

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "Truth and Error About Christ" – Part One

Speaker: Rev. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 10/25/2009

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In Colossians 1:15, the Apostle Paul says that Jesus Christ "is the firstborn over all creation"? Does this mean that God the Son had a beginning?

The false teaching that Jesus Christ had a beginning – that He was created, or was adopted as the Son, or became the Son at some point in time – is one of the oldest and most persistent errors in church history. The Gnostics taught it in the earliest days of the New Testament church. The Arians taught it in 4th century. Jehovah's Witnesses have taught it from the 19th century onward. Family Radio's owner and principal speaker Harold Camping teaches it in the 21st century.

How can Christians answer this persistent, deadly error with Biblical truth? That's today's focus in our series, *Christ Above All: Studies in Colossians*.

Today we're continuing our study of the great statement about the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ that we find in Colossians chapter one, verse fifteen: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation."

In our last message, we began focusing on the two propositional statements that we find in this verse. First, what does it mean when Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit says that Jesus Christ "is the image of the invisible God"? And secondly, what does Paul mean when he says that Jesus is "the firstborn over all creation"?

And as I said last time, these two questions are going to lead us into four other vitally related questions. First: What is the Trinity, and why is the Trinity important? Secondly: How do we know that Jesus Christ is God? Thirdly, we're going to address the question that the Muslims ask: How could God have a Son? They say that Jesus

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cannot be God because God cannot have a son. But as we'll see, this is a gross misunderstanding of what it means for Jesus to be God the Son. And fourthly, we're going to deal with this question: When Jesus came into the world as a man, did He remain fully God? There is a great deal of error being taught about the humanity of Jesus Christ, and so we're going to address that question from the Word of God.

Christians need to know the right answers to these questions. We need to be ready to give an answer for the hope that is within us. Why do you believe that Jesus Christ is God Himself? Why do you believe that He created the universe? Why do you believe that He is the Savior of sinners? Colossians chapter one, verse fifteen is the basis on which we can know the right answers. And as we saw last time, our study of this verse leads us into many other passages that bear upon these questions. And that is because the Bible is one book from beginning to end. It reveals one Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, and one way of salvation – by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone – from Genesis all the way to Revelation. So it is vitally important for us to know who Jesus Christ is. And our authority for this is Scripture alone – not the varying and contradictory opinions of sinful men.

“The Image of the Invisible God”

Last time we considered the first part of Colossians 1:15 – “He is the image of the invisible God.” And we saw that while He was on earth, Jesus once asked His disciples the question of all questions: "Who do men say that I am?" And we saw that the disciples told Him some of the wrong answers that were circulating among the

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Jews at that time. And today wrong answers about Jesus still abound, they're just different wrong answers. Skeptics deny that Jesus ever existed. Secular humanists and religious liberals say that Jesus was a great philosopher or a supreme moral example – but not God the Son.

The Purpose-Driven and Emergent church present Jesus as a "savior" – but not the only Savior from sin and wrath. They present Jesus as the "savior" of society, the "savior" of the economy, the "savior" of the world-system – if only the world will follow His ethical precepts. But that is not true salvation. That is not the way to eternal life. And while the Purpose-Driven Church and the Emergent Church are presenting this false "savior", many if not most of the people in their churches remain lost and Hell-bound without true saving faith in the true Christ. The leaders of these churches that are presenting a false Jesus will have much to answer for when they stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

We also saw last time that after hearing the wrong answers, Jesus made the question more personal: "Who do *you* say that I am?" And Peter responded without hesitation, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

And that is what Colossians 1:15 tells us. Jesus is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." And we saw last time that the Greek word for "image" tells us that Jesus is the exact representation and complete revelation of God the Father – so exact, and so complete, that as Jesus himself said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father."

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The emphasis, here in Colossians chapter one, verses 15 and following, is on the absolute and complete deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is fully God, and at the same time fully man, and nothing less.

Did Jesus Have a Beginning?

A question that is often asked is this: Did Jesus have a beginning? Through the history of the church, several different groups of people, as well as many pseudo-Christian cults, have taught various forms of the heresy that Jesus had a beginning, that He is not God from all eternity.

The Gnostics were beginning to gain influence in the church at the time that Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians. They taught that God was unknowable. They taught that God had little or nothing to do with the material universe He had created. And therefore, the Gnostics denied that the eternal God could come into the material world as a human being. So the Gnostics taught the heresy that Jesus was merely a great teacher, merely a human being, who had a beginning at physical conception and birth.

