

The Supremacy of Christ

DAVE BAST

You might think that a brief letter written almost two thousand years ago by a Jewish Christian theologian from a Roman prison cell, addressed to a group of gentile converts living in rural Asia Minor would have very little to say to us today. Surprisingly though, Colossians is one of the most strikingly relevant books I know. In a culture where many claim to have found the secret to true spirituality, where various writers promise to share special techniques that will lead people into a deeper and more powerful kind of spiritual health and experience, Paul's message in Colossians is simple: Christ is the center, he says; the center of everything. He is the one. Everything that exists was made through him and for him. Everything anybody needs, either in this life or in the life to come, is to be found in him. So join us now on *Groundwork* as we continue to explore the message of Colossians about who Jesus Christ really is. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, this is the second program in a brief, four-part series on Christology. Christology is the branch of Christian teaching or doctrine about the person of Jesus Christ, in particular; who he was and is and how that is relevant to us; and what is the work that he came to do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we said in the first program that all Christology...all the theology of who Jesus is...begins with the fact of his being undeniably human; and we talked about that, that he was an ordinary human being who didn't look extraordinary to anybody who was just looking at him or grew up around him in Nazareth; but that eventually he lit out on a preaching and teaching career that was marked by signs and wonders and miracles and amazing teachings and parables; and then, of course, he died, but rose again from the dead; and after that, he sent his Holy Spirit; and we said that in places like Colossians 1, the Apostle Paul, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, reveals the deeper truths of who this human being was, because it turns out he wasn't only human, he was divine. He was the Son of God who created...who existed before creation, and who executed creation and created everything that exists and now has redeemed it; and it all comes together in him. So, that sort of was the first program, to establish that there is divinity in Jesus, as well as true and undeniable humanity both, and that combination allowed him to save us and to create a kingdom of light...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In which we are now citizens.

DAVE BAST

Yes; if you want the short answer of Christology, orthodox Christian teaching in all forms and places and at all times has said: It is pretty simple. He is fully human—really and truly human—and he is fully God—really and truly divine. So, end of series; but obviously we want to dig into that a little bit more.

One of the ideas that people often get or form about Jesus is that, you know, in the beginning there was this simple Jewish rabbi who said a lot of beautiful things, and maybe he even worked some miracles through prayer or in some other way; and then later his followers got ahold of this idea that he was somehow God and they turned him into this amazing thing that he never intended them to think or...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Or say; and so, scholars, especially beginning with the 20th Century, going back even into the 19th Century, set out on what one book called the quest for the historical Jesus: Who was Jesus really? Can we get behind all of these miracle stories and these amazing, unbelievable things that they said about him and figure out just what he said and who he really was? It is important, I think, at the outset to say that is not what happened; that is not how it was. The letters, including Colossians Chapter 1, were written before any of the Gospels.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

So, there never was a time when somehow Paul and these other guys got ahold of the simple story of Jesus and turned it—twisted it—into some god in human form kind of thing. From the very outset the first Christians worshipped Jesus as God. That was the *first* thing they knew about him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, in Colossians 1 Paul makes it clear that both are true, but also why it is appropriate. He really is the living God in the flesh; and in our previous program, we kind of left off, I think, around verse 17 of Colossians 1, but Paul has more to say; and so, he goes on now starting at verse 18 to say:

And he (that is, Jesus) is the head to the body, the Church. He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross.

