

Creator of All Things

It is instinctive, something simply built into us. When we pray, we recognize, intuitively, that God is the Creator, and we are the created. Our hearts are filled with awe when we consider the One who has given us our being.

There is no greater proof of deity than to be the Creator. As we saw earlier, God constantly upbraided the idols of the people of Israel for the very reason that they could not claim to have created the world (Jeremiah 10:10–11). A god who is not the Creator is not worthy of our worship and adoration. Such is a plain biblical teaching.

In light of this, we can hardly underestimate how important it is that the New Testament often speaks of Jesus Christ as the Creator. No discussion of the deity of Christ would be complete without dealing with the fact that the Man from Galilee was described by His immediate followers as the Maker of the heavens and the earth!

Of course, if Jesus is described as the *Creator*, another truth is

therefore established. He who *creates* cannot himself be *created*. Hence, the eternity of Christ is directly related to His being the Maker of all things. Obviously, then, those who wish to deny the deity of Christ, whether they do so because they belong to a non-Christian cultic group, or simply reject the bare possibility that Jesus was more than a mere man (as in liberal Protestantism or liberal Catholicism), focus quite strongly on the passages that assert both His creatorship and His eternity. The first group attempts to get around the passages, either by misinterpretation or even mistranslation. The second group dismisses the passages as later "reflections" that have little if anything to do with the "historical Jesus." But the fact of the matter is that we have the plain assertions of the earliest Christian writings that they believed Jesus Christ *created the entire universe*. And as we shall see in the next chapter, this belief fits perfectly with the earliest forms of worship in the Christian church, where we find the highest thoughts and confessions about Christ's eternity, power, and might.

The first passage we will examine is one of the most important in all the New Testament, Colossians 1:15–17. But before we can properly understand this passage, we need to establish some of the background of the passage.¹ While many have argued about what these words mean, rarely is that debate played out in full light of the reasons that prompted Paul's letter to the church at Colossae. If we wish to deal with Paul's words, we must understand one of the major religious movements of that day, Gnosticism.

GNOSTICISM

One of the greatest struggles of the early Christian faith was against a mortal foe, an enemy that believers recognized as one of the most dangerous threats to the infant church. Today most Christians have never heard of this movement, yet, in some senses, we are still threatened by it. Gnosticism was a religious movement that prompted many of the early literary efforts of the early church. Many of the leaders of the church in the second and third centuries wrote blistering denunciations of Gnosticism. At times, and in certain places, Gnosticism threatened the very existence of orthodox Christian faith.

By its very character Gnosticism was dangerous, for it was an eclectic movement. That is, it was willing to “make room” in its theology for religious leaders and beliefs it encountered as it spread west into the Roman Empire and south into the academic strongholds of Egypt. Like some religious faiths today, it could adapt and change its own views to “make room” for new religious concepts, heros, theories, or dogmas. It was, to use a modern term, a very “inclusive” movement. That is not to say that there were not fundamental concepts that marked the general movement we today call Gnosticism. There were. But the Gnostics were willing to add your favorite deity to their system, as long as it resulted in your “going along” with their program.

Two main ideas will help us to get a handle on Gnostic belief. First, the very term “gnosticism” comes from the Greek term *gnosis*,² meaning “knowledge.” Devotees of Gnostic thinking believed that salvation was primarily a matter of obtaining certain knowledge (normally available only through their particular group, often disseminated by secret rituals). This knowledge, in turn, allowed a person to “escape” from the corruption of the world and their physical bodies.

