

The Pre-Eminence of Christ

By Malcolm H. Watts

The Lord Jesus Christ was introduced to Colossae during the time of Paul's ministry at Ephesus, between AD 52-55. According to (Acts 19:10), while Paul was preaching in that capital 'all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus'. The apostle, however, did not visit Colossae himself, nor was he the founder of the church there (Col 1:4; 2:1). It was probably Epaphras, a native Colossian, who first brought the Gospel to this city. Converted elsewhere under Paul's preaching, he appears to have returned home in order to witness to his new Lord and Saviour. 'The gospel' of 'the grace of God' these Colossians had 'learned from (the lips of) Epaphras' (Col 1:3-7).

After Paul left, false teaching infiltrated those parts and it began to threaten the church. The so-called 'Colossian heresy' is not at all easy to identify because the apostle gives no formal definition of it; but the evidence suggests that it was derogatory of Christ, denying his uniqueness as the Son of God, claiming that he was just one of many intermediaries, and insisting that his atoning work was deficient and incomplete (Col 2:1-4,8-10,18,19).

Epaphras, who had become the church's pastor, decided to visit Paul in Rome and inform him of this dangerous doctrine. This letter to the Colossians was evidently Paul's response to the news. It is a robust defence of the orthodox faith and a setting forth of Christ's divine and unrivalled glories. In the first chapter, after declaring

Christ to be 'the image of the invisible God (i.e. God made visible), he goes on to attribute to Christ the works of creation (Col 1:15,16), providence (Col 1:17), and redemption (Col 1:18-20). It is evidently intended - as Paul points out - 'that in all

an independent right to the sovereignty of the whole universe; but it was as the One who would become incarnate that he was 'appointed heir of all things' (Heb 1:2). The word 'heir' is used here in the sense of acquiring or possessing. The meaning is

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things he (Christ) might have the pre-eminence' (Col 1:18).

The word 'pre-eminence' occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. It literally means 'the first place' or 'the primacy'. Christ has it now; and he must retain it for ever. His title to this is indisputable. As Lord of glory, he is worthy of the highest position and the noblest praise.

This great subject deserves to be opened up further and to be explored more fully.

1. Christ is pre-eminent in the eternal decree. By the 'eternal decree' we understand God's act of will before time, whereby he foreordained everything which shall come to pass (Is 46:10; Acts 15:18; Eph 1:11). According to revelation, this decree had particular respect to God the Son. Hence we read of 'the eternal purpose' formed 'in (or, with respect to) Christ Jesus our Lord' (Eph 3:11).

Christ was the Father's 'elect', 'set up' in the office of Mediator 'from everlasting' (Is 42:1; Prov 8:23). As God the Son, he had

that, as equipment for his special work in this world, he was from all eternity invested with authority so great that he was able to be Lord of this world, Ruler of the universe, and Sovereign of the heaven and the earth. 'The Father loveth the Son', he once said, 'and hath given all things into his hand' (Jn 3:35; cf Matt 11:27).

In that same decree, there was a multitude 'chosen in him': that is, chosen to be his saved people (Eph 1:4 - 'he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world'; cf 1 Thess 5:9). It was determined that these would be saved by Christ, who in the appointed time would take a 'body' and pour out his 'precious blood' (Heb 10:5-7; 1 Pet 1:18-20). These elect souls would then be effectually 'called' to 'the fellowship of...Jesus Christ' (Rom 8:28; 1 Cor 1:9; 2 Tim 1:9) and thereafter 'preserved' by him, so that at the last day Christ would 'lose nothing' (Is 49:6; Jn 6:39).

All the determinations of God's mind therefore centred in Christ.

2. Christ is pre-eminent in the works of creation and providence. The work of creation is ascribed to him. 'All things', writes the apostle John, 'were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made' (Jn 1:3; cf Heb 1:10). He created the glories of the sky above us, with its sun, moon, and galaxies of shining stars; the wonders of the deep beneath us with its mighty seas and the wide-stretched oceans; and the exquisite beauties of the earth all around us, with its hills, valleys, trees, flowers, and birds. Everything which has been made proclaims the wisdom and power of the Son of God.

Similarly, the work of providence belongs to him. Providence, in Scripture, means the preservation and government of the entire universe. Christ is represented as responsible for this. He is described as 'upholding all things by the word of his power' (Heb 1:3) and, as the One more dignified than any of earth's potentates, he is 'over all, God blessed for ever' (Rom 9:5; cf Rev 19:16).

(Colossians 1), bears its own testimony to these truths. 'By him', writes Paul, 'were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth' and 'by him all things consist (or, hold together)' (Col 1:16,17).