So, now we are moving from the creation, which we looked at in the previous program, to the Church, which on one level somebody might say: Well, that is a little bit of a comedown. It is sort of like saying, you know, the President of the United States is the leader of the free world, and head of the local YMCA.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It's like, well, big deal about the YMCA, when you are head of the... So also, if he is the head of all creation, who cares about the Church? It is just sort of this...but this is actually, for Paul, an advance, even on creation because the Church represents the new creation.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; and we want to unpack that idea, too, but I think first it is important to pick up on this word, *firstborn*, because that is one we have seen before in verse 15, where Paul says: Christ is firstborn of the creation; but which he does not mean he is the first thing God created. That was one of the early heresies of the Church, and we are going to kind of explore that in this series, too—a teaching called *Arianism*, which said that Jesus is a creature: he is a great creature; he is the *first* creature; he is a very high and powerful creature, but God made him. No, when Paul says he is the firstborn of the creation, he means that Jesus holds the place over creation which belonged to the firstborn of the family...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Meaning it is his inheritance...it is his by right. He is supreme. His is the supremacy, as we pointed out in the last program; but now Paul repeats that phrase, and he says he is the firstborn from the dead, and that is a clear reference to the resurrection.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; the resurrection is indeed the key in all of this, and the Church has often talked about the fact that, you know, Jesus didn't raise himself. He was dead. The Father raised the Son to new life; and in so doing, the Father put his stamp of approval on the entire life and ministry of Jesus—everything he ever taught—it is true, the Father is saying—because I am bringing him back from the dead as the risen Lord and Savior of all. So, the resurrection is the linchpin—the resurrection is the key event—that transforms Jesus from maybe what some could get away with saying was just a really bright, human teacher into the living Son of God. It all really is about Easter.

DAVE BAST

Yes, Easter...that is great. You remind me of a comment by a New Testament scholar who said: There wouldn't be any Good Friday if there hadn't been an Easter.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Stop and think about that. What he meant was, nobody would have remembered Jesus' death if he hadn't been raised from the dead, because crucifixions were a dime a dozen in the Roman world...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; not at all unusual.

DAVE BAST

All kinds of people got crucified and nobody cared much about their stories; but the reason we still tell the story of Jesus on the cross is because three days later God reversed all that and he undid the shame by giving Christ glory and exalting him. He nullified the condemnation of those who said he was guilty of blasphemy by saying: No, he was telling the truth when he claimed to be one with me; and the resurrection is what launched the apostles on their mission to reach the world with the good news about Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The Church is built on the foundation of the resurrection; no resurrection, no Church, no message to proclaim; and so, as the German theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg, used to say: What Jesus was, was the future breaking into our past. Jesus is the future human being in a new, resurrected body. He is our future that we have already seen in the past.

DAVE BAST

Right; he is sort of the prototype...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Of what is going to happen to each of us, the way a car might be made first as a prototype before the production model comes along. So, that is why it is important to say he is the head of his body, the Church;

and we want to explore the implications of that in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are looking at the part of Colossians 1, Dave, where Paul has just said that he [Jesus] is the head of the body and the head of the Church, and that is all founded on his resurrection; that he has the supremacy in all things because he was the one the Father raised back to life; and now, among the many implications of that resurrection, is the fact that he is the head of the Church; and we just said a minute ago, that could look like a comedown after being said you are the head of all creation, but for Paul it was a building of an argument. We will want to wonder: What is so important about the Church that that is important that he is the head of the Church?

DAVE BAST

Right; well, you could especially think of it as a comedown when you consider what the Church must have looked like when Paul wrote those words, probably around 60 AD, so it is about 30 years after the crucifixion and resurrection. The Church has been going now for a while, but it hasn't exactly taken off. I mean, it is a few people here and there. They are sometimes under pressure locally by people in their own community. You know, he is writing this little town of Colossae, which didn't amount to much, frankly, even in the ancient world; and it might seem kind of disparaging to say: Well, Jesus is the head of his body, the Church; but from small things great things grow, as Jesus himself said in his parables, you know. A grain of mustard seed, that is what the Church is like. It is going to grow to become this huge thing. Christ's headship is very important for the nature and identity of the Church.

It probably suggests two different things: On the one hand, he is the origin of the Church, like the head of a stream; and in the other sense, he is the authority over the Church.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes; when we talk about the head of a stream it reminds me of an image from the book of Ezekiel, where Ezekiel in a dreamlike state that God puts him in takes him to the Temple in Jerusalem, and Ezekiel sees a little trickle of water coming out from the Temple—just a little trickle—just nothing, you know, just a few drops; but then, he follows the trickle and all of a sudden it is getting to be a little bit bigger and a little bit more of a stream, and Ezekiel keeps walking and all of a sudden he is ankle deep in water, and then he is knee deep in water, and then all of a sudden he has to tread water because he is in this vast sea; and the idea being from humble origins God is building a new thing, and that is certainly true of the Church. The Church was, as you said, Dave, certainly then, and to some people's eyes even yet today, was just a ragtag group of losers, people who had no real power. I mean, to this day you don't go to the Church for power, you go to Wall Street or you go to Hollywood or Washington DC or Ottawa or London, England. The Church is, you know, nothing compared to the real epicenters of power in the world, but God is saying: No, through that humble beginning I am building something magnificent. In fact, I am building a new creation...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

A new people.

