

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Number:	8		Gary L.W. Johnson
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THE GLORY OF THE SON (Part IV)

The incarnation is at the heart and center of Christianity. Not surprisingly, it has always been subjected to criticism and ridicule. Even some well-meaning Christians have at times misrepresented the doctrine by false analogies and bogus illustrations. Two examples come to mind. In ancient mythology we read of such fabled creatures as the centaur, the faun, and the mermaid. The centaur was a monster, half man and half horse, said to have inhabited a part of Thessaly. But such a creation involves an anatomical absurdity. The arms of a man correspond to the forelegs of the horse, but a compound like this involves a double set of bones and muscles and organs, like those that pertain to the upper part of the trunk. All such inventions are preposterous. So, when man tries to create even a fanciful being by combining things that do not exist together, he blunders into grotesque nonsense. In the field of literature, we have Robert Louis Stevenson's famous *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, where one man has two distinct personalities. But this too does not reflect the biblical doctrine of Christ and historic Christian orthodoxy. David F. Wells points out that the traditional Chalcedonian Christology¹ is quickly being abandoned due to the massive cultural changes taking place in society today. The biblical doctrines of God and man have frequently been caught up in the same broad shifts that have taken place in our culture. Over the last century, our philosophical style has increasingly stressed becoming over being, existence rather than essence, dynamic emergence within the world rather than abstract aloofness from the world. It is a shift to broadly accepted existential motifs. Subjectivity rather than objectivity; the individual against the mass; human nature as unformed and nonexistent until, by our decisions, we give ourselves shape and substance; involvement rather than intellectualizing; choices rather than bare information – these are the themes that run through much of our literature. Consequently, the idea of evolution – that unfolding of reality which itself exhibits something of the divine – is far more likely today to provide the immediate matrix for Christological thought than the older ideas of God and man which now seem unreal and abstract. The context in which Christ is being interpreted has been enlarged beyond the pristine categories which Greek philosophy defined and which the Chalcedonian Definition used to include the whole of contemporary, cosmic experience. The direction of this new thinking has placed the famed Chalcedonian Definition in jeopardy. Indeed, Christologies in the latter part of the twentieth century have been more or less unanimous that their starting place must be the rejection of this definition. The discomfort with the Chalcedonian formulation is, however, felt at two quite different levels. There are those who are uneasy with the conceptuality employed by the framers of this statement and revealed in words like “substance” and “nature.” They generally argue that the employment of these philosophical terms could never take place in a neutral context; the terms presuppose a certain philosophical understanding. This philosophical understanding therefore becomes an alien ingredient in the theological statement of which it has become a part. It is true that there is no more reason to think that the philosophical outlook these terms represent is any more divinely mandated than was the Ptolemaic world view which Copernicus and Galileo rightly contested. By the same token, however, alternative terms which reflect our own modern, cognitive interests do not, of necessity, carry with them greater fidelity and plausibility.² More recently, we have a major theological runaway

train in the advocates of the Eternal Subordination of The Son (ESS or EFS – the Eternal Functional Subordination of The Son). To suggest that the Father and the Son are distinguished by eternal submission and obedience is to suggest that the Father and the Son each has a different nature – and this is contrary to everything the great Creeds teach. W. G. T. Shedd, one of the great Reformed theologians of the 19th century, correctly noted, “The term *begotten*, in the Nicene trinitarianism, is descriptive only of *that which is peculiar to the second Person, and confined to him*. The Son is generated with respect only to his Sonship, or, so to speak, his individuality, but is not generated with respect to his essence or nature. The term “generation,” being thus rigorously confined to the *hypostatical character*, as distinguished from the unity and community of essence, denotes only a *relationship* between the first and second Persons. It, consequently, no more implies a subordination with respect to the *essence* of the second Person, than it does with respect to the essence of the first.”³

The advocates of ESS, by insisting eternal submission within the Trinity, do in fact, as Butner warns, “jeopardize the metaphysical foundation of classical Christology and soteriology.”⁴ What is also disturbing is the growing number of evangelical theologians who are embracing an inclusivist notion of salvation (Inclusivist reasons that God saves people only because of the work of Christ, but people may be saved even if they do not know about Christ. God grants them salvation if they exercise faith in God as revealed to them through creation and providence.), without realizing the danger that poses for a truly evangelical Christology. John Hick, no friend to historic evangelicalism, sees this very clearly. He says that what prevents Christians from moving from an inclusivist to a pluralist view is their belief in incarnation and the doctrine of the Trinity, which was defined at the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon (an “all or nothing Christology”). However, if this Christology of “substance” was replaced with a “degree Christology” in which “incarnations applied to the activity of God’s spirit or God’s grace in human lives, so that the divine will is done on earth,” then any claim to exclusivism would be invalid. God would be perceived as working through all religions as he does through Christ.⁵

Historical Situation At Colossae: We owe this great passage of Pauline Christology to the heresy of Gnostic Judaism, which had been making inroads in the Church at Colossae. This heresy taught the existence of angelic intermediaries (as listed in 1:16) between the Creator and the material universe. Jesus was considered to be only one of these angelic intermediaries. It is against this background that Paul writes.

