

THE REASON FOR THE SEASON

by Ray C. Stedman

Most scholars feel that the magnificent description of Christ found in verses 15-20 of Colossians 1 represents an early Christian hymn which Paul is quoting. These verses may represent the very first of all Christmas carols. If so; it is a hymn of two stanzas. The first concerns Jesus as Lord of creation, i.e. the material universe, and all forces at work within it. The second stanza speaks of Jesus as Lord of the new creation, the new humanity. We have lost the tune for this hymn, but we still have these words which focus upon our Lord's overall supremacy.

Here are Paul's words:

"He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy."

The church, of course, is the new creation. It is healthy to remind ourselves of that because many churches seem to forget it. The church is something eternally new which the world has never seen before. It is quite different from any other organization or organism among men. It is a sad thing to observe the loss of this concept among Christians. As I travel about I have noted the way people think about their church. I am afraid that the most widespread concept is that the church is a religious country club, operated for the enjoyment and benefit of the members; it makes its own rules and exists for its own purposes. That is a far cry indeed from the New Testament description of the church.

Others look upon the church as a collection of emotional misfits who are waiting for the first bus to glory. I fear some of us give them good reason to think that! Then there are those, like the Colossians, who are a group of eager beaver religious fanatics, running after every new doctrine that comes along, especially if it offers a good feeling and has a sense of magic and mystery about it. That to many is the church.

But here the apostle corrects these false ideas and declares that Jesus is the Head of the body, which is the church. Paul relates the two together as a head and trunk relate in a physical body. This is one of the most important statements in the New Testament about the church. God has actually given us a model to carry around with us (our own body), so that we may understand how the church is to function. The church is a body, and we all have bodies. The church has a Head, and we too have heads. To understand the church and how it should function, think about your own body and how it functions.

If you stand in front of a mirror you will notice, I hope, that there are two divisions of the body. The knob up on top, with more or less hair, we call the head. It is the control center of the body. The rest of the body, with its appendages of arms and legs, etc., is all part of the trunk.

That is a body---and the head runs the body! Many churches seem to forget that. Think what would happen to your body if somebody removed your head. It doesn't appear that any of you has had that experience since most of you seem to be well attached. When I was a boy growing up in Montana, we did not buy chickens at the grocery store all nicely packaged in plastic. I had to go out and run one down, and then remove its head. A chicken with its head cut off acts very strangely. It does not simply quietly perish, but jumps and runs around, out of control for a minute or two, before it finally dies. Churches that lose their awareness of the Head are like that---they too go out of control. They do not know what to do. They run about and become involved in things they ought not to have anything to do with. They have, for all practical purposes, lost their Head.

That was the trouble at Colossae. In chapter two Paul says they "have lost connection to the head." It is essential, therefore, that a church must have its Head in place and functioning: supplying direction, maintaining order, giving it health, solving its difficulties, coordinating its activities, and supplying to every single member its own kind of life. That is what your physical head does, and that is what Jesus, as Head of the body, desires

to do. This must find application on an individual basis. Oftentimes we fail to see that a church consists of individuals. You are the church! It cannot act as a corporate body very often---it is not expected to. Yet, because we have false concepts of the church, we often expect the corporation to act for us. But Christ's body is not designed that way. Each individual is directly related to the Head. It is he who should direct each of us in our activities through the week. That is where the church truly functions, not here on Sunday morning. Here is where the church is taught by the Head, where we learn how to function. But we actually function away from here, in our homes and neighborhoods. There we must relate directly to the Head, expecting him to open doors, provide energy, wisdom, comfort and forgiveness. That is where the church touches society on every side.

Yet, despite the fact that we are to function as individuals, we must never forget that we belong to the whole, not only this local body but the whole body of Christ all over the world. We are all related to one another. This marvelous mystery of relationship constitutes one of the most exciting things in the world today. When the church functions properly it is far and away the most powerfully effective body on earth. That is what Jesus means when he said, "You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world." As individuals we must remember that our part is to respond to personal direction from the Head: to do as he says and obey his word.

Now Paul tells us, in two marvelously descriptive phrases, exactly why Jesus is the Head of the body. First, he says, "he is the beginning." The beginning of what? The beginning of the church! He is the One from whom the church gets its life. There are several "beginnings" in Scripture. The Bible opens on that note: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." But that is not the beginning referred to here. There is another "beginning" in the gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word." That goes back even before creation. But that is not the "beginning" spoken of here either. The "beginning" here is the same one which John speaks of in his letter: "We know him who was from the beginning." He is referring to the beginning of the church, when the disciples saw Jesus, touched him and handled him. From the risen life of Jesus flows the new life of the church. That is what Paul teaches so clearly in 2 Corinthians 5: "If anyone be in Christ he is a new creation. Old things have passed away, all things have become new." We are part of a new humanity that God is bringing forth upon this earth, a humanity that is "bought with a price": "You are not your own, you are bought with a price." Remember, "He who knew no sin was made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."