DAVE BAST

Yes; we know from the book of Acts that when the Church began sort of officially on the Day of Pentecost, there were about 120 people, men and women, gathered in the upper room, waiting and praying according to the promise of the risen Christ, whom they had seen, that power would come when the Spirit was poured out; and the Spirit was poured out and they went out into the streets, and you know the story, perhaps, of how that eventuated; but even in the New Testament, the vision of where that stream, that mighty river, would end up of Ezekiel's vision is embracing a whole redeemed creation; and so, in the book of Revelation we see the Church depicted in heaven around the throne; a great multitude that no one can number from every nation, language, race and people. It is God's idea of what the human race is meant to be. Divisions are done away with. Differences are not obliterated. We are still who we are. God loves variety; God loves diversity; God loves the races and the languages, but brought together, reconciled, divisions healed, all at peace, one in love for the Lord and for each other; that is the vision that the Church is intended to *begin* to embody in the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you know, Dave, it makes a lot of sense when you think about it, that the Church does and did have that humble beginning, because so did Jesus. They match, right? Jesus didn't come to this world full of splendor and visible glory. He was a baby born in a barn and was raised as a peasant and never had anything to attract the power centers of the world to him; and so it makes sense that the Church also is humble like its savior. Humble, a servant, sacrificial. In fact, the only times in history the Church has made major mistakes is when it tried to compete with governments...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And with Hollywood or with big money. Whenever the Church has gone for power it has lost its way. Our path is to follow the firstborn, who is the head of the Church...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And his path leads to a cross over and over and over. That is what we are called to be as the new people of God.

DAVE BAST

Well, and that is the other meaning of headship: authority. Are we obeying him? Do we live like him? It is pretty simple, really, when you stop and think about it. Does the Church look the way Christ commands it to be? Over and over in the New Testament we hear the apostles basically making this argument to the early Church: Be who you are.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Just be who you are in Christ. Be what he was. It is not difficult to understand. It is a little bit difficult to put into practice given our sinfulness and our selfishness...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And our pettiness. So, I have often said, Scott, that the worst argument for Christianity is the Church—the behavior so often of the Church; but the best argument for Christianity is the Church...

SCOTT HOEZEE

The Church.

DAVE BAST

When it is being what it is and what Jesus called us to be.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we are talking about Christology in this series, and who Christ is; and what we have established already is that he is truly human, but also truly divine; and that in his divine nature, by virtue of the fact that God raised him up from the dead, he has now been revealed to us as the firstborn of all creation. He created everything. He was the part of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who had such an active role in creation. He has redeemed everything, and in so redeeming has forgiven our sins, has won the victory over death and evil, and has established a kingdom of light; and in the meantime, until that kingdom fully comes, there is this thing called the Church, which bears his presence to the world and proclaims his presence to the world, and he is the head of that Church, and we take our marching orders from him accordingly.

DAVE BAST

But there is one more thing here that Paul says about Jesus. You might describe it as the way you become the Church, or the way you get into the Church, which is also the way of salvation and the way of reconciliation with God; and we will turn to that in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and our series. This is the second program of four now, on Christology or the doctrine of Jesus Christ. Who is Jesus and what does our knowledge of him mean for us also today? Dave, one of the things that we just talked about, that Christ created a church, and he is the head of the Church now, but right after talking about the Church in Colossians 1, starting in verse 19, Paul says:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him. ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross. So, there is some really, really big ideas here of the function of the cross and this really vital New Testament concept of reconciliation.

