

THE PRE-EMINENCE OF CHRIST

"That in all things He might have the pre-eminence." Col. 1:18

There is a story to the effect that a great artist painted a beautiful picture of the Last Supper in which he used all the resources of his art in depicting the figure and countenance of the Master. On the table in the foreground, however, he put some beautifully chased cups. As his friends came to see it one after another remarked, "What beautiful cups!" Realizing that something of lesser importance quite outshone the Master's face and that the cups diverted the eyes of the spectators from the Master, he took up his brush and struck out the cups saying, "Christ must be the center of this picture."

That is exactly the position of Paul regarding his message and ministry. So he writes a striking statement in his remarkable letter to the Colossians that Christ must "come to hold first place." When he wrote to the Corinthians he put the same truth into other words, "I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." (I Cor. 2:2) There should be nothing unusual in a Christian minister thus putting the main emphasis upon loyalty to Christ. Yet strangely enough Christians are constantly losing this Christocentric emphasis.

Living as we do, far down the stream of time from the age when the name of Christ associated itself to all that was the most classical in literature, the most refined in art, the most exquisite in poetry, the most generous in chivalry, and the most advanced in civilization, it is very difficult for us to throw ourselves into the spirit of the age of Paul, to estimate the grandeur of thought, and the strangeness with which the words must have burst upon the world, that Christ should in all things have the pre-eminence. Nevertheless, all through the centuries, the church has been strongest and Christian experience has been richest and most vital when Jesus Christ has been magnified. To fail now to give Christ first place will be to lose the very thing that has made Christianity unique and powerful.

I suppose that if Paul ever made a supreme effort to enthrone Christ at the heart of all Christian thinking, he did it in this letter to the Colossians. It is almost impossible to exaggerate the place of supremacy the apostle assigns to his Lord. I am asking you to share with me the thought of Paul as he asserts the supremacy of Jesus in Colossians 1:14-18. I wish that we knew Jesus, our Lord, as well as Paul knew Him. This passage fills me with a supreme sense of the majesty and glory of Christ our Saviour; and I never read it without a new throb of satisfaction and assurance.

Paul, a prisoner in Rome, learned from Epaphras of the zeal and devotion of the Colossian church. But he also learned that the Colossian Christians were being greatly disturbed by incipient Gnosticism. Against this destructive heresy, Paul threw the whole force of his dynamic influence and wrote this glorious passage on the Person and Work of our Lord in which he teaches that in all things He should have the pre-eminence. "That He might come to stand first in everything."

I. PRE-EMINENT IN CREATION.

In order to exalt man's conception of the dignity and glory of Christ Paul states that He is the image of God. (vs.15) "Christ is the visible representation of the invisible God."--Weymouth. Jesus Christ is the answer to the cry of humanity's heart, "What is God like?" He is God's answer to humanity's prayer, "Show us the Father." As He went about doing good,---blessing the children, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, comforting the sorrowful, lifting the

fallen, quickening the dead, He was saying, "God is like this, he that hath seen Me, hath seen the Father." In Jesus Christ the unknown has become known, the invisible has become visible, and the intangible has become tangible. He was and is the Lord of creation. He was before all things. He Himself spoke of the glory which He had with the Father before the world was. He was in the beginning with God. Not only did He precede all things, He also created all things. "For by Him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are upon the earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers; all things were created by Him and for Him." (vs.16) "By Him were all things created." There was great need to assert that in those days for the Colossians were tangled or confused in their thinking about the relation of God to the material world. They believed that up above was God who was inherently good. In that, they were right. They believed that down here was matter which was inherently evil. In that, they were wrong. But with those premises their problem was how to relate a good God to an evil world. They did it by filling all the intervening space with intermediate beings, "aeons", or spirits until the chain was long enough to bind the two together. No! says Paul, and he swept the whole fabric away at a single stroke. It is Christ who stands between. He is the interpreting center of the world of nature. You wonder how this universe came, it came by Him; how it is sustained, it is sustained by Him; why it was created, it was created for Him; where it is driving to, it is driving unto Him.

1. All creation was in Him---the power
2. All creation was through Him---the promoter
3. All creation was for Him---the purpose
4. All creation consists or holds together in Him---the preserver

In other words, Christ the first born and Lord of all creation is the power and promoter and purpose and preserver of all created things visible and invisible. Therefore, He should hold first place in all things.

