

# Proclaiming Christ as Lord: Colossians 1:15–20

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“Preach on great texts!” This advice to aspiring preachers has been severely compromised by our current obsession with “preaching where people itch.” A sermonic diet of pop psychology, peppered with bible verses taken out of context, presupposes

enable believers to be “mature in Christ” (Col 1:28) and “established in the faith” (Col 2:7). In so doing, it also provides reliable guidance for the pressing issues of postmodernity and beyond. Spirituality can never rise higher than its theological foundations.

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that first and foremost Jesus functions as a spiritual guru, someone “totally about” our existential angst. The result may well be, at least in North America, the most narcissistic generation of Christians ever to wend its way to heavenly Mount Zion. I want to plead for a return to sermons that elevate the level of theological discourse and awaken one’s listeners to the necessity of ultimate truths. In short, pastors must rediscover the importance of preaching biblical theology. Such a menu serves as the most effective and enduring way to

I cannot think of a greater text on which to preach than Colossians 1:15-20. It is an awe-inspiring, mind-boggling portrait of the Lord Jesus Christ. In high definition, the cosmic Christ confronts us in all his glory and majesty. When this reality grips us, we bow before him and proclaim the quintessential Christological affirmation, “Jesus is Lord” (Rom 10:9)! The Lordship of Christ is the key to Christian discipleship, the unerring reference point for charting a course in the midst of a bewildering and uncertain world. To this end, I offer some suggestions concerning how this text may serve as the basis for an edifying and inspiring sermon.

First, however, I want to discuss briefly some introductory, exegetical issues and suggestions for dealing with them. Preachers should, by all means, give careful attention to the background and context of this passage before constructing their sermon—good

advice for preaching on any biblical text. Though it is not advisable to parade all the details of this intricate passage before the congregation—almost certainly a recipe for a boring message—the preacher needs to have a basic grasp of the issues before setting out the main points of the sermon.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE TEXT**

### **OCCASION**

Paul writes this hortatory letter to the house church at Colossae because a disciple of his, Epaphras, needed his assistance.<sup>1</sup> In short, false teaching was threatening the congregation. Epaphras, probably the founder of the church (Col 1:4, 7–8; 4:12–13; Phm 23), sought Paul’s counsel while the latter was under house arrest in Rome, awaiting trial before Nero Caesar.<sup>2</sup>

The precise nature of the false teaching has generated an enormous amount of secondary literature, but, unfortunately, nothing like a consensus has emerged. The primary problem is that Paul nowhere explicitly identifies either the false teacher(s) or provides a full description of the false teaching.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the interpreter must resort to mirror reading, involving not a little subjectivity. Nonetheless, Paul’s explicit criticisms of the aberrant teaching and his unequivocal antidote, coupled with judicious inferences, provide enough evidence to draw some tentative conclusions about the situation.

In my view, the false teaching centered on visionary experience and showcased an ascent to the heavenly throne room. The climax of this visionary rapture involved the initiate observing, and perhaps also participating in, angelic worship around the glorious throne of God (Col 2:18).<sup>4</sup> The troubling aspect of the teaching is that it pushes Christ to the periphery (2:19) and focuses instead on mystical experience as the touchstone of spirituality. In order to experience this visionary ascent, the teacher(s) prescribed a strict regimen of rules and regulations (“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch,” involving abstinence and self-abasement (2:16–18, 20–21)).<sup>5</sup> It seems likely that some of the “boundary markers” of Judaism were also smuggled in through the back door.<sup>6</sup> Thus

circumcision, dietary laws and Sabbath observance were tacked on to an already ascetic piety.<sup>7</sup> In short, visionary experience resulted in a diminution of the person and work of Christ; a performance-oriented spirituality skewed his cosmic centrality. Based on Paul’s response to this sham spirituality, I infer that, while the teaching may not have explicitly diminished the role of Christ in the cosmos and church, its misguided, narcissistic spirituality resulted in the same distortion.

### **LITERARY GENRE**

In dealing with the text itself, the first issue concerns the literary genre of this celebrated passage. The elevated language and rare vocabulary, rhythmic cadence and intricate structure, as well as its apparent insertion into the flow of Paul’s letter (note the shift from second person pronouns in the preceding and following contexts to strictly third person in the passage itself), suggest that we are dealing with an early Christological hymn or confession of faith. Assertions that it is a hymn have not convinced all; a consensus, however, acknowledges its confessional nature.<sup>8</sup>

An ancillary question arises: Did Paul insert a pre-existing hymn or creed of unknown (to us) composition and provenance or did he compose the entire passage himself? If the former, did Paul edit the hymn in order to emphasize omitted aspects of Christ’s creative and redemptive work and thereby critique the false teaching at Colossae?<sup>9</sup> I have investigated this question in some detail and concluded that the most likely answer is also the simplest: Paul himself is responsible for the existing form and entire content of the passage.<sup>10</sup> Not all will agree with this assessment. Whichever view one holds, Paul employs the confession as a doctrinal platform from which to launch his counter attack against the false teaching. In so doing, Paul redirects the attention of his readers/listeners to apostolic tradition. One might say, “Back to the creed!”

### **LITERARY STRUCTURE**

Another decision relates to the structure of the

hymn or confession. Are we dealing with a passage consisting of two or three stanzas or sections? Some have argued for a three strophe hymn in which vv. 17–18a serve as a short statement describing Christ’s sustaining creation (cf. Heb 1:3).<sup>11</sup> In my view, it is more likely that the passage falls into two basic affirmations: Christ and Creation (vv. 15–17) and Christ and the Church (vv. 18–20). One may prefer to label the second stanza as Christ and the New Creation. Another way of outlining the passage might be Christ and the Beginning (vv. 15–17) and Christ and the New Beginning (vv. 18–20).<sup>12</sup> In any case, this two-fold division seems to follow naturally from the two parallel affirmations that serve as the basic framework for all the other statements in the passage:

