

## Hope of Glory

### Colossians 1:15-28

I spent a great deal of time at General Assembly in Orlando singing songs. Many were about prayer since our theme was “Lord teach us to Pray.” A song was even written as the theme song for the event. Songs help us to remember who God is; who Christ is; and who we are in Christ; the hope of glory. Colossians 1:15-20 is commonly understood as a hymn that would have been song in the churches before the Letter to the Colossians was written. Within the Colossian church, it served as the primary exposition of the person of Jesus Christ and his relationship to the church. Paul drew a strong connection between knowledge and morality, and the hymn is the basis of both his cosmic and ethical assertions. Paul contended that the church at Colossae could hold fast to the gospel because its claim of reconciliation with God were rooted in Christ's sovereignty over all of time and creation.

The content and structure of Colossians indicate the influence of Stoicism and Jewish Wisdom literature. Both sources assert that the universe was ordered by the benevolence of God, who created through a divine intermediary of Wisdom or the law. Since humanity, you and I, were also created in this manner, people possess within themselves the capacity to sense and locate the "divine order," which allows us to live in accordance with God's intentions for creation.

The hymn begins with the claim that Christ is the "image" of God and is a manifestation of God's creative and redemptive power and that Christ has sovereignty over all creation. Not only is everything created in Christ, but everything in the created order is "held together" in him. Thus, all powers—be they earthly, demonic, or angelic—live each moment within the lordship of Christ. Creation can only receive nourishment through Christ, who sustains all of existence.

The hymn uses the same language as Ephesians 1:22 in drawing upon the vision of Christ as the "head" of the church. In both epistles, the headship of Christ is grounded in his

redeeming activity. This intimately connects the mission of the church with salvation in Jesus Christ. Just as he is "the firstborn of all creation," Christ is also "the firstborn from the dead." So, the person in whom all things were created and are sustained is the one who rose from the dead; and the "blood of his cross" (v. 20) facilitated a reconciliation between God and creation that was fully within Christ's capability.

Having established the basis for certainty in the gospel through the Christ hymn, Paul called upon the Colossians to remain steadfast in the truth they received. He asserted that reconciliation to God in Christ will enable the church to present itself as "holy and blameless and irreproachable" before God as long as they, and we, remain steadfast in what they were taught. If the Colossians understood the knowledge they have received, they would live according to the hope in Jesus Christ that it reveals: the hope of glory!

Paul also reminds us that the love shared within the Christian community includes bearing affliction for the sake of the gospel. Paul used himself as an example of this suffering. While the Christ hymn indicates that God has "reconcile[d] to himself all things" through the blood of Jesus Christ, Paul identified the activity of the church as completing this mission in Christ for the entire world. This pushes the church, us, beyond our doors and embraces the suffering that Christians experience in proclaiming the gospel as the fruit of the faith, hope, and love of our community. The struggle itself is not an individuated experience. Instead, it is the completion of the very suffering of Christ through which redemption occurred.

This view of the nature of God's saving activity in Jesus Christ is empowering to the church; to us. Therefore, the legalism, self-abasement, and worship of lower beings (2:16-18) creeping into the church at Colossae, are our congregation, is unnecessary. Just as Paul united the faithful work of churches throughout the world with the activity of God in heaven, his vision of the church binds the entire narrative of redemption within the body of Christ. Given that Christ is the very structure of creation, to live in accordance with his gospel is to follow the grain of the universe. Thus, living in harmony with the gospel produces good works that bear witness to the divine order of all things in heaven and on earth. (**Matthew Flemming**)

Theologian Brian McLaren writes in his book *A Generous Orthodoxy* about his own confusion and growth in understanding this Jesus Christ whom we are called to proclaim. He describes the "seven Jesuses I have known" McLaren begins with his upbringing as a child when he first met Jesus, whom he calls the "Conservative Protestant Jesus." This Jesus was "born to die," he writes. The focal point was Jesus' innocent death on the cross for McLaren's sins.

Over time, McLaren struggled with this view of Jesus because it seemed an individualistic, legalistic view with personal but no global import. As a young adult, McLaren next met the "Pentecostal/Charismatic Jesus." This Jesus was present, personal, and dramatically involved in everyday life through the Holy Spirit, but nagging questions about God's concern for the whole world, for history, and for creation frustrated McLaren. This led him to the "Roman Catholic Jesus" McLaren loved the way this Jesus helped him focus on the Lord's Supper and the connection to ancient tradition that was beyond his present experience, but the exclusivism of the church in this view troubled him.

For a time, he worshiped the "Eastern Orthodox Jesus," which emphasized the Trinity, affirmed mystery, and still engaged the world. This led him to the "Liberal Protestant Jesus," with a focus on social justice that grew from personal experience of faith in Christ. From there he ventured to the "Anabaptist Jesus," with its historic focus on peace and nonviolence, and from there to the "Liberation Theology Jesus," who confronted injustice in the whole of society and stood in solidarity with the poor and oppressed.