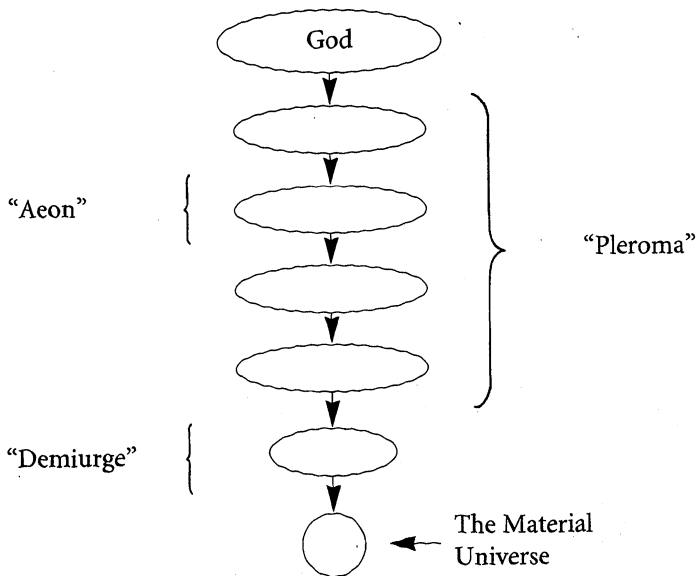
Second, Gnostic belief was marked by dualism. Dualism is the idea that what is material (matter, flesh, the world) is inherently evil, while that which is spiritual (the soul, angels, God) is inherently good. Much of Greek thought was dualistic in nature. Salvation was found through “escaping” the body, for it was believed that man is basically a good spirit trapped inside an evil body. This is one of the reasons that when Paul made mention of the resurrection in his sermon on Mars Hill (Acts 17:32) they began to mock, for anyone who sees salvation as being freed *from* the body will hardly find the message of the resurrection *of* the body to be good news.

The acceptance of dualism led to two extremes of behavior. Some became ascetics, depriving the body through fasts and monastic living, often demanding that followers abstain from sexual conduct, even to the point of forbidding marriage. For some strange reason, these groups often died out in a couple of generations. On the other extreme, you had the hedonists who reasoned that since the goal of salvation was to be rid of your physical body, and since your spirit really wasn't impacted by

what your body did, why not just have fun, eat, drink, and be merry? These folks would engage in extremes of immorality, figuring that what the physical body did was irrelevant to the pure, immortal "soul."

Most important for our study and for the background of Colossians is the question of how the Gnostics explained the creation of the world. If you think about it, you see they had a problem. If all matter is evil, how could the pure, good God of Gnosticism be responsible for the creation of evil matter? Over time they developed an elaborate scheme to explain how evil matter made its appearance in the universe. As it is a bit complex, I provide a graphical explanation below.

We begin with the good, pure, spiritual God at the top of the diagram. From this one true God flows a long series of "emanations" known to the Gnostics as "aeons." These aeons are godlike creatures, often identified as angels when Gnosticism encountered Jewish or Christian beliefs (possibly alluded to in Colossians 2:18). All of the aeons, taken as a group, comprised the "pleroma," the Greek word for "fullness."³ Each of these aeons along the line of emanation from God is a little less "pure," a little further away from the one true God. Eventually, the line extends far enough that you encounter the "Demiurge," a divine being who has



the capacity to create and is sufficiently "less pure" than the true God so as to create, and come in contact with, matter. In the second century of the church's history, some Gnostic teachers identified this evil Demiurge with the God of the Old Testament, Yahweh.

One other element of Gnostic teaching and influence should be noted. The concept of dualism led to one of the most forcefully denounced heresies of the apostolic era: *Docetism*. The Docetics were individuals who denied that Jesus had a real physical body. They were called Docetics because the Greek term *dokein*⁴ means "to seem." Hence, Jesus only *seemed* to have a physical body, when in fact He didn't. As we noted earlier, Docetics would tell stories about Jesus and a disciple walking by the seashore, talking about the mysteries of the kingdom. At some point the disciple would turn around and look back upon their path and discover that there was only one set of footprints. Why? Because Jesus doesn't leave footprints, since He only *seemed* to have a physical body. One can easily see why the Docetics believed as they did. They were dualists, influenced by the Greek concept of spirit and matter. If they affirmed that Jesus was truly *good*, they could not believe He was truly *human* with a physical body, since the body is evil. It is plain that there were Docetics around during the time of the apostles, for John left no uncertainty as to his view of their teaching:

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. (1 John 4:2-3)⁵

With this background, we can now listen to Paul's words and test the various interpretations that are offered of his teachings in Colossians 1:15ff, as well as in Colossians 2:9.

IMAGE AND FIRSTBORN

Colossians 1:15-17 is so often cited by so *many* different groups, both orthodox and heretical, that we must be very careful to look as closely as possible at the text so as to be able to give a proper, God-

honoring, consistent, and truthful answer to those who ask us concerning our belief in Christ as the eternally preexistent Creator of all things. A few points here might seem complex or obscure. However, keep in mind that the cultic groups that deny the deity of Christ *are often well prepared to utilize this passage to their benefit*. Knowing the passage well is your first line of defense in seeking to speak God's truth in love. Paul obviously felt it necessary to go into detail on this topic, so we should be prepared to work just as hard to understand his teaching.