NOTE: This passage (1:15-20) is a “hymn,” but it does *not* carry the same meaning as a congregational song. Rather, it is a term that is really “creedal,” having dogmatic, confessional, liturgical and doxological import. The reason it is called “hymnic” is due to its stylistic (rhythm, parallelism, meter or chiasm) and linguistic (very selective vocabulary) structure.⁶ If this is the case, it would then reflect primitive Christian tradition that even more directly affirms the correctness of Chalcedonian Christology (cf. also John 1:1-4 and Heb. 1:2-4).

I. THE SOVEREIGN LORD OF CREATION

A. The essential basis of Christ’s Lordship (v. 15a)

The first thing Paul declares is that Christ is “the image of the invisible God.” What does this mean? Besides the very obvious notion of “likeness,” the Greek word *EIKON* (also used in II Corinthians 4:4, 3:18; Romans 8:29; and Colossians 3:10) involves two other ideas:

1. **Representation** (compare with the word *CHARAKTER* in Hebrews 1:3). It indicates not mere resemblance (like one egg to another) but implies an archetype of which it is a copy. It is derived from its prototype. The context unfolds how the word is to be understood.

2. **Manifestation.** The Word as preincarnate or incarnate is the revelation of the unseen Father. Christ is the manifestation of the invisible God (Exodus 3:20; 1Timothy 6:16 compare with John 1:18).

NOTE: If Jesus Christ is God, how can He be the image of God? The reference to God is God the Father. The Person of the Son bears the likeness of the Person of the Father (John 14:8,9).⁷

B. The economic basis of Christ's Lordship (v. 15b)

Christ Jesus is "the firstborn of every creature" (lit. "over all creation" as in the NIV). The Jehovah's Witnesses argue that this means that Christ is the first creature. But what about the words of verse 15: "He is ... the firstborn over all creation"? Do they not suggest that Christ was a creature, albeit the earliest? The words were certainly put to this use by Arians in support of their doctrine that "there was when he was not" (*EN POTE OUK EN*). It should be borne in mind, however, that Paul (or whoever the original author was) does not say *PROTOKTISTOS* ("first-created") but *PROTOTOKOS* ("first-born"). Furthermore, the Septuagint had used *PROTOTOKOS* in Psalm 89:27, "I will also appoint him my firstborn" and, as a result, *PROTOTOKOS*, used absolutely, had become a recognized Messianic title. This had been facilitated by its application to Israel in, for example, Exodus 4:22, "Israel is my firstborn son." The strongest suggestion in the title *PROTOTOKOS* is primogeniture (in fact, the Vulgate translates it *PRIMOGENITUS*), which in turn carries with it the ideas of sovereignty over the household and the right to the inheritance. The idea of sovereignty is already linked with the word in Psalm 89:27, "I will also appoint him my first-born, the most exalted of the kings of the earth." In Hebrews 1:2 the divine sonship is clearly linked to inheritance, and in Hebrews 12:23 all the people of God are subsumed under the designation "the church of the firstborn." In the Christian community, every member has rights of primogeniture: we are "heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17). It is worth noting, too, that J. B. Lightfoot and F. F. Bruce (two of the most respected New Testament scholars on the Pauline Epistles) are able to cite two instances from a Rabbinic source where the title *PROTOTOKOS* is given to God himself, and where there can certainly be no thought of portraying God as part (even the first part) of the world.⁸