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| <p><b>1:15-17</b><br/> <i>hos estin eikōn tou theou ...</i><br/>         who is the image of God ...</p> <p><i>prōtotokos pasēs ktiseōs</i><br/>         firstborn of [or over] all creation</p> <p><i>hoti en autō ... di’ autou ...</i><br/>         for in him ... through him</p> <p><i>kai eis auton</i><br/>         and for him</p> | <p><b>1:18-20</b><br/> <i>hos estin archē tou sōmatou</i><br/>         who is the head of the body [the church]</p> <p><i>prōtotokos ek tōn nekrōn</i><br/>         firstborn from the dead</p> <p><i>hoti en autō ... di’ autou ...</i><br/>         For in him ... through him ...</p> <p><i>eis auton</i><br/>         for him</p> |
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Establishing the basic outline of the passage leads to an obvious way of organizing one’s sermon. The message becomes an exposition centering on the person and work of Christ in both the old and new creations. We may summarize the message in a thematic statement: Christ is the Lord of creation and the Lord of the church. We turn now to the supporting details of this awesome affirmation.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT

An effective way of introducing the text would be to invite the congregation to imagine they are present in an early Christian house church listening to this letter being read out loud (Col 4:16). Clearly, Paul wants to remind his listeners of something they received and were taught as part of their new faith in Christ (Col 2:6–7). Whether it was a hymn or an early creedal statement is not of first importance. What is important are the apostolically grounded affirmations—these must be confessed. Here is a suggestion: have the congregation recite the Nicene Creed together before the sermon. It would be helpful to remind them that Colossians 1:15–20 was one of the primary texts on which this creed was based. This prepares your audience to appreciate the creedal nature of the text to be expounded.

Paul essentially answers a question Jesus asked his twelve disciples some thirty years earlier at Caesarea Philippi: “But who do you say that I am?” (Matt 16:15). This question, asked at a decisive point in Jesus’ ministry, requires a decisive answer. Jesus’ contemporaries offered the following possibilities: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets (Matt 16:14), or “the prophet” (John 6:14; 7:40). Modern scholarship has attempted to answer the question by stripping off the assumed layers of tradition in the canonical Gospels (and sometimes supplementing with snippets of apocryphal gospels!) and recovering the “historical” Jesus.<sup>13</sup> Lay Christians are generally aware of the much ballyhooed results, given the media hype they typically receive, and so a brief survey is in order.<sup>14</sup>

The proposed, scholarly reconstructions span a surprising range and, in many instances, stand in stark contradiction to each other:

- Jesus was a Jewish magician, adept at sleight of hand tricks, who introduced his disciples to hallucinogenic drugs—what one scholar called “the sacred mushroom cult.”<sup>15</sup>
- Jesus was essentially a terrorist, a member of the Palestinian national liberation party of the day called the Zealots.<sup>16</sup>

- Jesus was an itinerant, popular philosopher, perhaps akin to the Cynics.<sup>17</sup>
- Jesus was a simple Galilean sage who taught in memorable parables and one-liners.<sup>18</sup>
- Jesus was an apocalyptic, visionary prophet who expected the imminent end of the world and final judgment.<sup>19</sup>
- Jesus was a social reformer who identified with the poor and oppressed and passively resisted the powerful and wealthy.<sup>20</sup>
- The most off-the-wall reconstruction of the historical Jesus is that of Barbara Thiering. She identifies Jesus as an Essene who married Mary Magdalene, fathered three children, divorced her and was the Wicked Priest referred to in the Dead Sea Scrolls! It gets better. Pilate traveled down to Qumran to supervise Jesus' execution, but in fact Jesus didn't die; he revived in the coolness of the tomb and escaped. Later he traveled in the Mediterranean, consulting with Paul at Caesarea and Corinth. Finally, he ended up in Rome where he lived for many years and died an old man in about A.D. 64. Unbelievable!<sup>21</sup>

While there is a modicum of truth in some of these reconstructions, they share a common denominator, namely a rejection of the portraits of Jesus that emerge from a face value reading of the canonical Gospels, in particular, Peter's divinely revealed response in Matthew's Gospel: "the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:15–17).<sup>22</sup> Needless to say, they also fall well short of the astounding affirmations found in this Pauline letter to believers in Colossae in the early 60's. Furthermore, whether Paul redacted a pre-existing hymn/creed or composed it entirely himself, the letter presupposes that the essential content of the confession was already part of received church tradition, at least in the Pauline churches. The implication of this observation is that a high Christology reaches back to at least to the 50's and probably even earlier.<sup>23</sup>

### CHRIST THE LORD OF CREATION

So, according to the apostle Paul, who is Jesus

of Nazareth? The first stanza of this confession is stunning: it celebrates Christ as the creator ("by Him everything was created," Col 1:16) and in the course of doing so, includes some equally amazing corollaries.

#### RELATIONSHIP TO GOD: IMAGE OF GOD

The first of these corollaries concerns his relationship to God. The predication "He is the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15) affirms the full deity of Christ. The expression implies a level of likeness going far beyond mere similarity.<sup>24</sup> Though strict identity goes too far, a shared likeness is at least required. This does not read into the text later Christian creedal theology because Paul subsequently explains what he means: "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority" (Col 2:9–10).<sup>25</sup> To this extraordinary statement should be added a Pauline parallel from another Christological passage in the letter to the Philippians: "Who, though he was in the form (*morphē*) of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited" (Phil 2:6).<sup>26</sup>

Paul is not alone in this conviction; the apostle John also makes it crystal clear. "The Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1:1). "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen the glory, the glory as of a father's only son ... No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1:14, 18). Jesus' reply to Philip's question, "Lord, show us the Father" (John 14:8) could not be more straightforward: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).<sup>27</sup> The anonymous author of Hebrews is on the same page (Heb 1:3, 5, 8, 10). These texts unequivocally affirm the preexistence of the Son, the one who is "before all things" (Col 1:17). The later formulations of Nicaea ("God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God") and Chalcedon ("truly God") restate Paul's affirmation that the beloved Son is the image of the invisible God. Perhaps the colloquial expres-

sion “spitting image” captures the idea. Peterson paraphrases Col 1:15a this way: “We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen.”<sup>28</sup>

#### **RELATIONSHIP TO THE COSMOS: CREATOR**

He is “the firstborn over all creation” (NIV).<sup>29</sup> This title emphasizes the preeminence and position of the Son as the one who exercises rule over his creation.<sup>30</sup> Since the Son shares equality with God (Phil 2:6), this title sits comfortably with the corollary notion that he is the mediator of creation. Everything that is, whether visible or invisible, came into being through the creative power of the Lord Jesus Christ. This mind-boggling affirmation could only be grasped by the post-resurrection Jesus movement after two indispensable prerequisites: the forty day post-resurrection period of instruction by the risen Lord and the descent of the Holy Spirit to guide them into all truth (John 14:26; cf. 12:16). Tutored by the risen Christ and illuminated by the Paraclete, the story of Jesus now becomes the sequel and fulfillment of the OT story of Israel. The God of Israel, Yahweh, the Lord, is now revealed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In the words of the apostle Thomas, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28).

