sovereign Christ remains Ruler over all.

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⁶⁷ Adams, p. 139.

⁶⁸ Hendriksen, p. 71.

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