3. Christ is pre-eminent in general and special revelation. By the former, we understand the knowledge communicated to us through the visible creation (Ps

19:1,2; Rom 1:19,20); and by the latter, the knowledge conveyed by supernatural means - a knowledge now embodied in the Holy Scriptures (Ps 147:19,20; Heb 1:1,2).

Concerning general revelation, Paul writes in the passage presently under consideration, 'all things were created by him and for him' (Col 1:16). 'But how were all things created for Christ?' asks Bishop Davenant. The answer he gives is, 'That they might minister to his glory; inasmuch as they shew forth his divine power and infinite goodness'. The whole visible world testifies to Christ's majesty and every object within it displays the perfection of his beauty and loveliness. Take a flower and it will show you something of Christ, 'the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys' (Song 2:1). Walk through a wood and your thoughts will be turned to 'the tree of life' (Rev 2:7). Climb a hill and, once again, you will see him, this time as 'the rock of ages' (Is 26:4 mg). View the bespangled heavens and you will be lost in wonder before the glory of 'the bright and morning star' (Rev 22:16). Watch the day dawn and praise the One who is like 'the dayspring from on high' (Lk 1:78). 'O lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!' (Ps 8:1)

As for special revelation, we are taught that there is not a page of Scripture which does not in some way point to Christ. Of the Old Testament Christ himself said, 'Search the Scriptures...they are they

which testify of me' (Jn 5:39); and after his resurrection, on the road to Emmaus, we read how 'beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself' (Lk 24:27).

From the time God announced in the Garden of Eden that 'the seed of the woman' would 'bruise' the serpent's 'head' (Gen 3:15), Christ became prophecy's central fact and figure. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Solomon, and all the later prophets spoke of him (Gen 22:13,14 cf Jn 8:56; Deut 18:15-18; Pss 2; 45; 110; Prov 8:22ff; Song 1:2ff; Mic 5:2; Zech 12:10; Mal 3:1). Besides these prophecies, God gave a series of 'types', divinely instituted to foreshadow the Lord Jesus. These Old Testament pictures or portraits are of different kinds: there are typical persons, like Adam and Melchizedec (Rom 5:14; Heb 7:1-3); typical things, like Jacob's ladder, the rock in the wilderness, the heavenly manna, and the brazen serpent (Jn 1:51; 3:14; 6:32,33; 1 Cor 10:4); and typical places, like the tabernacle, the temple, and the cities of refuge (Jn 1:14 - 'dwelt' or 'tabernacled'; 2:18-21; Heb 6:18). Each of these types is 'a shadow of things to come'; but, as the apostle immediately adds, 'the body (or, substance) is of Christ' (Col 2:17).

In the New Testament, the four Gospels present us with four views of Christ. Matthew represents him as King, Mark as Servant, Luke as Man, and John as God. The

book of Acts demonstrates that Christ was the grand subject of early gospel preaching (Acts 2:29ff; 4:19ff; 9:19,20). The Epistles reveal the mysteries of his person and work (Rom 5:1-21; Eph 3:1-21; Heb 1:1-14); and the book of Revelation predicts his return and ultimate triumph over sin, and death, and hell (Rev 1:7). The whole matter is summed up in the words of an angel recorded at the end of that book - 'the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy' (Rev 19:10).

4. Christ is pre-eminent in the accomplishment of redemption. 'Who is the Redeemer of God's elect?' is the question asked in the Assembly's Shorter Catechism. The answer, at least in part, is given as follows: 'The only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ'. This the Scripture confirms. No man, it tells us, 'can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him' (Ps 49:7). Redemption is the prerogative of God: hence, a divine voice is heard within these pages, saying, 'I the Lord am thy Saviour and thy Redeemer' (Is 49:26).

Only God in Christ was capable of this arduous work. His divinity enabled him to pay the full ransom-price for the deliverance of his people (Heb 9:12-14), while his humanity rendered him capable of actual suffering and death (Heb 2:14,15). Since this alone could satisfy the divine justice, he was given the commission to redeem. He was therefore set apart and solemnly confirmed in the office. 'Him

hath God the Father sealed' (Jn 6:27). At the appointed time he came into this world to secure the redemption of poor, wretched sinners - 'God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law' (Gal 4:4,5).

He was entirely alone when fulfilling his mission. 'I looked', he says, 'and there was none to help; and I wondered that there was none to uphold: therefore mine own arm brought salvation unto me' (Is 63:5). On him the burden of redemption was laid, and to him the praise shall be given in time and throughout all eternity. 'And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy...for thou wast slain and hast redeemed us to God' (Rev 5:9).