The creator has entered his creation. This is something Jesus could not share with his disciples out in the boat on the Sea of Galilee. Pedagogically, they were not yet ready—the paradox was simply too profound. Frequently, during Jesus’ ministry, the disciples are flummoxed: “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:41). They must first see with their eyes and touch with their hands the risen Lord (1 John 1:3), and then the Paraclete must lift the veil and reveal Christ in the Scriptures of Israel (2 Cor 4:3–6). The apostle Paul, like “one untimely born” (1 Cor 15:8), was no exception; he too encountered the risen Lord (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8; Gal 1:15–17) and received divine instruction from the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:11–16).<sup>31</sup> Once the equation is made that Jesus is Lord, the hermeneutical key lies close at hand to unlock the meaning of Israel’s Scripture and the awesome God who stands

behind those Scriptures. This explains the transparent assumption by NT authors that what Yahweh of the OT did, the pre-incarnate Lord Jesus did. Simply stated, that is the taproot of the cosmic Christology so evident in the Colossian confession. Christ is the cosmic Lord because he is the cosmic creator.

#### **GENESIS OF COSMIC CHRISTOLOGY**

Rudolf Bultmann posed a question that scholars adhering to strict historical critical methodology have long tried to answer: “The proclaimer became the proclaimed—but in what sense?”<sup>32</sup> I have suggested a way to understand how the apostle Paul could have arrived at his cosmic Christology, given the resources and traditions available to him.<sup>33</sup>

In the first place, the Synoptic Gospels portray Jesus exercising unprecedented authority, something that scandalizes the religious leadership and amazes the crowds (Matt 7:28–29); indeed, he assumes prerogatives proper only to God. For example, he forgives sins (Mark 2:7; Luke 5:21; 7:47–48), amends or even abolishes portions of the sacrosanct Torah (Mark 2:21–22; Matt 5: 21–48) and exercises divine control over demons, disease and nature (e.g., Mark 3:10–12, 22; Matt 14:19–36). Then, leading up to the last visit to Jerusalem, Peter, James and John witness Jesus’ transfiguration, an unveiling of his divine nature (Mark 9:2–8 and pars.). The culminating event, however, that totally transforms the disciples’ understanding of Jesus is the resurrection. Here is the grand demonstration that Jesus is Lord. The light comes on and in that light the apostles see the face of Jesus Christ, the image of God (Acts 9:3–9; 22:4–16; 26:9–18; 2 Cor 4:4–6).

But how did Paul bring all this together to create the unique, cosmic Christology exhibited in Colossians? In my view, a crucial component is the wisdom tradition of ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism. Beginning in Proverbs 8:22–31, God’s attribute of wisdom is personified. Lady Wisdom is described as preexistent and as the creator of the world. This personification is taken up and advanced by Ben Sira (Sir 24:1–34) and the author of Wisdom of Solomon (Wis 7:22–8:1). In

the latter work, we have a remarkable passage that “comes quite close to hypostatizing Wisdom—that is, ascribing material existence to an abstract idea.”<sup>34</sup> What I suggest is that Paul took “one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind” by incarnating God’s wisdom in the person of Jesus Christ, the beloved Son (Col 1:13; cf. Rom 1:3–4; 9:5; 1 Cor 8:6; 1 Tim 2:5–6; 3:16).<sup>35</sup>

This giant leap was facilitated by employing a rabbinic exegetical principle called *gezera shawa* (“an equivalent regulation”), in which passages containing the same word or words interpret one another.<sup>36</sup> The link passages are Proverbs 8:22, where Wisdom is created “in the beginning” (*en archē* LXX), Genesis 1:1, where God initiates creation “in the beginning” (*en archē* LXX) and Genesis 1:26, in which God creates humankind as his “image” (*eikōn* LXX). *Archē* has several different nuances including, “firstborn,” “head,” “beginning,” and “chief.” Precisely these descriptors, in addition to the “image” predication, are applied to Christ in Colossians 1:15–20. Furthermore, even the different meanings of the preposition *en* such as “in,” “by” and “for” each play a crucial role in shaping the Christological confession.<sup>37</sup> Paul’s Pharisaic training thus uniquely qualified him to be “the first and greatest Christian theologian.”<sup>38</sup> In short, the Colossians must reaffirm their commitment to the great confession: Jesus Christ is the Lord of creation.

#### **IMPLICATIONS OF COSMIC CHRISTOLOGY**

To affirm Christ as creator is no small matter. The scope of creation is beyond comprehension. Our galaxy alone, the Milky Way, has an estimated 135 billion stars and there are thought to be at least 100 billion other galaxies! Our infinitesimal speck of the universe teams with millions of species of organisms, with estimates as high as two billion for the number that have existed at some point in our 4.5 billion year old history. So much for the visible things. The invisible realm staggers imagination. Scientists are generally agreed that in order to make sense of the universe, one must assume that 70% of its vast expanse consists of

“dark” energy and 23% of “dark matter.” That is to say, what we can see with our most powerful space probe telescopes is but a mere 6% of what is out there! The Psalmist surely had it right: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”

Not to be overlooked is Paul’s singling out of one particular subset of the invisible order, namely the thrones, dominions, rulers and powers (1:16). These are various classes of angelic, spiritual beings, mentioned again in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (Eph 1:21) and perhaps related to the “elemental spirits of the universe” (2:8 cf. Gal 4:9). Their inclusion in both letters directed to house churches in the Roman province of Asia is probably not accidental but pastorally relevant. Such beings must not be venerated or feared since they, like everything else, stand under the authority of the sovereign Lord of creation.<sup>39</sup>

#### **CHRIST THE GLUE OF THE UNIVERSE**

Not only is Christ the creator, he is the one who holds it all together. “In him all things hold together” (Col 1:16). The writer of Hebrews concurs: “he sustains all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3). Once again, in trying to comprehend the meaning of this, we reach the limits of our intellectual capacity. Because he is God of very God, Christ’s power and control extends to the edges of the universe and beyond.

If one tries to explain the existence and coherence of the universe without invoking the reality and active presence of God, the answer goes something like this. In the standard model of physics, there are four fundamental forces that account for all the known phenomena in the cosmos.