This should remind us of that simple, often misunderstood parable, that our Lord told among several others, in Matthew 13. He says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it." Unfortunately, that parable has been interpreted to mean that Jesus is the pearl of great price, and that when we see what a valuable person he is we will sell all we have and buy him. But that is entirely contrary to every other teaching of Scripture. We do not buy God. We cannot purchase him or purchase our salvation in any sense. We have nothing to offer him! We must come, as the old hymn puts it, "Nothing in my hand I bring, / Simply to thy cross I cling." No, it is Jesus who is the merchant looking for a fine pearl. And he finds one: it is the church! For it, "he went away and sold everything he had and bought it."

This is most instructive if you remember how a pearl is made. A pearl, you know, starts out as an irritated oyster! A grain of sand gets under the oyster's shell. To the oyster that feels like crackers in bed do to us. It is very uncomfortable, and the oyster sets about getting rid of it. What it does is to cover the irritating grain of sand with a beautiful nacre that hardens into a lustrous and gorgeous pearl. That is how the church was born. It emerges from the wounded side of Jesus. It was the irritation that we represent by our sinful lives that put him to death, and he covers it over and heals it, making it into a beautiful pearl of great value. That is the church. That is what Paul is describing here: Jesus himself is the beginning of the church.

Then, secondly, Paul says, Jesus is "the firstborn from among the dead." Many take that to mean he is the first one ever to be resurrected. That is certainly true. The resurrection of Jesus is the only resurrection that has ever occurred on this earth. Lazarus, and all the others who came back from the dead, were simply resuscitated: they came back to the same life they had left. We may even feel a bit sorry for them because they had to come back to take it up again. But Jesus was truly resurrected. He was given a glorified life: he came from the grave at a far higher level than he went in. He returned in a glorified body, subject to different laws and governed by different principles. But that is not what is meant here. That is what Paul calls "the first-fruits of them that

slept." But here "firstborn" means what it does in verse 15. We have already seen that it means the owner, the possessor, of the old creation. Here then it means the owner, possessor, of the new creation. He is the One who alone possesses the resurrection life that he gives to each of us. That is what John is saying in his first letter, in chapter 5, verse 11: "This is the testimony: God has given us eternal life [deathless life, resurrection life], and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life." He may be moral, he may be a nice person, but he does not yet possess the life of eternity, the resurrection life of Jesus, because that life comes from Jesus alone.

Now it is a clear biblical fact that Christians who have received Christ and been born into the new creation have this life. That is the reason they can no longer excuse themselves for wrong behavior by saying, "Well, after all, I'm only human." It is true you are human yet in the body, in the flesh, and that is why you are tempted, but because you also have a new life it means you do not need to yield to that temptation; there is now a new power within.

I feel constrained to get this across to people. When you become a Christian you have a new source of power which the world knows nothing about. Therefore, you are expected to live at a different, higher level. And you can. You cannot excuse yourself by saying, "I'm only human." True, that is why temptations come, but God has given us an ability to say no to these and to say yes to the power of Christ. We will not feel powerful---we are never expected to---but we have the power to say no; that is what the new creation is all about.

Thus, because our Lord is Master of the old creation (the old, material universe all around us)---and also master of a whole new humanity that is now coming into being, Paul goes on to say that he is both firstborn of the old and firstborn of the new "in order that he might have the supremacy." There is nothing left out of his control. One of the old Christmas carols captures this beautifully,

King of kings yet born of Mary,
As of old on earth he stood,
Lord of lords in human nature,
In the body and the blood.
He will give to all the faithful,
His own self for heavenly food.

That is the difference that being a Christian makes: we have Christ himself dwelling in us, and that enables us to be more than we once were.

Paul now turns from our Lord's position as Head of the body to his work as the reconciler of all things.

"For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 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."

Notice how carefully the apostle links together the reconciling work of Christ and his deity. Jesus had to be God to do what he did! At the Chicago Conference on Biblical Application which I mentioned last week I was thrilled to hear Dr. Bruce Waltke make an impassioned plea that we who are working with these great themes of Scripture find some way to reduce these theological statements to contemporary terms, because, as he put it, "the world is lost without a sense of God. Men and women everywhere desperately need to know that there is Someone in charge of life, and that there is a Source to whom they can turn for help and for deliverance. The world needs to know that Jesus Christ is God." He made the statement personal with these words, "If Jesus is not God, then I do not have a Savior." That is surely true. If Jesus is not God there is no bridge that can span the chasm between God and man.

This is why Christianity is often offensive to people of other faiths. They say, "Why can't you recognize that all religions have leaders who can lead us into truth? Why do you claim that Jesus is different and above all the others?" That is often called "the scandal of exclusivity," the exclusive claim that only one religious founder is both God and man. As C. S. Lewis well states, If you had gone to Buddha and asked him, "Are you the Son of Brahma?," he would have said, "My son, you are still in the vale of illusion." If you had gone to Socrates

and asked, "Are you Zeus?" he would have laughed at you. If you had gone to Mohammed and asked, "Are you Allah?" he would first have rent his clothes, and then cut your head off. If you had asked Confucius, "Are you Heaven?" I think he would have probably replied, "Remarks which are not in accordance with nature are in bad taste."