NOTE: Sheer theological perversity leads the Jehovah's Witnesses in their *New World Translation* to insert the bracketed word "other" ("all [other] things") throughout the passage in order to justify their Arian view of the Son as being properly part of the created order. The word is Hebraic, ascribing **priority** of the rank to the firstborn son, who enjoys a special place in the father's love and who accordingly is the father's primary heir (cf. Psalm 89:27ff; Exodus 4:22 and Hebrews 1:2). Whereas "image" emphasizes Christ's relation to God, the second title, "firstborn of all creation," designates His sovereignty over creation. Paul is effectively refuting any claim (like that of the Jehovah's Witnesses) that Christ is an angelic creature emanating from God. Christ is God, and He is Lord of all creation. The natural way to express superiority would not have been *PRO PANTON*, but *EPI PANTON* (Rom. 9:5; Eph. 4:6) or *HYPERANO PANTON* (Eph. 1:21; 4:10) or *HYPER PANTA* (Eph. 1:22). Besides, the preceding context makes plain that Paul had pre-existence in mind: "by him all things were created ... all things were created by him and for him." If everything that was created was created by him, then manifestly he himself was not created.⁹

C. The explicit proof of Christ's Lordship (vv. 16, 17)

Two great things are described as the foundation of Christ's Lordship over creation.

1. ***Christ IS the Creator.*** This central activity of Christ in creation is also stated in John 1:3 and Hebrews 1:2 and is complete denial of any Gnostic philosophy. The word translated “were created,” *EKTISTHE*, is aorist and describes the definite historical act of creation.
2. ***Christ IS the Sustainer of the Universe.*** “All things hold together in Him.” Apart from Christ’s continuous sustaining activity (Note the word translated “hold together,” *SUNESTEKEN*, perfect tense), all things would literally come unglued!

CONCLUSION: Since Christ not only created all things but sustains creation, can you not **trust** Him? Every breath you draw, you do so because Christ gives it to you (cf. Daniel 5:23). The One who is the Sovereign Creator is also the One who became a man and gave Himself up as an atonement for sinners. He now is enthroned at His Father’s right hand. Confess Him as your Lord and Savior. The day will come when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:10,11). “But now let us fall down before the majesty of our good God, with acknowledgement of our faults, praying Him to acquaint us more and more with them, that we may be brought to true repentance. And let us condemn ourselves and seek to find in our Lord Jesus Christ all that we need, and that not for one day, or for a mere brief moment, but continually and steadfastly to our life’s end. And whatever happens to us, let us always assure ourselves that we have good cause to praise our God, and that even if we are poor and miserable in this world, the happiness of heaven is enough to appease us, to sweeten all our afflictions and sorrows, and to give us such content that we may nevertheless have our mouths open to bless God for showing Himself so kindhearted and liberal towards us as even to adopt us as His children, and to show us that the heritage which has been purchased for us by the blood of His only Son is ready for us, and that we cannot miss it, seeing that we go to it with true and invincible constancy of faith. May it please Him to grant this grace not only to us but also to all peoples” (John Calvin).

ENDNOTES

¹The Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.). Basically it affirms, first, that the Lord Christ is one, His two natures preserved in one *prosopon* and *hypostasis*. Second, it states that both natures, God and man, are unimpaired, “perfect,” consubstantial with God and man, preexistent and born of the Virgin. He is “acknowledged in two natures,” “unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly and inseparably.” Third, the Definition affirmed that the distinct natures are fully God and man, thus securing salvation by a saving God and a man identified with men.

²D. F. Wells, *The Person of Christ* (Crossway, 1984), p. 7.

³W. G. T. Shedd, *History of Doctrine I* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978) p. 340.

⁴D. Glenn Butner, Jr., “Eternal Functional Subordination and The Problem of Divine Will” in *The Journal of The Evangelical Society* 58/1 (2015) p. 149.

⁵Cf. G. J. Pillay, “No God’s–Eye View: Traditions, Christian Hermeneutics, and Other Faiths” in *No Other Gods Before Me? Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions*, ed. J. G. Stackhouse Jr. (Baker, 2001). “The frightening reality,” exclaims John MacArthur, “is that evangelicals are beginning to echo that language and say similar things. This redefines the whole concept of missions. Instead of going into a tribe and saying that those people are lost, doomed, and in darkness, you should say, you’re standing on holy ground, because God has been there in the form of their paganism!” J. MacArthur *Hard to Believe* (Thomas Nelson, 2003), p. 191.

⁶Cf. Robert Reymond, *Jesus: Divine Messiah: The New Testament Witness* (P & R, 1990), p. 245.

⁷John Davenport, *An Exposition of The Epistle to the Colossians* (rpt. James Family, 1979), p. 175.

⁸Cf. as cited by Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (IVP, 1998), p. 57.

⁹Cf. Bruce M. Metzger, “The Jehovah’s Witnesses and Jesus Christ,” *Theology Today* (Apr. 1953, Vol. X, No. 1) and Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon: Word Biblical Commentary* (Word Books, 1982), p. 42.