5. Christ is pre-eminent in evangelism and soul-winning. Luke, the inspired historian, tells us that in his gospel he recorded what Jesus 'began', which implies that in the book of Acts we have what Jesus 'continued both to do and teach' (Acts 1:1). Accordingly, as we read the history of the early church, we are thrilled to see how Christ 'shewed himself' to his disciples, instructed them in 'the things pertaining to the kingdom of God', appointed them as his 'witnesses' in all the world, endued them with the power of 'the Holy Ghost', 'called' them to 'preach the gospel' in new areas, and encouraged them on certain occasions with such words like 'be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace' (Acts 1:3,8; 2:4,33; 16:10; 18:9).

How long will Christ continue to do this? It will be for as long as he has a body of people in this world who bear witness to the Gospel of his saving grace.

That very Gospel is Christ-centred. Our Lord made this clear when he began preaching in the synagogue at Nazareth. His sermon then was all about himself (Lk 4:18,19). According to the apostle Paul, the preaching of 'the gospel' and the preaching of 'Christ' are one and the same thing (1 Cor 1:17,23,24). 'We preach not ourselves', he says, 'but Christ Jesus the Lord' (2 Cor 4:5; cf 1 Cor 2:2). To 'preach Christ' is to preach his engagements in the everlasting covenant; it is to preach his assumption of the office of Mediator; it is to preach the mystery of his person as both God and man; it is to preach his obedience unto death as the sole ground of the sinner's justification; it is to preach his present power to save all who turn to him in repentance and faith; it is to preach his promise to keep believers from all evil, bringing them at last to his everlasting kingdom; and, finally, it is to preach the 'gospel-offer' to sinners indefinitely, without restrictions of any kind.

Such preaching, attended with divine power, will bring people to Christ, the Saviour of the world. Our aim is not (at least, not primarily) to bring them to a church or to a creed, but rather to a person - the only person who can do good to poor ruined sinners. 'Come unto me', Christ says, 'and I will give you rest' (Matt

11:28). In evangelism and soul-winning Christ is absolutely everything.

6. Christ is pre-eminent in the bestowal of spiritual blessing. He was the promised 'seed' in whom 'all the nations of the earth would be blessed' (Gen 22:18; cf Acts 3:25,26). Would sinners like to possess the blessing of God? They must understand that it can only be theirs through Christ. In the words of the Psalmist, 'Thou hast made him (Christ) most blessed for ever' or, as it may be rendered, 'Thou hast set him to be blessings for evermore' (Ps 21:6 margin). On account of his merit, Christ has secured the covenant promises (2 Cor 1:20). He has therefore become the source or medium of blessings to mankind. 'Men shall be blessed in him', we read, '(and) all nations shall call him blessed' (Ps 72:17).

There are - to name but a few - the blessings of knowledge, faith, repentance, pardon, acceptance, peace, comfort, strength, and hope (Lk 2:32; Jn 12:32; Acts 5:31; 13:38; Eph 1:6; 2:14; Phil 2:1; 4:13; 1 Tim 1:1). It is impossible to name one spiritual blessing which is not in his hand. His people are so favoured - 'blessed...with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ' (Eph 1:3). Either we are blessed in Christ or we are not blessed at all.

7. Christ is pre-eminent in the glory of the eternal world. Look into the Holy Scriptures and you will see, in those places

where the veil is lifted, that Christ is given the highest place in heaven and that there he is the object of universal adoration.

The blessedness of glorified saints is to be with him, to walk with him through scenes of unparalleled beauty, to hear from his lips the secrets of his love, to gaze upon his kind and lovely face, and to know him in such a way as no-one has ever known him in this world. There, and throughout the everlasting years, and to the inexpressible joy of his people, Christ's great intercessory prayer shall be answered: 'Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory which thou hast given me' (Jn 17:24).

'Oh that he and we were together! Oh, when Christ and ye shall meet about the utmost march and borders of time, and the entry into eternity, ye shall see heaven in his face at the first look, and salvation and glory sitting in his countenance, and betwixt his eyes. Faint not; the miles to heaven are but few and short'. (Samuel Rutherford, 1637)

If pre-eminence really does belong to our Lord Jesus Christ, there are searching questions to face:

- Does Christ have his rightful place in our lives?
- How much time do we spend with him each day in prayer?
- Are we searching the Scriptures to

discover his Will for us?

- Is the great desire of our hearts towards him?
- What kind of service do we render him in his church?
- Are we prepared to make real and costly sacrifices for him?
- Is he the One who satisfies and makes us perfectly content?

On one occasion when Charles Simeon was preaching in Trinity College, Cambridge, he took as his text these very words: 'That in all things he might have the preeminence'. In the congregation that morning was Dr. Howsen, Dean of Chester. He recalled how Simeon, towards the end of his sermon, was so taken up with his Master's glory that he exclaimed with tremendous power:- 'That he might have the pre-eminence! And he will have it! - And he must have it! - And he shall have it!'

All who love the Saviour's name will be moved to say, 'Amen! and Amen!'