Another heresy about Jesus that developed not long after Paul wrote to the Colossians was called adoptionism. Adoptionism. This false teaching said that Jesus was born as a human being like other human beings. And it said that when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the river Jordan, at that point God granted Jesus supernatural powers, and God adopted Him as the Son.

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Another heresy that developed in the fourth century A.D. was called Arianism, named after the man Arius who popularized it. Arius, like the Gnostics before him, said that God was too pure to appear on earth. And so Arius taught that God created Jesus, and that Jesus then created the universe. Some of the Arians even believed that Jesus created the Holy Spirit. All these things are blasphemies.

And today, a man named Harold Camping is the latest in a long line of false teachers about the Lord Jesus Christ. Harold Camping teaches that Jesus did not become the Son of God until after His resurrection. Camping says, and I am quoting now, that Jesus "was not in eternity past the Son of God." Dear friend, if you are still listening to Harold Camping and supporting his radio ministry, this is reason enough to stop right now. Like so many heretics before him over the centuries, Harold Camping denies that Jesus Christ is the Son of God from all eternity. He denies that Jesus came into this world as the Son. In the New Testament book of Second John, beginning at verse six, we read this:

For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist... Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.

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Dear friend, if you listen to Mr. Camping's heresy on the radio, you are receiving him into your house. You are receiving into your house someone who denies the Bible's plain teaching about the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Word of God warns you, "Do not receive him into your house." Do not share in his evil deeds.

And do not share in the evil deeds of other cults like the Jehovah's Witnesses that deny the deity and the eternity of the Lord Jesus Christ. Stand on the Word of God. Be a Scripture-driven Christian. God's Word must be your sole authority, and your infallible critic, in everything. And God's Word says that Jesus Christ is eternally God the Son. He had no beginning.

"Firstborn Over All Creation"

What, then, does it mean when Paul says here in Colossians 1:15 that Jesus is "the firstborn over all creation"? The answer is that we need to understand the meaning of the Word "firstborn" in the original language, and we need to compare Scripture with Scripture. The Bible is its own interpreter. We don't need a Gnostic, or an Arius, or a Camping as our authority. We need the Word of God alone. The Word of God compels and commands us to reject such false authorities, and to cling to the solid foundation of the truth of the Bible.

The Greek word that is translated "firstborn" in Colossians 1:15 is the word *prototokos*. This word is another one of those Greek words that has a very rich meaning. *Prototokos* or firstborn means "someone or something who existed before other things." It also means "someone who has the inheritance rights of the

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firstborn.” And it also means that the person who bears this title of firstborn is in a position of superiority. It is not a word that has to do with birth, or birth order, or even temporal beginning. And when Paul adds that Jesus is “the firstborn over all creation,” he is saying that Jesus Christ existed before anything was created. He is eternally existent.

The prophecy of Jesus’ birth in Isaiah chapter nine, verse six also speaks of this. “For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given.” Notice – a child was born, but a Son was not born. A Son was given. “And,” Isaiah continues, “the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God,” – and notice what comes next – “Everlasting [eternal] Father, Prince of Peace.” And in First Timothy 1:17, Paul writes this: “Now to the King [Jesus] eternal, immortal, invisible, God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Now as we continue in our study of the deity of Jesus Christ here in Colossians chapter one, we’re going to be considering some other verses that prove that Jesus had no beginning, and that He is God from all eternity. But before we do that, I want to turn to another question that is vitally related to this issue of the eternal deity of Christ. And that is the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Trinity

In the early verses of Colossians chapter one, the Apostle Paul has already mentioned all three persons of the Trinity. In verse one, he says to the Colossian believers, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

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And in verse three: "We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus..." And then in verse seven, he says that Epaphras has told Paul and Timothy about the Colossians' "love in the [Holy] Spirit." And Paul says in verse twelve that it is God the Father who has "qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light." And in verse thirteen he says that God the Father "has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love," Jesus Christ.

So here Paul has mentioned the vital role of all three persons of the Godhead, the Trinity, in relation to the believer. God the Father has redeemed us because of the work of God the Son. And as a result, God the Holy Spirit lives within us and is bearing fruit within us, and the foremost of those fruits is love for other believers.