1. The first is called “the strong force.” This is the most powerful force known in the universe and exists within the nucleus of an atom, something too small even to be seen with an electron microscope! But in the amazing world of subatomic particles, an astounding collection of par-

ticles exist, bearing exotic names like fermions, hadrons, leptons, quarks and bosons. One of these theoretical bosons, called the Higgs' boson, after the physicist who postulated its existence, has even been called "the God particle" because of its necessity to explain the behavior of other particles. Elementary particle physicists speak about "spin" (four of these) "flavors" (twelve of these) and even antimatter. The strong force binds together these mysterious particles that apparently are the building blocks of the universe.

2. The second force is only 1/100th as strong as the strong force. It confines the negatively charged electrons in their complex orbits around the positively charged nucleus. The orbital patterns of electrons determine most of the properties of matter that we see around us—hardness, color, chemical properties and so on. In short, the world of ordinary experience is shaped by electromagnetism.

3. The so-called "weak force" is only a trillionth as strong as electromagnetism. It modifies the behavior of the first two forces and causes radioactive decay.

4. The last force is the weakest of all, and yet, paradoxically, exerts the greatest influence. In terms of its relative strength, it is a trillion, trillion, trillion times weaker than the weak force and yet the universe is shaped largely by this force! We call it gravity. It is a force of nearly infinite range and, so far as anybody knows, is never cancelled out by anything else. It has rightly been called a kind of master field. One might say it creates the arena in which all the other forces "live and move and have [their] being" (Acts 17:28).

What is fascinating is that no one has really explained why these forces and particles act the way they do. The quest continues to discover a comprehensive master field theory. I am not optimistic such a goal is attainable. All that we have been able to accomplish up till now—and this has been a remarkable achievement—is to describe many things, though probably not most things, that happen in our universe. We have even been able to explain various levels of causation for these many things. But what we have not been able to do is offer a satisfactory account

of final causation. For that, one must turn to theology grounded in special revelation, Holy Scripture. The ultimate explanation why there is anything at all and why it continues to exist stands before us in Colossians 1:17. Jesus Christ, the cosmic Lord, determines the functions and durations of all the cosmic forces and particles. Teleology is a function of theology. Beyond that we cannot go, for we are, after all, finite beings. But that is okay, because our cosmic Lord is in charge and he has promised that "all things are yours (the world, life, death, the present, the future) ... all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God" (1 Cor 3:22).

### **CHRIST THE LORD OF THE CHURCH**

The second stanza of our confession shifts from ontology (the nature of being) and cosmogony (theory of origins) to soteriology. Like the first stanza there are corollaries that carry immense theological freight. The primary theological term describing the saving work of the cosmic Lord is reconciliation (*apokatallasō*), a term requiring unpacking. But first we must examine the affirmations leading up to it.

### **CHRIST THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH**

I have already suggested that Paul composes his portrait of the cosmic Christ on the basis of a sketch consisting of the various nuances of the word *archē*. On this understanding, one can appreciate the appropriateness of affirming Christ as the "head (*kephalē*) of the body, the church" (1:18). The expression affirms Christ as the "life principle and sovereign ruler" of his body, that is, the church.<sup>40</sup> Thus the church is bound to the cosmic Christ as both her source and authority. In the background we hear an echo of the Master who promised his beleaguered disciples near the shrine of Pan at Caesarea Philippi, reputed by the pagans to be a portal to Hades, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Matt 16:18b). It is also not without significance that in this letter Paul stresses the lordship of Christ over the thrones, dominions, rulers

and powers who inhabit the invisible realm (Col 1:18) and that Christ “disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it [i.e., the cross]” (2:15). One hears a similar theme in the related epistle to the Ephesians (3:10; 6:12).

### **CHRIST THE BEGINNING AND THE FIRSTBORN FROM THE DEAD**

Whereas one might naturally connect the “beginning” in v. 18 with Paul’s earlier cosmogonic Christology of the first stanza, the immediate link with the ensuing title points us in a different direction: Paul is speaking about the new creation initiated in the church.

These two titles are semantic neighbors, the latter explaining how it is that Christ became the *archē* of the church. The new beginning arises in the resurrection, implied in the title “firstborn from the dead.” Whereas context required that “firstborn” in stanza one was not primarily temporal in perspective, the opposite is true here.<sup>41</sup> Christ is firstborn precisely because he is the first to come back from the realm of the dead and to hold its power in his hand. According to Paul, Christ functions as the “firstborn within a large family,” each member of which is predestined to be conformed to his image [*eikōn*] (Rom 8:29; cf. Heb 12:22). This theological confession also undergirds the message of hope in the Apocalypse. There Jesus Christ is likewise “the firstborn of the dead,” and “the living one [who] was dead... [but now] alive forever and ever; and holds “the keys of Death and of Hades” (Rev 1:5, 18). Paul can also depict this climactic saving deed in cultic terms when he emphatically reminds the Corinthians, “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died” (1 Cor 15:20, 23). The temporal aspect of “firstfruits” is clearly to the fore (cf. Lev 23:10–11, 17, 20). The same may be said with regard to “firstborn from the dead” without at all denying the notion of pre-eminence in the background.

There is the possibility that another important

Pauline theme lurks behind this predication. It may be that Paul is alluding to the notion of Christ as the Second Adam.<sup>42</sup> Thus in 1 Corinthians 15:22 Paul offers this crisp theological summary: “for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.” This is spelled out more fully in the justly famous passage in Romans 5:12–21, where Paul asserts that “death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, *who is a type of the one who was to come*” (Rom 5:14 [*italics mine*]).

### **CHRIST THE FIRST PLACE IN EVERYTHING [PRŌTEUŌN]**

The purpose clause at the end of v. 18, summarizes Paul’s antidote to the poisonous teaching and exposes the nub of the problem at Colossae. The teachers who declared the Colossians disqualified, if they did not participate in angelic worship (2:18), were, in fact, the ones debarred: they were not “holding fast to the head” (2:19). For them visionary experience took pride of place in Christian experience. Paul’s critique is unsparing: without Christ at the center, it is of no value whatsoever (2:23).

