

Week 2

# THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST

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Colossians 1:15-23

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*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all  
creation.*

(Colossians 1:15, ESV)  
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## Introduction

Every year around Easter and Christmas time the popular news magazines and television shows begin to run stories about “The Search for the Historical Jesus.” They’ll ask, “Who was this man? What did he really do? Did he perform miracles? Is he really all that his followers say that he is? What did he teach?” Almost inevitably, they conclude that Jesus was a great human teacher, but nothing more. This conclusion, in the mind of philosopher C.S. Lewis, is ridiculous:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us.<sup>5</sup>

This passage is all about who Jesus is—the image of the invisible God. May it lead us to acknowledge his supremacy and respond with total devotion.

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<sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 2001). 43.



# Implication

1. Why is it essential that Christians hold firmly to the belief that Jesus is God? What are some of the dangers that would come from abandoning this doctrine?
2. Suppose you're having a conversation about spiritual matters with a friend, relative, associate, or neighbor. He or she says something like, "Jesus was a great spiritual teacher who did lots of things to help people, but I don't think he was God." How could you address this in a respectful and biblical manner?
3. When it comes to their affection for God, Paul describes the unsaved as "alienated and hostile." Therefore, in contrast, Christ-followers should be marked by passion for God and closeness with him. Are you currently more passionate for God or indifferent toward him? Why?

4. Which of the four descriptions below best characterizes you right now? What can you do to take the next step of spiritual growth based on where you are currently?
- a. Exploring Christ – “I believe in God, but I am not sure about Jesus. My faith is not a significant part of my life.”
  - b. Growing in Christ – “I believe in Jesus and am working on what it means to get to know him.”
  - c. Close to Christ – “I feel really close to Jesus and depend on him daily for guidance.”
  - d. Christ-Centered – “My relationship with Jesus is the most important relationship in my life. It influences everything I do.”

## Other Issues

**This passage says that Jesus is the “firstborn of all creation.” What does this mean? If Christ is eternal, how can he be firstborn? Does this mean that he was simply the first thing that God created?**

### Short Answer:

According to biblical usage and custom, the “firstborn” has the right of leadership or authority in the family for one’s generation. So Colossians 1:15 means that Christ has the privileges of authority and rule, the privileges belonging to the “first-born,” but with respect to the whole creation. The NIV translates it helpfully, “the firstborn *over all creation*.”

### Detailed (and quite interesting) Answer:

This is an important question because many in our day, including Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons, use this verse to deny the full deity of Christ with a centuries old error known as “Arianism.” The term *Arianism* is derived from Arius, a Bishop of Alexandria whose views were condemned at the Council of Nicea in AD 325, and who died in AD 336. Arius taught that God the Son was at one point created by God the Father, and that before that time the Son did not exist, nor did the Holy Spirit, but the Father only. Thus, though the Son is a heavenly being who existed before the rest of creation and who is far greater than all the rest of creation, he is still not equal to the Father in all his attributes—he may even be said to be “like the Father” or “similar to the Father” in his nature, but he cannot be said to be “of the same nature” as the Father.

The Arians depended heavily on texts that called Christ God’s “*only begotten*” Son (John 1:14; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). If Christ were “begotten” by God the Father, they reasoned, it must mean that he was brought into existence by God the Fa-

ther (for the word “beget” in human experience refers to the father’s role in conceiving a child). Further support for the Arian view was found in Colossians 1:15, “He is the image of the invisible God, *the first-born of all creation.*” Does not “first-born” here imply that the Son was at some point brought into existence by the Father? And if this is true of the Son, it must necessarily be true of the Holy Spirit as well.

But these texts do not require us to believe the Arian position. Colossians 1:15, which calls Christ “the first-born of all creation,” is better understood to mean that Christ has the rights or privileges of the “first-born—that is, according to biblical usage and custom, the right of leadership or authority in the family for one’s generation. So Colossians 1:15 means that Christ has the privileges of authority and rule, the privileges belonging to the “first-born,” but with respect to the whole creation. The NIV translates it helpfully, “the firstborn *over all creation.*”

As for the texts that say that Christ was God’s “only begotten Son,” the early church felt so strongly the force of many other texts showing that Christ was fully and completely God, that it concluded that, whatever “only begotten” meant, it did not mean “created.” Therefore the Nicene Creed in 325 affirmed that Christ was “begotten, not made”:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father....

This same phrase was reaffirmed at the Council of Constantinople in 381. In addition, the phrase “before all ages” was added after “begotten of the Father,” to show that this “begetting” was eternal. It never began to happen, but is something that has been eternally true of the relationship between the Father and the Son. However, the nature of that “begetting” has never been defined very clearly, other than to say that it has to do with the relationship between the Father and the Son, and that in some sense the Father has eternally had a primacy in that relationship.

In further repudiation of the teaching of Arius, the Nicene Creed insisted that Christ was “of the same substance as the Father.” The dispute with Arius concerned two words that have become famous in the history of Christian doctrine, *homoousios* (“of the same nature”) and *homoiousios* (“of a similar nature”). The difference depends on the different meaning of two Greek prefixes, *homo-* meaning “same,” and *homoi-* meaning “similar.” Arius was happy to say that Christ was a supernatural heavenly being and that he was created by God before the creation of the rest of the universe, and even that he was “similar” to God in his nature. Thus, Arius would agree to the word *homoiousios*. But the Council of Nicea in 325 and the Council of Constantinople in 381 realized that this did not go far enough, for if Christ is not of exactly the same nature as the Father, then he is not fully God. So both councils insisted that orthodox Christians confess Jesus to be

ὁμοούσιος of the *same* nature as God the Father. The difference between the two words was only one letter, the Greek letter *iota*, and some have criticized the church for allowing a doctrinal dispute over a single letter to consume so much attention for most of the fourth century AD. Some have wondered, “Could anything be more foolish than arguing over a single letter in a word?” But the difference between the two words was profound, and the presence or absence of the *iota* really did mark the difference between biblical Christianity, with a true doctrine of the Trinity, and a heresy that did not accept the full deity of Christ and therefore was non-Trinitarian and ultimately destructive to the whole Christian faith.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 1994). 243.

# Sermon Notes