There is only One who claims that he is both God and man. This explains the name which the shepherds whispered when they came into the stable after the angels' announcement. They knelt in awe before the Babe lying there and breathed the one word, "Immanuel" (God with us). He is the reason for the season! I want to tell you it makes me angry to see the commercialization of Christmas. All this flim-flam about trees, and presents, and Santa Claus tends to obscure this marvelous truth: that Baby was "God reduced to a span/Incomprehensibly a man" and he is the only hope we have out of the mess we find ourselves in. That is the glory of Christmas.

But because Jesus is both God and man he is able to bridge the gap, "to reconcile to himself all things." This verse has been used as a proof text to substantiate the idea of universal salvation; that ultimately every person and every being is going to be redeemed. Even the devil and his angels (this concept maintains), and even the wickedest of men such as Hitler and Stalin and those who are far worse because of spiritual evil are someday going to be redeemed. There may be a temporary punishment, but eventually everything in the universe will be restored to God, and there will be no hell and no eternal judgment. That is the teaching of universalism.

It is true that the word "reconcile" upon which this whole teaching hangs, does mean salvation in the case of those who believe. It is used in that sense in the very next verses, where Paul goes on to say,

"Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation."

That is clearly salvation in its fullest degree. But "reconcile" often means things other than salvation. This is where we must be very careful. Heresy can creep in at places where we do not expect it. It is wrong to take a single meaning of a word and press it everywhere as its only meaning.

If you look elsewhere in Scripture you will find that "reconcile" is broader than salvation. In Ephesians 2, for instance, Paul uses it of the healing of hostility between Jew and Gentile. He says Jesus has come "and broken down the middle wall of partition and reconciled Jew and Gentile in one body," by which he means the hostility is ended. Not that every Jew and every Gentile will be saved, but they will be able to live in harmony; that is his point. In 1 Corinthians 7, the apostle says that husbands and wives are to be "reconciled" to one another. There may be some husbands and wives here who need to have their hostility end and begin to live together in peace. Parents and children need reconciling at times. Friends often need it. Christmas is a time when reconciliation between estranged family members takes place more than it does at other times of the year. The basic meaning of this word is "to remove all impediments to peace" so that harmony prevails.

What does it mean, then, that Jesus shall "reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven"? It means a day is coming when the hostility of evil against righteousness will be brought to a sudden halt. Evil men and angels will find themselves unable to function in their enmity against God. They will be subdued, and will cease their rebellion. It does not mean their punishment ends; it is their active hostility that will cease. Then, at last, the terrible question that every one of us has asked at times, "Why does God permit evil?" will be answered. There is coming a day, according to this verse, when all will be explained to us: Why do the good suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why does injustice reign triumphant at times? Why are innocent children raped, tortured, and killed, or ruined in mind and body by drugs or molestation? Why were six million Jews gassed to death in Germany? Why were millions of others elsewhere shot, speared, drowned, burned or hanged by the tyrants of history? Why?

We have all asked these questions. Why do accidents occur, ruining our joys? Why does insanity rage in so many? At last this question is to be answered. At last we will learn why it was necessary to allow evil. Then we will see it was part of the working out of God's program. Every hurt will be resolved, every tear will be wiped away, every pain will be relieved. At last the whole universe will live in peace and harmony with one

another. "Nothing shall hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain." Read the great promises of Isaiah in this regard. What glorious language he employs to picture an earth where nothing is out of step, nothing is eccentric, nothing is out of balance; everything is in harmony with everything else. That is what this declares. Surely this is what Paul is describing in that great passage in Philippians. An hour is coming when "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father." That is where history is headed.

The marvelous thing about this is that it flows out of the death of Jesus on the cross. It is the cross that has brought this to pass. That is why it has been the central symbol of Christian faith since the very beginning. We put crosses up in our sanctuaries, not to make us think that the cross was a beautiful piece of wood, for it was a dirty, bloody, rugged means of death. But out of that death has flowed life to all the universe. That is what this is telling us. We find it described very clearly in chapter two of this letter, in the words, "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (2:15). It is the cross that is the center of all life.

Christians should never allow themselves to forget that wonderful scene recorded in the book of Revelation, where John is caught up into glory and sees the end of history, the end of all human affairs. Here is how he describes it:

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they said: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.

That is what Christmas initiates: it is the beginning of the great process that shall end in the perfect harmony of all creation. We are privileged to have a part in proclaiming this good news right now, and in our hearts to give honor and glory to the Lord Jesus, even before the rest of creation joins in the song. Revelation closes with this reminder:

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life... He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all God's people. Amen. (Rev. 22:17ff)

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