Note that Paul does not condemn visionary mysticism per se. How could he given his own ecstatic, visionary experiences (2 Cor 12:1–10 cf. Acts 22:17–21; 27:23)? Rather, what Paul finds disturbing about the false teaching is its focus on the periphery of the throne room, not the person who sits on the throne (cf. Rev 4–5). Paul’s corrective consists of this nice piece of realized eschatology: “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:1–3). The upshot is that the Colossian believers should not aspire to visionary ascents to the throne room because they are already there! In a profound, spiritual sense, they are already seated with Christ on his throne by virtue of being in Christ. Because this is so, Paul can confidently affirm: “We would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor



5:7; cf. Phil 1:23). To be sure, this spiritual reality is presently “hidden.” But at the Parousia, that which is hidden gives way to a fully revealed glory (Col 3:4 cf. Rom 8:18).

### **CHRIST THE RECONCILER OF CHURCH AND COSMOS**

We are now in position to examine the central theological affirmation of stanza two. In the term reconciliation we have a rich reservoir of ideas and concepts.<sup>43</sup> *Apokatallasō* conveys the notion of reestablishing “proper friendly interpersonal relations after these have been disrupted or broken.”<sup>44</sup> It stands over against its opposite, namely, a state of estrangement and hostility (Col 1:21). In this context, estrangement exists between God and sinners as a result of trespasses and evil deeds that are duly recorded as if on a bill of indebtedness (Col 2:13–14). Such a state of estrangement and hostility requires an act of reconciliation, of peacemaking. Paul indicates that the initiative for such reconciliation lies entirely with God and that the Son was the agent through whom (*dia autou*) “God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col 1:20). This coheres with Paul’s thought elsewhere on the atonement (Rom 5:10; 2 Cor 5:18–21).

But in what sense can it be said that Christ’s cross reconciles “all things,” especially those things that are in heaven? The “all things” of v. 16 must be parallel to the “all things” of v. 20, leading to the conclusion that Paul has in mind the entire cosmos, including the thrones, dominions, rulers and powers (Col 1:16).<sup>45</sup> At face value, Paul appears to say that reconciliation affects all things and is comprehensive in its effect. In short, we must raise the question whether, at the end of the day, Paul envisions a universal reconciliation.

If this text were all we had on the topic, there would be little choice but to acknowledge that Paul affirmed universalism. It does not, however, exist in solitary isolation. Indeed, the letter of Colossians itself provides a larger context within which to interpret his comments about the scope of reconciliation. Why would Paul even bother to “struggle” (Col 2:1)

for the Colossians if all are reconciled to God, regardless of their personal response to God’s initiative? Furthermore, Paul’s warning to his readers implies that not all ends well if one shifts from the hope promised in the gospel (Col 1:23). It is unnecessary to prolong argument here. The Pauline corpus speaks unequivocally: reconciliation requires a response of faith, a faith that perseveres until the end (e.g., Rom 1:18, 32; 2:8–9, 12; 10:1; 1 Cor 1:18; 2 Cor 2:15; 2 Thess 2:10). I conclude that Paul’s sweeping language about reconciliation means that the basis for reconciliation in the cross of Christ makes salvation *available* to all but not *automatic* for all. A magic-like transformation, operating independently of human response to Christ’s atoning death on the cross, is quite foreign to Paul’s thought.<sup>46</sup>

But what about the hostile angelic and spirit beings? Later in his letter, Paul pulls back the curtain on the events at Golgotha and reveals that more was taking place behind the scenes, than meets the eye. “He [Christ] disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it [i.e., the cross]” (Col 2:15). The Philippian confession anticipates the grand finale of redemptive history when “at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10–11). Apparently, then, not all spirit beings willingly submit; some must be forcefully subdued as in 1 Corinthians 15:24–28. Thus reconciliation includes the idea of pacification.<sup>47</sup> This chimes in with the apostle Peter’s depiction of Christ’s triumph over “the spirits in prison,” when the “angels, authorities, and powers [are] made subject to him” (1 Pet 3:22, cf. Eph 1:21–22).

Paul does not in Colossians elaborate on the destiny of inanimate things other than to include them within the sweeping scope of reconciliation. He does, however, mention their final disposition in Romans 8:18–23, where he declares: “creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” In all likelihood then, Paul shared with Peter

and John a vision of “a new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21–22). The reconciling work of the cosmic Christ prepares for “the renewal of all things” (Matt 19:28).

### SUMMARY

Before Paul launches his attack on the false teaching (Col 2:8–23), he lays the foundation for his remarks by redirecting the attention of the readers/listeners to a creedal affirmation highlighting the person and work of Christ (Col 1:15–20). This confessional statement, reformulated in the later creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon, functions as an antidote to the Colossian poison. The passage confesses Christ as the center of Christian experience, indeed, of the entire universe. Like the “strong force” in the nucleus of an atom, Christ holds all things together. As the Lord of old and new creations, everything lies under his purview and sovereign rule. Even the angelic and astral beings who seem to have loomed so large in the estimation of the false teachers, fall under his jurisdiction; indeed, they are his handiwork. Based on this confession, Paul’s parenthesis in 2:8–3:4 demotes them to their proper, peripheral orbit around the cosmic Lord.

Viewed from a cosmic Christology perspective, the false teaching is exposed as shallow and a mere “shadow of what is to come,” whereas the “substance belongs to Christ” (Col 1:17). Paul lifts the vision of the Colossians to “the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1). And what a vision it is! The cosmic Christ in Colossians 1:15–20 explodes our puny notions about him. Like John on the isle of Patmos we need a fresh vision of his majesty (Rev 1:17–18). This is the remedy for the Colossian aberration and the self-absorbed myopia of our own day.

### APPLICATION OF PAUL’S COSMIC CHRISTOLOGY

Paul’s admonition is timeless in its application. Each era of Christianity has exhibited moments of imbalance, when Christ was displaced from the center and allowed to orbit around something of lesser

importance. Whether asceticism, dogma, eccentric personalities, ecstasy, liturgy, ritual, tradition or visionary experience, each has the potential to displace Christ from his rightful place as Lord of all. These alternative focal points may “have indeed an appearance of wisdom,” but when they supplant the all-sufficiency and centrality of Christ, they amount to mere “human commands and teachings” and are of “no value in checking self-indulgence” (Col 2:23).

