

Christ in the First Place

Colossians 1:13-20

Now that the students are gone, more of you are probably old enough to remember the old Abbot and Costello routine, “Who’s on first.” Is it a question? Is it a statement? As they keep going back and forth, they both get more and more confused and more and more frustrated. Who’s on first? I don’t know. Third base!

The Colossians didn’t play baseball, but they still seem confused about who’s on first. Or at least, who’s first? These three words were also confusing Christians in the first century church of Colossae. That’s why Paul wrote Colossians. He was a prisoner in Rome when he heard about false teachers in Colossae from a man named Epaphras. Epaphras told Paul that false teachers weren’t denying Christ: they were dethroning Christ. They weren’t denying that Christ is a way. They were denying that he is the way. Or, to get to the heart of the issue—false teachers weren’t denying Christ a place, they were denying Christ first place.

Paul clears up the confusion; for the Colossians, and for us. Jesus is first! Jesus is, “Firstborn of all creation.” (Colossians 1:15) “Firstborn from the dead.” (Colossians 1:18) “So that he might have first place in all things.” (Colossians 1:18) Jesus in first place.

He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (Colossians 1:15–17) “All” is used five times in just three verses and a total of eight times in Colossians 1:15–22. All means total. Complete. Entire. Everything. The whole ball of wax.

Paul says that Christ is over all creation. Two times in these verses Paul writes that Jesus created all things. Paul also contends that Jesus existed before all things and in Christ all things hold together. These terms announce that Jesus can only be one person—God. In the Nicene Creed we say of Jesus that he is, “Very God of very God. Begotten, not made. Being of one substance with the Father.”

“Then why,” you may ask, “Does Paul write that Jesus is the firstborn over all creation? That sounds as though Jesus was the first thing God created.” That’s incorrect. Arians tried to argue that, which was part of the reason for the council of Nicaea 1700 years ago. Jesus is not the first thing God created. Jesus is God! In the context of the people of the Bible, the firstborn son enjoys the highest status in his family. And, once his father died, the firstborn son became the ruler in the family. That’s who Jesus is. He has the highest status in the universe and he rules over all things.

One newer tradition about this Sunday, the last one of the church year, is that it is celebrated as Christ the King Sunday. It was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 in response to the growing nationalism and fascism that was beginning to take hold following World War I. The aim of the feast day was to refocus the church on Christ as its leader instead of the allure of earthly powers. Because if Jesus is first, if Christ is king, then he demands our highest allegiance, and no earthly ruler comes close. And that was a problem for Caesar, which is part of why Paul is writing to the Colossians from prison. Because if Christ is above Caesar, Caesar doesn’t like it much. But Jesus is in first place, over all.

“And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead ... For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.” (Colossians 1:18a–19) There’s that term “all” again. And there’s that term “firstborn” again. Christ is the firstborn from among the dead. Oh really? What about the child Elisha raised from the dead? Or Jairus’ daughter? Or the widow of Nain’s son? Or Lazarus? Weren’t there a number of people who were raised from the dead before Jesus?

Yes. Their body was temporarily resuscitated, but each eventually died again. Jesus, on the other hand, rose from the dead in an immortal body never to die again. As Paul wrote to the Romans [6:9], “Death no longer has dominion over him.” And if Jesus is the firstborn from the dead, that means there’s more to come. Jesus’ resurrection isn’t just the end point. It’s a new beginning.

And 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.” (Colossians 1:20) There’s that word “all,” again! Christ has reconciled all things. Total. Complete. Entire. Everything. The whole hog. The whole enchilada. The whole ball of wax. And that includes you! The implications of this verse, in this context, are stunning! Christ, as God, made the tree from which his cross was carved. Christ, as God, made the minerals from which his nails were forged. And as God, Jesus set in motion the political events that sent Pontius Pilate to Judea, Herod to Jerusalem and Caiaphas to serve as high priest.

God, on a cross? A sponge was thrust into God’s face? Dice tossed at God’s feet? God bled for us? God took nails for us? God was pierced with a spear for us? Yes. Yes. A

thousand times, and forever, yes. All of that, for you!

When you come to the communion rail, you receive Jesus. “He has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.” (Colossians 1:22) The Bible doesn’t teach real absence. It teaches real presence. In, with and under the bread and wine, Christ’ physical body and blood are present to present you holy, without blemish, free from accusation!

“So that he might have first place in all things.” (Colossians 1:18b) This is the only purpose clause in our reading. How can I tell? It begins with the words “so that.” “So that” is a purpose clause. What does that mean? Christ is who he is and did what he did so that. So that Christ might have first place in all things. There’s that word again, “all.” Total. Complete. Entire. Everything. The whole hog.

What’s the difference between a committed and an uncommitted Christian? Between an on-fire Christian and a lukewarm Christian? Between the believer who has Jesus in the driver’s seat and the believer who keeps Jesus in the back seat? Christians making a difference in the world are learning that Christ is first place in all things.

Let’s be honest, though. Like the false teachers in Colossae, we don’t deny Christ, but we dethrone Christ. We don’t deny that Christ is a way. We deny that he is the way. Or, to get to the heart of the issue, we don’t deny Christ a place, we deny him Christ first place.

When Luther explains the First Commandment, he describes an idol as anything that you trust in more than God. Paul would have agreed with that. We are idol factories.

Yet that's why Jesus came to earth in the first place. He came to show us that he's in the first place. He also came so his death on the cross would make up for all the times we put anything else in the first place.

And what does that mean for us? If we back up just one verse from where we started here in Colossians, we see even more what our response is to be. Thankfulness. giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son. Because we have been delivered from darkness and brought into the kingdom of Jesus, because we have been redeemed and saved, our response is to give thanks.

"Who's on first?" Bud Abbott and Lou Costello could never figure it out. How about you?

"Who's on first?" The answer should clearly be Jesus. And that's worth giving thanks.

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