In this way, McLaren illustrates the complexity of proclaiming Christ. While he does not argue that one of these interpretations is the true Jesus, he does remind us that the purpose of the church is to proclaim Jesus Christ, whoever that church understands Christ to be.

Professor David Ng, much like the apostle Paul and Brian McLaren, sought to remind the church of its central purpose when he wrote *Youth in the Community of Disciples*. Concerned that the church had become distracted from its essential identity as the body of Jesus Christ and its central task of proclaiming Christ, he wrote that the purpose of the church is not to be a place of entertainment where persons, and especially young people, come to be spectators

while worship leaders and Bible teachers "put on a show," using whatever gimmicks and novelties they can pull out of their bag of tricks so that everyone has fun. The church is not some theological theme park where frantic leaders, fearful of ever boring or frustrating their customers, employ an ever-escalating array of techniques.

Ng also wrote that the purpose of the church is *not maintenance*—to be a safe place, a refuge for its members—until Christ comes again. This vision of the church as perpetual purgatory requires nothing of its members except that they wait and not stir things up, lest they become more anxiety ridden than they already are. The key purpose of this kind of church is to keep the status quo. Abhorrent of disruption, change, or even growth, the church focuses on itself by keeping its members comfortable without challenges. Keeping its members in this continuous holding pattern, the church simply tries to survive.

Furthermore, Ng wrote, the purpose of the church is *not fellowship* where the entire energy of the congregation is focused on its social relationships, so that each person feels as if he or she belongs. Certainly, he argues, fellowship is an important dimension of the church, but it is not the church's central purpose. Fellowship-focused churches act as little more than social organizations that exist for their own members, rather than for the worship of God as the body of Christ. With a tendency to be insular—and more often than not exclusive—the congregation whose primary purpose is fellowship tends toward a more therapeutic focus; the emphasis is one's comfort within the larger group, rather than whether one is living one's life faithfully.

Finally, Ng also wrote that the purpose of the church is *not protection*, where the community, terrified of the world beyond its walls, invests all its energies in constructing a safe place where its members can dutifully worship, study, and enact their sacred rituals. These congregations ultimately forbid any interaction with outsiders until the strangers have been duly tested and assimilated. For Ng, the real purpose of the church is clear—to be the community of disciples of Jesus Christ and as such, to proclaim Christ. We do not proclaim entertainment or fun or fellowship or maintenance or protection. The apostle Paul would

agree with Ng. The church of Jesus Christ does not exist for us. We exist for one reason: to proclaim Christ the firstborn of all creation! (**Rodger Y. Nishioka**)

It is easy for us to shake our heads at the Colossians and think that they have not understood the headship of Christ. We can wonder how they did not understand that Jesus "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." It is strange to us that the Colossians did not remember that the humanity of the earthly Jesus is inextricably united with the preexistent and cosmic Christ. But don't we often get seduced by the trappings of power that go with money and position. Are we often preoccupied by them. There is so much good that power can do, and yet so much harm they have done. Whether those who sit on these thrones are called president or prime minister or just major, there is always a temptation for those who call themselves Christians. We are tempted to cozy up to those on the throne in order to give us prestige, security, or some power of our own.

There are other powers that can enslave. They can bore down within a person and reach out to capture others nearby. Just think of how an addiction works. It is a "social disease," with deeply personal effects and widely ranging devastation. Even entire societies can become addicted, enslaved. It is not just the usual things we think of; but it can be our jobs, our families, our hobbies. The outcome is always the same unless there is redemption: these powers lead to death.

One other temptation confronts the church when we try to make Christian faith "believable"—whether in a world like that of the Colossians or in our own. The tactic is familiar and chronic: when faced with a pluralistic world with all kinds of gods and causes, just ratchet down your Christology to make Jesus fit in. Diminish your Jesus until he will not disturb or upset anyone. Good thinking—until we learn that the world's powers now have us where they want us: harmless and tamed.

But what if Jesus Christ is the image of God? Imagine—all things created through him, all things fulfilled in him, creator of all that is, both seen and unseen. Consider all these powers—these "thrones" and "dominions" If Christ is the "firstborn of all creation," then

these powers were created by him and through the cross have been "dethroned." They can no longer enslave. What if everything holds together in the One who is the image of God?

This cosmic Christ does not just "reign on high, in heavens above." He is the head of the church. We are all one within the church, for we all have one head of the body. While the powers and thrones may have different names, there is only one name, Jesus Christ, for the One who is our head. So, no matter what thrones and powers threaten to divert our focus, we are the hope of glory for all through Jesus Christ! No matter what "ism" we fight: classism, sexism, racism – we (you and I) are the hope of glory through Jesus Christ! So sing the song, not just in our worship, but in our working and serving and playing in the world. Sing of the firstborn of creation; for he is our hope of glory. (**Richard L. Eslinger**)

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