

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "Christmas: Christ the Firstborn" (Colossians 1:18)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 12/5/2010

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Today we're continuing our Christmas season focus on the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul tells us in Colossians chapter one, verse 18, that Jesus came into the world, born of a virgin, in order to go to the cross and die for sinners, and to become "the firstborn from among the dead." What does it mean for Jesus to be the firstborn from among the dead, and what does that mean for you today, if you're trusting in Him as your Savior? Stay tuned to find out the answer.

## **Introduction**

In our study of the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ in book of Colossians, we've now come to chapter one, verse eighteen. As we begin today, let me read that verse for you, but I want to start back at verse twelve and read down through verse twenty, in order to pick up the context:

...giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth,

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visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.

And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.

And so our focus today is on verse eighteen: "And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence."

The way I'm going to approach this verse is to break it down into its component statements. There are four of them in this verse. First, Jesus Christ is the head of the body, the church. Second, Jesus Christ is the beginning of the church. Third, Jesus Christ is the firstborn from among the dead. And fourthly, these things are true in order that in all things, Jesus Christ might have the preeminence, or first place.

After we've looked at these four points, I want to make some comments about the application of this verse to your life as a Christian today.

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## **The Head of the Body, the Church**

First of all, Paul declares about Jesus Christ that "He is" the head of the church. In the original Greek, the force of the words translated "He is" would be, "He Himself is." He Himself – Jesus Himself – and no one else. The Creator of the world is the Head of the Church. The church has its origins in Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 1:4, Paul says that God the Father chose us, the members of His church, in Christ, "before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love."

"He Himself" is the Head of the Church. Not a pope, not a pastor, not a preeminent man or woman in the congregation or the denomination. Christ is preeminent in the church, and anyone else who exalts himself into that place of preeminence is a usurper. In fact, it is not too strong a thing to say that anyone who exalts himself against the preeminence of Christ in the church is either an antichrist, or is operating in the spirit of Antichrist.

Paul declares that Jesus Himself is "the head" of the Church. The Greek word that is used for "head" is the word that was normally used for a physical head. When a body is cut off from its head, life ceases. And so it is when the church cuts itself off from the authority of Jesus Christ and His written Word.

This same word for "head" was also used to denote the cornerstone or the keystone of a structure – the stone without which the structure weakens and collapses. In Colossians 2:19 Paul warns the believers against "not holding fast to the Head" – not

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letting the Head be the Head. As Adam is the federal head of the fallen human race, Christ is the federal Head of believers as the Second Adam. Just as the Bible alone is the Word of God, Jesus Christ alone is the Head of the Church.

In First Peter chapter two, beginning at verse five, we read this: "...you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, 'Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone [it could also be translated, keystone], elect, precious, and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame.' Therefore, to you who believe, He [Jesus Christ] is precious."

And here in Colossians 2:19, Paul declares that Jesus Christ Himself is the Head "of the body" – and the word that is translated "body" speaks of a living body, a living organism. This word was also used, figuratively, to speak of a body of people who have been joined together to function under a common head. The use of this word implies a body that is designed to function in all its parts for one unified purpose.

And then Paul uses another term for this body. The body of which Christ Himself is the undisputable Head is "the church" – in the Greek, the *ecclesia*, the called-out ones. In declaring this about Jesus Christ, Paul is refuting a pagan mystical teaching that was common in the Greek world in which the Colossian believers were living. There was a pagan mystical teaching that the body of God was the *kosmos* or the universe – in other words, that God's body was the physical world. But Paul here refutes this.

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Christ is the Head of the church. The church of which Jesus Christ is the Head is not a physical building. The church of which Jesus Christ is the Head is not a presbytery, or a synod, or a denomination. The church of which Jesus Christ is the Head is not a papacy. The Church of which Jesus Christ is the Head is not limited to one place or one point in time.

The church of which Jesus Christ is the Head, is the body of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ from the beginning of the world to the end of the world. Some of the members of Christ's body, the church, are on earth today; but much of the body of Christ is made up of believers who have already gone to Heaven. The true church of which Jesus Christ is the Head is not the visible church. The visible church will always be made up of a mixture of believers and unbelievers. Paul is speaking here of the invisible church, which is made up of believers only. So our first point is that Jesus Christ Himself is the Head of the Church.

### **Christ is "The Beginning"**

Secondly, in verse eighteen Paul declares that Jesus Christ "is the beginning." The word than is translated "the beginning" also means "the origin." It is a word that denotes priority in time. Jesus Christ, as we shall see, is "the firstborn from among the dead." And this word "the beginning" also denotes originating power. Jesus Christ is the originating power, the source of the life of the true Church. Christ by the working of the Holy Spirit is the one who has made us alive, Paul says in Ephesians two.

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As the writer to the Hebrews declares, in chapter twelve, verse two, Jesus is the Author and Finisher, or the Originator and Perfector, of our faith. He came into the world two thousand years ago in order that through His sacrificial death and resurrection, we might have eternal life and become members of His true Church.