And He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:15-17)

At first glance, it seems obvious that we are describing the Creator in this passage. Yet many groups attempt to derail what seems like the obvious meaning of the passage by pointing out that verse 15 describes the Son as the "image of the invisible God" and as the "firstborn of all creation." Those who do not understand the doctrine of the Trinity will assert, "See, He's the *image* of the invisible God, not the invisible God himself," wrongly assuming that we believe the Father (the "invisible God") and the Son to be the same Person. In response, we point out that no *creature* can be the *image of the invisible God*, at least not in perfection. The Bible likewise describes Christ in similar language when it says that He is the "exact representation of His nature" (Hebrews 1:3). The Son can perfectly reflect the nature of God, and be the perfect *image* of the Father, because He, like the Father, is eternal and unlimited in His deity.

But what of the term "firstborn"? Many groups place heavy emphasis upon this term, though often for different reasons. Normally, the use of the term falls into two categories:

1. *Those who deny the deity of Christ will insist that the term indicates origination, creation—a beginning in time.* These groups will insist that the passage is teaching that the Son is the first thing created by God,

or the first element of the rest of creation. For most of these folks, "firstborn" is taken as completely synonymous with "first created."

2. *Those who believe this refers to some kind of relationship between the Father and the Son that indicates an inferiority on the Son's part.* Mormons, for example, take the term to refer to the idea that the Son was begotten by the Father in a premortal existence, making the Son a second God, separate from the Father.

The first major task in properly addressing this passage is dealing with the meaning of the Greek term *prototokos* (firstborn).⁶ When Paul wrote this letter and used this term, what did he intend? How would his readers have understood him?

First, it is important to realize that this term already had a rich background in the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX).⁷ It appears there approximately 130 times, about half of those appearances coming from the genealogical lists of Genesis and Chronicles, where it bears the standard meaning of "firstborn." But it has a much more important usage in a number of other passages. The "firstborn" was entitled to a double portion of the inheritance or blessing (Deuteronomy 21:17; Genesis 27), and received special treatment (Genesis 43:33).

That *firstborn* came to be a title that referred to a position rather than a mere notion of being the first one born is seen in numerous passages in the Old Testament. For example, in Exodus 4:22 God says that Israel is "My son, My firstborn." Obviously Israel was not the first nation God "created," but is instead the nation He has chosen to have a special relationship with Him. The same thought comes out much later in Jeremiah 31:9, where God again uses this kind of terminology when He says, "For I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is My firstborn." Such language speaks of Israel's *relationship* to God and Ephraim's *special status* in God's sight.

But certainly the most significant passage, and the one that is probably behind Paul's usage in Colossians, is Psalm 89:27: "I also shall make him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." This is a highly messianic Psalm (note verse 20 and the use of the term "anointed" of David), and in this context, David, as the prototype of

the coming Messiah, is described as God's *prototokos*, the "firstborn." Again, the emphasis is plainly upon the relationship between God and David, not David's "creation." David had preeminence in God's plan and was given leadership and authority over God's people. In the same way, the coming Messiah would have preeminence, but in an even wider arena.

When we come to the New Testament,⁸ we find that the emphasis is placed not on the idea of birth but instead upon the first part of the word—*protos*, the "first." The word stresses superiority and priority rather than origin or birth.⁹ In Romans 8:29, the Lord Christ is described as "the firstborn among many brethren." These brethren are the glorified Christians. Here the Lord's superiority and sovereignty over "the brethren" is acknowledged, as well as His leadership in their salvation. In Hebrews 1:6 we read, "And when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says, 'AND LET ALL THE ANGELS OF GOD WORSHIP HIM.'" Here the idea of preeminence is obvious, as all of God's angels are instructed to worship Him, a privilege rightly reserved only for God (Luke 4:8). The term "prototokos" is used here as a title, and no idea of birth or origin is seen.

In both Colossians 1:18 and Revelation 1:5, Christ Jesus is called the firstborn of the dead (or "from" the dead). These would refer especially to the leadership of Christ in bringing about the resurrection of the dead and inauguration of a new, eternal life.