DAVE BAST

Right; and even before that, verse 19: For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him. That is almost a throwaway line here...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

In this passage. Wait a minute, whoa. All the fullness of God in this human being...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Paul says that in a transitional way. He introduces it with the word *for*, linking it to what he has just said. That is why Jesus has the right to be over the creation and to be over the Church, because he is God and we

are not. He is the Son of God in ways that you and I aren't and never can be.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because he was so undeniably human, even those closest to him missed this fact. So, you think of the end of John's Gospel, where Jesus is in the upper room and Philip at one point says: Oh, you mentioned your Father again. When are you going to show us the Father? And Jesus says: Well, Philip, if you have seen me, you have seen the Father. In other words, I am it, too. We are one. The Father and I are one. All God's fullness is in me; believe it or not, it is true.

DAVE BAST

But now we come to this final idea of reconciliation. So, God is the subject of this sentence: Through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood (Christ's blood) shed on the cross.

So, let's try to unpack that a little bit. I mean, all things: Things in heaven and on earth. What do you make of that? Even spiritual beings somehow were reconciled through the cross, Paul says.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What is premised on that...the only way to make sense of a line like that, of course, is to kind of roll the tape back and say when we fell into sin, when evil crept into God's good creation way back in the beginning...you know, the whole Adam and Eve story and all the rest...it busted and broke everything. Everything got out of whack somehow. The only reason you ever have a need to have reconciliation is because you have a broken relationship.

DAVE BAST

Estrangement, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Something has gone wrong and you are now at odds with somebody with whom you should be at one.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, the premise of Paul's words here is the whole cosmos was busted; it was broken. Something had to happen to build a bridge through which God and humanity, God and other creatures, God and spiritual beings, God and the very creation itself needed a bridge to walk back and have a reunion; and that bridge was the cross and the bloody cross at that; Jesus taking our place, bearing the punishment for everything that was busted, and somehow creating healing through that.

DAVE BAST

And the fact that the cross is the central thing that enables reconciliation to take place also opens up to us these sort of depths of truth. The holiness of God and how sin was a problem for us, but it was a problem for him as well. When there is a reconciliation, both parties need to be...something needs to work on both parties in order for that to take place. It is not just all on our side. It is not just that God somehow has to win us back and make us love him again. He also has to, in some sense, satisfy his own justice, pacify his own wrath against the evil that has been inflicted on his good creation...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It is just depths of mystery here...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And it all centers on the cross, and Jesus will...I mean, here is another thing. The cross does not make God love us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

The cross is an expression of his love. It is not like, oh, God hated us until Jesus stepped in and said: Oh please don't hate them. Hate me instead. That is the worst kind of caricature.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

The cross was itself an expression of God's love and his determination to bring all things back together and to himself.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; the cross didn't change God, but it changed the circumstances of the cosmos; and that is, Dave, why...and we are talking about Christology in this series, who is Jesus...that is why it was so necessary for Jesus to be fully human and fully divine, because within his own self, in other words, Jesus possessed both of the parties that were estranged...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And he was able to put them back together. The divine and the human in Jesus became the forerunner for humanity writ large and God to get back together. It all came together in the perfect God/human of Jesus; and that why he needed to be both. He needed to be human enough to bear the guilt of the estrangement and the broken relationship and God enough to have the power to fix it.

DAVE BAST

I think that is a crucial thing, and that is why Paul comes down here on this idea of reconciliation, and ultimately salvation, and bringing all things together; and that is why the Christology part is important, because without a divine Christ who is also human, there is no salvation—there is no reconciliation—the cross is emptied of its power and its significance. The blood cannot do what it needs to do. So, that is why this is all...it seems like we are talking about all these theoretical ideas: Oh, so what? Just, you know, just believe in Jesus. No, no! This is what makes it all happen.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is exactly why this Christology, which in so many ways, as we have said, Dave, is wild just to think about. Just a few short years after Jesus' death—and we believe, resurrection—Paul was saying all these things, but they are utterly true and utterly necessary things because they contain our very salvation.

DAVE BAST

Amen. Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation today. I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you to continue digging into scripture. So, visit groundworkonline.com, our website, and let us know what you would like to hear next on *Groundwork*.

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