Christian narcissism threatens us with a new Colossian heresy. Pastors need to address this crisis in a loving but firm manner (Gal 6:1; Eph 4:14–15; 1 Tim 1:3–7; 6:11). I am not encouraging open season on various and sundry forms of Christian spirituality and worship we find objectionable. Great charity, discernment and flexibility are required. My own generational preferences should not become the norm. On the other hand, constant vigilance must be maintained, whatever form of spiritual discipline and worship one practices, lest the centrality of Christ be subverted. The Dark Lord is a master of deception and deceit and pastors must constantly be vigilant to detect when the Lordship of Christ is being undermined (2 Cor 2:11; 11:3, 14; cf. 1 Pet 5:8–9). Such vigilance calls for discernment: “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (Rev 2:7, et al).

Authentic Christian life and worship must be christocentric because Christ is the center of the cosmos and the church. The mystery of Christ rests not on mere human tradition, but on the apostolic tradition concerning Christ (1:7, 26–28; 2:8). This requires being “rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, *just as you were taught*” (Col 2:8 [italics mine]). From this it follows that “discipleship is ... a transformation of the mind, and only through such transformation can the will of God be discerned (Rom 12:2).”<sup>48</sup> The mind matters. “Think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received.” (Phil 4:8). Modern Christians must not be hoodwinked by the idle notion that Christology is just theoretical speculation; in truth, it is the indispensable entry point into all the fundamental doctrines of Christianity.<sup>49</sup>

How, then, as Christians, do we respond to this magnificent portrait of the Cosmic Christ? The short answer is: we confess him as Lord. This involves much more than mouthing a mantra. As our understanding of the person and work of Christ deepens, we discover the master key that unlocks the meaning of life: “Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:2–3). Christ at the center creates a new center of consciousness and a new orientation:

1. Our hearts swell with joyful thanksgiving to our heavenly Father who “has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col 1:12–13). We acknowledge with profound gratitude that this rescue and transfer operation was costly beyond measure. Through the beloved Son’s death, in his fleshly body and by the blood of his cross, we are reconciled to God, and experience peace with God (Col 1:20, 22; Rom 5:1).

2. Our lives reflect hope. We do not live in a vast, impersonal universe of mysterious, unfathomable forces in which the ultimate outcome for everyone and everything is oblivion. On the contrary, this is our Father’s world, a world created and preserved by the Lord Jesus (Col 1:16). But the best is yet to come: the Cosmic Christ promises to unveil a glorious, new creation, exceeding our wildest expectations, “the hope laid up for [us] in heaven” (Col 1:5; cf. 1:23; 3:4).

3. Closely related to hope is spiritual stability. Christ at the center maintains our emotional, intellectual and spiritual equilibrium in the midst of a cacophony of competing views, voices and values, all clamoring for our allegiance and threatening to tip us off balance. Being “steadfast in the faith without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel” (Col 1:23) is the guaranteed formula for becoming “mature in Christ” (Col 1:28). No ascetic or esoteric ritual, no gimmick or special regimen and no new philosophy, therapy or vision can really deliver the goods. “They are simply human commands and teachings” (Col 2:22).

What matters is Christ in you the hope of glory. And having him we have all we need.

4. We willingly worship the Lord of all. Worship is no longer wearisome; wakened within us is a Spirit-prompted outpouring of adoration and praise. There is a renewed sense of the communion of the saints as we “let the word of Christ dwell in [us] richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in [our] hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God” (Col 3:16). And this is not just on the Lord’s day; for us, every day is the Lord’s day since we “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col 3:17).

5. We give witness to our Cosmic Lord. Overwhelmed by the grace of God in Christ, we seek to fulfill Paul’s admonition to the Colossians: “Conduct yourself wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone” (Col 4:5–6). The lost surely need a friend in Jesus, but they also desperately need a cosmic Lord and redeemer.<sup>50</sup>

#### **SUGGESTION FOR THE CLOSING**

I think a hymn celebrating the person and work of Christ would be a fitting way to conclude the sermon.<sup>51</sup> While many could be selected, I especially like “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name” with its grand concluding line “and crown him Lord of all!” Paul would be pleased.

#### **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Maria A. Pascuzzi weighs the arguments pro and con for the authenticity of Colossians and concludes that Pauline authorship is more plausible (“Reconsidering the Authorship of Colossians,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 23.2 [2013]: 223–45). See also her discussion of the ratio of modern scholars advocating one side or the other (p. 223, n. 3).

<sup>2</sup> I still incline to the view that Paul wrote Colossians from Rome, although a good case can be made for Caesarea. See, e.g., E. Earle Ellis, *The Making of the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 266–75. In my

view, despite its relative closeness to Colossae, Ephesus has less to commend it.

<sup>3</sup> For two relatively recent studies that survey the history of research, see Christian Stettler, “The Opponents of Paul at Colossae,” in *Paul and His Opponents* (ed., Stanley E. Porter; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 169–200, and Jerry L. Sumney, “Studying Paul’s Opponents: Advances and Challenges,” in *ibid.*, 7–58, esp. 29–33.

<sup>4</sup> This view was articulated by Fred O. Francis (“Humility and Angelic Worship” in *Conflict at Colossae: A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity Illustrated by Selected Modern Studies* [ed., Fred O. Francis and Wayne A. Meeks; rev. ed.; SBLSPS 4; Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1975], 163–95) and further developed by Andrew T. Lincoln (*Paradise Now and Not Yet* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], 110–114) and Thomas J. Sappington, (*Revelation and Redemption at Colossae* [Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplements 53; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991], 154–60). Stettler argues that the opponents were Torah-observant, non-Christian Jews who sought mystical, visionary experiences (*ibid.*), while Sumney holds that they were professing Christians (*ibid.*). The other leading interpretation of the phrase *thrēskeia tōn angelōn* takes it as an objective genitive construction in which the devotees venerate or worship the angelic beings and “the elemental spirits of the universe.” This is Frank Thielman’s view (*Theology of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005], 378). If, in fact, worship of spirit beings was part of the teaching, I find it hard to account for Paul’s critique. Elsewhere in his letters, he is unsparing in his attack upon those who compromise monotheism (cf. 1 Cor 8:5–6; 10:14–22; Gal 5:20; Rom 1:21–23; ). It’s not even clear from Paul’s language in Colossians that he treats the perpetrator(s) of the false teaching as completely “beyond the pale.” On this see Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 11.

<sup>5</sup> For many expositors, self-abasement (*tapeinophrosynē*) refers to rigorous fasting. Fasting was a regular feature of visionary experiences in paganism and Judaism. However, Heinz Giesen, “*tapeinophrosynē*,” *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 3:334 argues that “it appears more appro-

priate to take one’s cue from the general usages of this term within the NT and to understand *tapeinophrosynē* here as *humility* ... doubtless perverted whenever heretics take pleasure in it ... [since it] only serves the indulgence of the flesh, i.e., religiously inspired egoism, which excludes humility.”