And so we are now ready to tackle the question concerning Colossians 1:15 and "firstborn of all creation." In commenting on this passage, Kenneth Wuest said,

The Greek word implied two things, priority to all creation and sovereignty over all creation. In the first meaning we see the absolute preexistence of the Logos. Since our Lord existed before all created things, He must be uncreated. Since He is uncreated, He is eternal. Since He is eternal, He is God. Since He is God, He cannot be one of the emanations from deity of which the Gnostic speaks. . . . In the second meaning we see that He is the natural ruler, the acknowledged head of God's household. . . . He is Lord of creation.¹⁰

It seems the eminent Greek scholar J. B. Lightfoot was behind at least the outline of Wuest's comments, as he provides much the same information in his commentary on the usage of *prototokos* in Colossians 1:15.¹¹ He sees a definite connection between Paul's use of "first-born" here and its appearance in the Greek Septuagint at Psalm 89:27. He discusses both the aspects of priority to all creation as well as sovereignty over all creation. This understanding of the term is echoed by many other scholarly sources.¹²

So what can we conclude? Most importantly, we see that it is simply impossible to assume that the term "firstborn" means "first created." Even if one were to ignore all the background information above, the term would still not speak to *creation* but to *birth*, and such a term could easily refer to the Son's relationship with the Father, not to any idea of coming into existence as a creature. But when the Old Testament use of the term is examined, it primarily speaks to a position of power, primacy, and preeminence. So how does the concept of Christ's *preeminence* fit into Paul's teaching in this passage? Let's see.

ALL THINGS

Verse 16 of Colossians 1 begins, "For by Him . . ." This connects verses 16 and 17 to the thought of verse 15.¹³ Why is Jesus called the "image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation"? Because, Paul says, all things came into being by Him. We are completely missing the point if, in fact, we think verse 15 is in any way *diminishing* the view of Christ being presented. Instead, Paul feels he must explain what he means by applying such exalted titles to Christ! "Image of the invisible God" is not a phrase to be used of a creature.¹⁴ And when we read the phrase "firstborn of all creation," we should hear the emphasis upon *all creation*. When we say that someone is the champion in a certain sport "in all the universe," we are saying the person is the best there is, *period*. So when Paul says that Jesus Christ has preeminence over *all creation*, he is specifically denying that there is anything not under His sovereign power. He then explains how that can be by asserting that *all things* were created by, through, and for Christ.

It would be difficult to imagine how Paul could have been more

thorough or more emphatic in what he says in this passage. He quite literally *exhausts the Greek language* to make His point. Take a moment to read again, slowly, in your own Bible, verses 16 and 17. Notice especially the prepositions Paul uses. *By Him*,¹⁵ *through Him*,¹⁶ *for Him*, *in Him*. He is *before* all things. Then notice that Paul isn't satisfied to simply say that "all things"¹⁷ are created by Christ. He has to make sure we understand that he means *all* things. All things in heaven. All things in the earth (that's pretty much everything!). But he keeps going. All things visible. All things invisible. Now, *that is everything!* But he's not satisfied with just that. Things visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, dominions, rulers, or authorities. What's his point here? Even the heavenly realms and the spiritual authorities (concepts the Gnostics liked to talk about) exist simply because Jesus Christ made them! Everything, anywhere, at any time, looks to the Son of God as "Creator."

Not only did He make all things, but Paul says that all things were made for Him! Christians instinctively know that we exist for God's glory, God's pleasure, and God's purpose. Our hearts automatically agree with the sentiment, "You are the Potter, I am the clay." Yet here the Bible says that all things were made "for" Jesus, and that He is "before" all things! Can such language possibly be used of anyone but the eternal Creator himself? Can we make sense at all of using such terms of someone like Michael the Archangel¹⁸ or any other created being? Of course not.

Finally, we are told that all of creation "holds together" or "consists" in Christ.¹⁹ Echoing John's assertions about the Logos that we saw above, Paul places within the realm of Christ's power the very maintenance and continuation of the entirety of the universe! He makes everything "fit" and remain in its proper place. Is this not the function of God himself? It assuredly is.