II. PRE-EMINENT IN REDEMPTION.

Paul also asserts the supremacy of Christ in the world of redemption. "In Whom we have redemption through His blood." I imagine that each of us has felt at times that there was in him or her a spiritual chaos. There were black oceans of sin that no plummet of ours could sound, dark clouds of guilt that no hand of ours could dissipate, wailing winds of remorse that no word of ours could silence, restless seas of passion that no voice of ours could subdue, and we have felt too that our hearts were only one little corner of the universal chaos of sin.

Now what does Paul claim? He claims that on His cross Jesus drove the shining chariot of His sacrifice into the midst of that abyss of sin, and became its hope and center. He has changed the wailing of remorse into the music of hope for the race. He has smitten a pathway through the grave and has brought life and immortality to light through His gospel.

We must remember, that He is the supreme spiritual hope of the world. For Him there is no possible substitute or successor. They who would attempt to dethrone our Christ have nothing and no one to offer in His place. If we want to remember how pre-eminent He is in redemption, let us contemplate sin, sorrow and death, those three great shadows that rest on human life. How can man escape the guilt of sin without His forgiveness, its stain without His cleansing and its palsy without His power?

When you swing the whole circle of human need, Jesus Christ is the only one that answers to the circumference of every necessity.

III. PRE-EMINENT IN THE CHURCH.

Christ is the head of the church. Paul says: "And He is the head of the body, the church." (vs. 18) All that the head is to the body, Christ is to the church. The peerless Lord of creation is the spiritual Head of the church. He is the cause of its origin; the bond of its unity; the source of its vitality; and the controller of its activities. As in His creative work He became pre-eminent in the universe, so through His redemptive work He merited Lordship over the church. The church is purely His own creation. He sketched its first rough outline, projected its design, constructed its organism, filled it with life, dowered it with spiritual riches; and He will continue to watch over and direct its future until He shall "present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing." Is He having His place in the church today? Many are signs that He is not. But He will have it. There will come a time when church members will be different from worldlings, when Christians will be Christ-in-men. God has purposed it.

Jesus is the source of life to the churches; and the greatest need of our churches is to keep in vital touch with the life-giving Lord. If we do that our hearts will pulsate with passion and power and we will be able to live lives of service and sacrifice. His life-giving power is expected to express itself in character as we become obedient to His will. He has the right to command and our obedience invariably expresses the degree of our loyalty to Him.

IV. PRE-EMINENT IN THE RESURRECTION.

"Who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things He might have the pre-eminence." Some had been translated and others had been raised up to die again, but Jesus is the first of those who shall die no more. The life of God in Jesus could not be held, even in a newly hewn tomb, nor bound with grave clothes, when the voice of God called.

This resurrection grace which cheered the drooping hearts and quickened the waning faith of the disciples of our Lord, became the victorious and insistent note of happiness and hope in the apostolic preaching that followed. It inspired them with a courage that defied the forces of evil, and enabled them to proclaim the gospel with supreme vigor throughout the Roman Empire.

This same resurrection grace as a pledge of assurance to us, is able to send us out and empower us to witness for Him. Jesus not only imparts new life but furnishes also the dynamic to live victoriously and usefully. It is fellowship with Jesus that is the secret of vital Christian living.

Now, of what avail is it, that Christ is pre-eminent in creation, redemption, the church, and the resurrection, if you and I do not give Him first place in our plans and lives? In his book, Robert Hardy's Seven Days, Charles Sheldon tells the story of a man who attended church once a Sunday, and that was all the religion his week had in it. His boys, seeing his hypocrisy, drifted into the saloon. His girls grew giddy, and flirted their way into society of the worst sort. Down at his office everything was wrong. Religion had never humanized his place of business. He had never learned that Christ intended Christianity to regulate life in all its parts and relations. One Sunday afternoon he fell asleep and dreamed. He looked into the face of eternity, and was told that he only had seven more days to live,---seven days in which to win back his boys; seven days

in which to teach his daughters the things that are worth while; seven days in which to right his business and his relations with his fellow-men. But life for Robert Hardy during that week was real life, for he saw things in their right relations and proportions, gave them their true valuations, and exalted Christ to first place.

Let us give the peerless Christ His rightful place of pre-eminence in each of our lives. Let us place Him first in our lives, our living, our giving, our hope, and our testimony. Place Him about self, family, friends, and business as God has purposed that we shall do. Let us enthrone Him, adore Him and crown Him King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

"Help us, O God, in all things to give Christ the pre-eminence. Help us also to love Him and delight to do His will. Send us out to serve Him better than we have done. We ask in His name. Amen."

Does He have the pre-eminent place in your life? Have you offered Him a throne or a footstool in your heart? Have you asked this pre-eminent Christ to take up his abode in the attic or the cellar or have you offered Him the whole house?