<sup>6</sup> “Boundary markers” or “badges of Jewish identity” are expressions that various Pauline scholars have adopted to denote those practices of Judaism that distinguished them from Gentiles. See James D. G. Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 65 (1983): 95–122 and Scott Hafemann, “Paul and His Interpreters,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 666–79.

<sup>7</sup> N. T. Wright sees the same basic contours as the Judaizers Paul combated in Galatians (*The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986], 24–30). Visionary mysticism masked the Judaizing bent of the teaching.

<sup>8</sup> On the background of this passage, see Larry R. Helyer, “Colossians 1:15-20: Pre-Pauline or Pauline?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26.2 (June 1983): 167-179; *idem*, “Arius Revisited: The Firstborn over all Creation (Col. 1:15),” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31.1 (March 1988): 59-67; *idem*, “Recent Research on Col 1:15-20 (1980-1990),” *Grace Theological Journal* 12.1 (1992): 51-67 and *idem*, “Cosmic Christology and Col. 1:15-20,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37.2 (June 1994): 235-246. For more recent research see Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “Tradition and Redaction in Col 1:15–20,” *Revue Biblique* 2 (1995): 231–41; Vincent A. Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith: An Authorial, Structural and Theological Investigation of the Cosmic Christology in Col 1:15–20* (Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology 41; Leuven: Peeters, 2006); M. E. Gordley, *The Colossian Hymn in Context: An Exegesis in Light of Jewish and Greco-Roman Hymnic and Epistolary Conventions* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007); Murray J. Harris, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament: Colossians and Philemon* (2d. ed.; Nashville: B&H, 2010) and David W. Pao, *Colossians & Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> In Murphy-O’Connor’s view, “Paul transformed the hymn into a formidable weapon in his struggle to

ensure that the earthly activity of Christ was recognized" (ibid., 231).

<sup>10</sup> Helyer, "Pre-Pauline or Pauline"? In *Cosmic Leap of Faith*, Pizzuto argues that the author of the letter wrote Col 1:15–20, but holds that the author was a post-Pauline disciple (73–93, 117).

<sup>11</sup> The *Mittelstrophe* view typically entails the notion that Paul edited a pre-existing hymn in which the cosmos is referred to as a body. Paul edits the hymn by inserting the words "the church," thus changing the meaning of "body" from cosmos to church.

<sup>12</sup> Pizzuto argues for two foci but organized around a chiasmic structure for the entire passage (*Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 203–205).

<sup>13</sup> I put "historical" in quotation marks because it signifies the reconstructed Jesus following the historical-critical method and the so-called "criteria for authenticity."

<sup>14</sup> The renewed, so-called "third quest" for the historical Jesus has, like its predecessors, failed to garner a consensus. See Scot McKnight, "Who is Jesus? An Introduction to Jesus Studies," in *Jesus Under Fire* (eds., Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 51–72. For a review of previous quests and their questionable results, see C. Brown, "Historical Jesus, Quest of," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1002), 326–41). Most of these attempts share a common denominator, namely, an approach "from below." That is, these researchers try to recover the historical Jesus from the encrustations of later faith now layered upon the earliest traditions. This enterprise necessarily brackets out the creeds of the early church and the doctrine of inspiration as a presupposition for understanding the historical Jesus. In their view, to adopt such presuppositions amounts to doing research "from above," disdained as unhistorical and therefore not accredited by the academy. Historical scholarship, so the argument goes, must be completely neutral with regard to faith commitments. The most candid admission about the shortcomings of historical Jesus research appears in Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Championed by the eccentric Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots: A Study of*

*the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity* (New York: Scribner, 1967). Most recently, Reza Aslan, an Iranian-American, has championed this view with a controversial best seller, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Random House, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: HarperOne, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Argued by atheist Robert W. Funk the convener of the Jesus Seminar and spokesperson for its controversial results, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> As developed in the magisterial work of the Roman Catholic New Testament scholar John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991, 1994, 2001) and essentially accepted by Scot McKnight, *A New Vision for Israel: The Teachings of Jesus in National Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) and Allison, *Historical Christ*.

<sup>20</sup> Championed by Adolf Harnack of the early 20th century (*What is Christianity?* [trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders; New York: Putnam, 1908]) and modified by Marcus Borg (*Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* [New York: HarperOne, 1995]). For a recent documentary advocating a similar approach, see *Who was Jesus?* (Discovery Channel 2009; DVD 2010).

<sup>21</sup> *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Unlocking the Secrets of His Life Story* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> See my arguments in support of the view that Peter's confession of Jesus as the Son of God in Matthew goes well beyond being merely a synonym for Messiah (*The Life and Witness of Peter* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012], 40–43).

<sup>23</sup> Larry Hurtado demonstrates how a high Christology derives from the earliest, Aramaic-speaking church in Jerusalem (*Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003]). Gordon D. Fee says, "a higher Christology does not exist in the NT. Indeed, what is said here by Paul is also reflected in John and Hebrews; and since it is here asserted by Paul as something that the Colossians should also be in tune with, one has to assume that such a Christology existed in the church from a very early time" (*Pauline Christol-*

ogy [Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007], 303).

<sup>24</sup> “All the emphasis is on the equality of the *eikōn* with the original...the being of Jesus as image is only another way of talking about His being as the Son” (Gerhard Kittel, “*eikōn*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964] 2:395). “There is no difference here between the image and the essence of the invisible God. In Christ we see God,” (Otto Flender, “Image,” *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976] 2:288). “Here *eikōn* means not so much resemblance as derivation and participation; it is not so much the likeness of a copy to its model, but the revelation and, as it were, emanation of the prototype. The image of something is its expression, the thing itself” (Ceslas Spicq, “*eikōn*,” *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994]1:417–28).

<sup>25</sup> “It [*plērōma*] must mean deity, Godhead, entirety, the sum total of divine attributes” (Reinier Schippers, [“Fullness,” *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*]1:740). Suzanne Watts Henderson argues that “fullness” reflects a mode of speaking about God’s redeeming work through Christ in the cross and resurrection, something that can be shared by the church as well (“God’s Fullness in Bodily Form: Christ and Church in Colossians” *Expository Times* 118.4 [2007]: 169–73). Her view is similar to that of James D. G. Dunn (*The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], p. 102). Both reflect attempts to scale down cosmic Christology from cosmological to soteriological dimensions.