SOME OBJECTIONS ANSWERED

Before we leave this passage, however, we need to listen to other objections that are raised. Indeed, this passage is translated in the *New World Translation*, published by the Watchtower Bible and Tract So-

ciety, in such a way as to attempt to hide the truths we have just seen. Rather than repeating the phrase "all things" over and over again, as Paul did, the Watchtower translation inserts another word, "other," into the phrase, making it read, "all [other] things."²⁰ The reason for the translation is transparent: since Watchtower theology insists Jesus is a creation, this passage *must* be rendered this way.

Apologists for the Watchtower Society have developed ingenious ways of defending the errors of the NWT. In this instance, two arguments are often put forward. The NWT tries to defend the insertion of the word "other" by referring the reader to passages where one could logically insert the word "other" to make sense of the passage.²¹ However, there is no such need here, and the grammar of the passages cited is quite different than what we are considering in Colossians. The more complex argument goes like this: Jesus is the "firstborn of all creation." It is insisted that the Greek grammar indicates that this means Jesus is a *part* of the creation,²² thus, one must translate "all things" as "all [other] things" to make sense of the passage.

Such an interpretation, however, is "excluded by the context,"²³ which makes a strong and undeniable distinction between the Son and "all things." Nowhere does Paul make the Son one of the "things."²⁴ The most telling objection, however, comes from the context that we established at the beginning of this chapter. Remember to read Paul in light of his intention to refute the early forms of Gnosticism that were coming into the Colossian church. The position taken by those who deny the deity of Christ *falls right into the trap of agreeing with the Gnostics against Paul!* In other words, if we interpret this passage as saying Jesus is a part of the creation, and not the Creator himself, we are left with a Jesus who looks very much like the Gnostic "aeon" that Paul is arguing *against!* The argument presented by deniers of the deity of Christ weakens Paul's entire argument against the Gnostics, leaving him arguing in circles! But when we allow the text to stand and speak for itself, Paul's point is devastatingly clear: the Gnostic cannot just stick Jesus into his "system" somewhere. Jesus can't be one of the "aeons" between the one true, good God and the evil demiurge who ends up creating the world. No, Paul makes it impossible for the

Gnostic to hold on to his false beliefs about the world *and* try to make room for an edited "Jesus" by firmly asserting that *everything that exists, including the physical universe*, came into existence through the creative activity of Jesus Christ. Keeping in mind the dualistic context of early Gnosticism helps us to see clearly the intention and purpose of Paul in this passage and, in so doing, helps us to avoid the misinterpretations rampant in non-Christian sects today. It might seem to some that such considerations are too "complex" or "obscure" to be important. Yet knowing these things, and being able to explain them to others, may well be used of the Lord to help deliver someone from deception and falsehood.

A SCENE IN HEAVEN

How fundamental is the eternity and creatorship of Jesus? Take a moment to consider this tremendous scene in heaven itself, recorded for us by the apostle John:

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, "To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, *be* blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever." And the four living creatures kept saying, "Amen." And the elders fell down and worshiped. (Revelation 5:11-14)

Did you catch the key phrase? "And *every created thing*" joined in this song of praise directed to the One sitting on the throne *and to the Lamb. Every created thing*. If Jesus is a creation, a mere creature, then is He not likewise joining into this song of praise? Yet the song is directed to Him and to the Father. Obviously, those in heaven itself know that Jesus is not one of the created things. Creation knows its Master.

THROUGH WHOM HE MADE THE WORLD

The Father and the Son together are involved in the creation of all things. The last passage we will look at under this topic is found in the great first chapter of Hebrews, a chapter we will look at a number of times before we finish our study. Here the writer to the Hebrews makes reference to the roles of the Father and Son in creation:

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. (Hebrews 1:1-3)

God the Father has made the world *through* the Son. We have seen already the importance of recognizing the truth that creation is not *only* the work of the Father or *only* the work of the Son (or even of the Spirit). Instead, creation is the work of *Yahweh*, and the New Testament reveals to us with glorious clarity the differing roles the Father, Son, and Spirit play in that great exhibition of divine power. The Father decrees, the Son enacts, the Spirit conforms. Just as all three share the one divine name, so they also share the one divine description as "Creator," even while maintaining the distinction of roles that exists between them. Surely the believer marvels at the consistency, balance, and beauty of the Word's testimony to the relationship of the persons and their role in creation itself.