So now, let's return to the question: What is the Trinity, and why is it important? The Trinity is a foundational Christian doctrine, and it is a doctrine where even small errors can have large and devastating consequences. Now it is true that the word "Trinity" appears nowhere in Scripture, just as the term "Rapture" appears nowhere in Scripture. But just as the doctrine of the Rapture of the saints – the doctrine that Jesus is coming again to take the saints out of this world – just as that doctrine is plainly taught in passages such as First Corinthians fifteen, and First Thessalonians chapters four and five, in the same way the doctrine of the Trinity – the doctrine of one God revealed in three persons – is plainly taught in Scripture. But this essential doctrine, the doctrine of the Trinity, has become a neglected doctrine in the Evangelical church in recent times, and this has done great harm in the church.

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A Propositional Truth

We must remember that the doctrine of the Trinity is propositional truth. Just as the Bible does not set out to prove the existence of God but states it as propositional truth, in the same way the Bible also states the doctrine of the Trinity as propositional truth. According to Scripture, the Trinity is the one true, living, and eternal God, who is composed of three united persons of one substance and power, without separate existence. The triune God is revealed in three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Let me briefly give you some key passages that state the doctrine of the Trinity:

Deuteronomy 6:4 – “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One.”

Matthew 28:19 – “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

John 5:19 – “Then Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner.’ ”

1 John 5:7 – “For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one.” Now, some people will dispute that last verse. You won’t find it in most modern Bible translations. But that verse is in the best translations like the King James and the New King James. Those translations are based on what is called the Received Text of the Greek New Testament, the most reliable and accurate original Greek text. And that reliable Greek text includes this verse. And I

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honestly believe that many people who want to leave First John 5:7 out of the Bible, want to leave it out because they do not firmly believe the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Trinity is a doctrine that human wisdom cannot fully comprehend or explain. It can only be accepted on the basis of God's propositional revelation in His Word. We accept it because God's Word says it.

Not Three Gods, But One

The one true God presented in Scripture is not three Gods, but one God. God is one in essence, but three in persons, the three persons forming a single unity. We read in Psalm 2:7, John 1:14-18, and 1 John 4:9 that Jesus Christ, God the Son, is eternally begotten of the Father. We read in John 15:26 and Galatians 4:6 that God the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son. And we read in Ephesians chapter one that each Person of the Godhead has a unique role in the plan of Redemption. God the Father has chosen a people for Himself. God the Son accomplished our redemption from sin. And God the Holy Spirit applies the work of redemption to individuals by bringing them to spiritual life in Christ, and He is the seal, or the guarantee, of our glorious inheritance in Christ the firstborn.

Not Only a New Testament Doctrine

We also need to understand that the Trinity is not only a New Testament doctrine. It is very much an Old Testament teaching as well. At various places in the Old

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Testament, God is referred to as a unity ("I") but at the same time as a plurality ("us" or "we"). Let me give you three examples of this.

Genesis 1:26 – The triune God says, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness."

Genesis 11:7, at the Tower of Babel, God says, "Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."

And Isaiah 6:8 – "Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?' Then [Isaiah] said, 'Here am I! Send me.'"

Also, among the Hebrew names of God in the Old Testament, the plural name *Elohim* is used over 2,000 times. We read in Genesis chapters one and two that it is *Elohim* — the triune God, the God who is at the same time a plurality and a unity — it is *Elohim* who created the heavens and the earth and everything in them. It is *Elohim*, the triune God, who gave the Ten Commandments to Moses in Exodus 20. It is *Elohim*, the triune God, who says, "I am God, there is no one else," in Isaiah 46:9. And it is *Elohim*, the triune God, who is denied by the professed atheist, the fool who says in his heart, "there is no God" – literally, there is no *Elohim* – in Psalm 14:1 and 53:1. The atheist not only denies the existence of God generically. He denies the existence of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit specifically.

Now because of the limits of time, we're going to have to continue our exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity in our next message. But dear friend, I cannot emphasize the

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importance of this doctrine enough. If you are a believer on the Lord Jesus Christ today, it is because of the redemptive work of the triune God. And if you are not a believer in Jesus Christ today, it is the second person of the triune God, God the Son, the firstborn over all creation, who says to you today, "I am the Bread of Life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who comes to Me shall never thirst." Only Jesus Christ, God the Son, can satisfy your spiritual hunger, and quench your spiritual thirst. I urge you to come to Him, right now.

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