<sup>26</sup> Gerald F. Hawthorne concludes that *morphē theou* means “the essential nature and character of God,” (*Philippians* [Word Biblical Commentary 43; Waco: Word, 1983], 84).

<sup>27</sup> Dunn argues that the Gospel of John, at the end of the first century, is the first Christian document to affirm the preexistence and full deity of Christ. He attributes this to a remarkable intellectual break-through in Christian theology (*Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* [2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996]). But what evidence is there for such an intellectual

break-through and why is such a hypothesis even necessary, given the arguments for early high Christology? I suspect that scholarly predilection for developmental theories is at work. See Helyer, “Cosmic Christology,” 241–47 for a more in depth discussion.

<sup>28</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995), 425.

<sup>29</sup> This genitival construction is what Daniel B. Wallace calls a “genitive of subordination” (*Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 103).

<sup>30</sup> Helyer, “Arius Revisited,” 62–67.

<sup>31</sup> Leander Keck says that Paul’s thought exemplified “a fundamental principle of Christian theology—that Christology makes event-based soteriology possible, and conversely, that event-based soteriology makes Christology necessary” (“Paul in New Testament Theology: Some Preliminary Remarks,” in *The Nature of New Testament Theology* [ed. Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett; Oxford: Blackwell, 2006], 112).

<sup>32</sup> *The Theology of the New Testament* (trans. Kendrick Grobel; New York: Scribner, 1955), 33.

<sup>33</sup> See Helyer, “Cosmic Christology,” and idem, *Witness of Jesus, Paul and John*, 281–89.

<sup>34</sup> Donald A. Hagner, “Wisdom of Solomon,” *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 3:948.

<sup>35</sup> Readers will recognize the famous words of astronaut Neil Armstrong just before he stepped onto the surface of the moon on July 20, 1969. Pizzuto, *Cosmic Leap of Faith*, says, “the hymnic author introduces a ‘leap’ in christological faith,” (209). Gordon Fee adamantly opposes any notion of Paul being indebted to Second Temple Wisdom speculation (*Pauline Christology*, pp. 317–32, 595–630). This is not the place to enter into a lengthy rejoinder. Suffice it to say, in my judgment, the conceptual parallels are quite convincing.” The keen mind of the apostle Paul almost certainly was steeped in this background. How could he have studied at Jerusalem and not known this work? Striking parallels between Wisdom of Solomon and Paul’s letters exist beyond Col 1:15–20. Basically, Paul transferred to Jesus Christ the attributes and role of personified

Wisdom. The fundamental difference—making all the difference!—lies in the fact that Paul does not merely personify Christ as Wisdom; rather, he incarnates Christ as Wisdom” (Helyer, *Witness of Jesus, Paul and John*, p. 286). For a view similar to mine see Ben Witherington III, “Christology,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 105, and Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 379, n. 15. Daniel J. Ebert IV, *Wisdom Christology* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2011), takes essentially the same tack as Fee. See my review of Ebert’s book in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 55.3 (September 2012): 630–32.

<sup>36</sup> This was one of seven rules for interpreting Scripture formulated by Hillel the Elder. He was a predecessor, perhaps the grandfather, of Gamaliel, the teacher of Saul of Tarsus (Acts 22:3). Several passages from Paul’s letters give evidence of this principle (cf. Rom 4:3–7).

<sup>37</sup> See further Helyer, *Witness of Jesus, Paul and John*, 277–81. The approach I am suggesting was first proposed by C. F. Burney, “Christ as the ARXH of Creation,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 27 (1926): 160–77. Burney worked this out on the understanding that Paul used the Hebrew text. Perhaps he did. It works either way in Hebrew or Greek.

<sup>38</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of the Apostle Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 2.

<sup>39</sup> See further Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

<sup>40</sup> See Michael Lattke, “*kephalē*,” *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991): 2:286.

<sup>41</sup> I interpret the genitive as either partitive or genitive of source. That is, for a brief time, Christ experiences the realm of death, but then departs from this state or condition (note the preposition *ek*). One might even suggest a genitive (or ablative) of separation (Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 107–109).

<sup>42</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 78–86 argues for Second Adam Christology as a comprehensive explanation for the entire passage. I think his insight is helpful with regard to the second stanza, but inadequate for the first.

<sup>43</sup> Ralph P. Martin, saw in this term such a comprehen-

sive view of Christ’s saving work that he wrote a book suggesting it as the central organizing principle of NT theology (*Reconciliation: A Study of Paul’s Theology* [rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989]). There is much to be said for this proposal. I offer this paper as a tribute to Dr. Martin who passed away on February 25, 2013. He was my doctoral mentor at Fuller Theological Seminary and a world-class scholar, fine preacher and Christian gentleman. Though he has gone on to be with Christ, which is far better (Phil 1:23), his deeds live on (Rev 14:13). *Zichrono livraka!*

<sup>44</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, “Reconciliation, Forgiveness,” *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (2d ed.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1989) 1: 502. See also Spicq, “*katallagē*,” *Theological Lexicon*, 262–66.

<sup>45</sup> See Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 46. Pizzuto insists that “despite attempts to deny the cosmic dimension of the hymn by subordinating its cosmology to its soteriology... Christ can only be cosmic redeemer insofar as all thing do, in fact, cohere in him” (*Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 204).

<sup>46</sup> Colin Brown emphasizes that “reconciliation is incomplete until it is accepted by both sides” (“Reconciliation,” *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978] 3:170). Sumney agrees: “This passage does not advocate a universalism that entails the salvation of all” (*Colossians*, 76).

<sup>47</sup> So Spicq, *Theological Lexicon*, 266.

<sup>48</sup> David W. Pao, *Colossians & Philemon* (ed., Clinton E. Arnold; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 117.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Block-buster movies such as *Star Wars*, *Superman*, *Batman* and *Spiderman* testify to the perennial yearning for someone bigger than life to intervene and rescue us from the forces of darkness and depravity.

<sup>51</sup> I realize that hymns have rather fallen out of many Christian worship services these days. Perhaps this could be an occasion in which to reintroduce the congregants to the rich hymnic heritage of our common faith. If this is out of the question, there is a contemporary, Christian song called “Jesus at the Center” by Israel & New Breed (Integrity/Columbia, 2012) based upon Col 1:15–20 that could serve to reinforce the message.