And finally, this word translated "the beginning" is also a word that designates the One who is the Leader of the Church, the person who is of the first rank in the Church. That person is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Head of the Church, point number one, and point number two, He is the Beginning, the Originator and Source of Life of the true Church.

### **He is the Firstborn From Among the Dead**

Thirdly, Paul declares, Jesus Christ is "the firstborn from among the dead." We find this same word, firstborn, used to describe the Lord Jesus Christ in several places in the New Testament. In the Gospel accounts we read that Jesus was the firstborn Son of Mary. He was born of a virgin. He had no earthly father in the physical sense. He was conceived in Mary's womb by God the Holy Spirit.

In Colossians 1:15, which we considered a few messages ago, we saw that Jesus is declared to be "the firstborn over all creation." This means that He is the One who pre-existed, the One who existed even before time and the universe were created, and He is the Creator God.

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And then here in Colossians 1:18, Jesus is called "the firstborn from among the dead." Jesus Christ is the originator and the source of spiritual life in the Church, and this was accomplished by His resurrection from the dead. In Acts chapter 2, verse 24, we read that God the Father raised Jesus Christ up from the dead, "having loosed the pains of death" – literally, having set Him free from the birth-pangs of death. Jesus came forth from the grave, came forth from among the dead, just as the first-born child issues from the womb. God the Father raised Jesus from the dead as the proof, the vindication, of the fact that Jesus Christ had made perfect, full, and final atonement for sin.

In Romans chapter 8, verse 29, Paul says that believers are foreknown by God, and we are predestined to be conformed to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ, in order that Jesus might be "the firstborn among many brethren." We find this same thought in Hebrews chapter 12, verse 23, where the true church of Jesus Christ is called "the general assembly and church of the Firstborn, who are registered in Heaven." And in Revelation 1:5 Jesus is declared to be "the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth."

### **"That in All Things He Might Have the Preeminence"**

And this brings us to Paul's fourth and final point in this verse. All this was done – Jesus Christ came into the world, was born of a virgin, lived the perfect life we could not live, died a perfect atoning death in our place as our substitute, and was raised up as the firstborn from among the dead – all these things were done, Paul says, "in order

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that in all things He might have the preeminence." That is the theme of the entire book of Colossians – the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

That word "preeminence" literally means, "holding first place." This is the only place in the Bible where this particular word is used. Jesus Christ is the first in time and place. Jesus Christ is the first in rank. Jesus Christ is the first in honor – not only in the Church, but "in all things." Jesus told His disciples, "all power" – all authority, and the place and rank and honor that go with that authority – "has been given unto Me, in heaven and on earth."

In Ephesians chapter one, beginning at verse 19, Paul speaks of "the exceeding greatness of God's power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all." The power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead – and in the original language, it is super-abounding power – that same power is the power that saves everyone who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Application Points**

Now that we've understood the meaning of this verse in its context, let me close by suggesting some points of application to you.

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First, Jesus Christ is Head of the Church because He came into the world to die to save those from every nation, and tribe, and tongue, from the beginning of the world to the end of the world, who would become His true Church. That is what we remember as we celebrate Christmas. I trust that you will take time out of all the busy-ness and focus on material things, to think about that glorious fact as you celebrate Christmas this year. The Head of the Church left heaven's glory and came to be laid as a baby in a lowly manger, in order to redeem you and make you a member of His true and eternal Church. I encourage you to keep Christ preeminent in your Christmas.

Secondly, we need to remember that the doctrine of Christ and the doctrine of the Church are inseparably linked in Scripture. The Church is the body of Christ, and Christ is the Head of the Church. The One who is the Head of the Church is the eternally pre-existent Creator of all things. This is the One who was sent into the world, born of a virgin, for the purpose of shedding His own blood as the perfect sacrifice to redeem those who become members of the body of Christ.

Today, a lot of churches have forgotten the significance of this. When Jesus Christ is no longer preeminent in a local church, it ceases to be a true church of Jesus Christ. When a church starts denying the inspiration and inerrancy and authority of Scripture, it is denying the Headship of Christ. When a church abuses baptism and the Lord's Supper and turns them into saving ordinances, or it neglects those ordinances, it is denying the Headship of Christ. When a church ceases to keep itself pure in its doctrine and in its conduct, both individually and collectively, it is denying the Headship of Christ.

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And finally, remember that the headship of the Lord Jesus Christ over the Church means that the triumph of the Church is absolutely certain, because it rests upon Him, and it rests in Him. He is the Author and Finisher, the Originator and Perfector, of our faith. It is already an accomplished fact. From before the foundation of the world the plan of God in Christ has been settled, unchanging, and unchangeable. Jesus paid for it in full at the Cross, and it will be ours in full in the new heavens and new earth where we shall rule and reign with Him. It is upon that Rock – Christ, the Son of the living God – that the Church is built.

And that is why Paul declares, at the end of Romans chapter eight –

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.

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Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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