

Colossians 1:15-20

(15) He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

(16) For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.

(17) He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

(18) And 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.

(19) For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,

(20) 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. (NIV)

1. As with all good biblical exegesis, it is important to note the context of the verses and why they would be written and placed where they are. Reading the Book of Colossians reveals that the Colossian Church had lost its focus on Christ. Some of the believers at Colosse had, in practice, forsaken their connection with the Head, Jesus Christ, and some were even being led to worship angels (2:18 and 19). The situation in Colosse called for a strong reminder of Christ's headship over his Church, and the epistle to the Colossians provided just that.

2. These verses cannot be affirming the Trinity because they open with Christ being "the image [*eikon*] of the invisible God." If Christ were "God," then the verse would simply say so, rather than that he was the "image" of God. The Father is plainly called "God" in dozens of places, and this would have been a good place to say that Jesus was God. Instead, we are told that Christ is the *image* of God. If one thing is the "image" of another thing, then the "image" and the "original" are not the same thing. The Father *is* God, and that is why there is no verse that calls the Father the image of God. Calling Jesus the image of God squares beautifully with his statement that, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9 and 10).

There are Trinitarian theologians who assert that the word *eikon* (from which we get the English word "icon," meaning "image," or "representation") means "manifestation" here in Colossians, and that Christ is the manifestation of God. We believe that conclusion is unwarranted. The word *eikon* occurs **23** times in the New Testament, and it is clearly used as "image" in the common sense of the word. It is used of the image of Caesar on a coin, of idols that are manmade images of gods, of Old Testament things that were only an image of the reality we have today and of the "image" of the beast that occurs in Revelation. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says that Christians are changed into the "image" of the Lord as we reflect his glory. All these verses use "image" in the common sense of the word, *i.e.*, a representation separate from the original. 1 Corinthians 11:7 says, "A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the *image* and glory of God." Just as Christ is called the image of God, so men are called the image of God. We are not as exact an image as Christ is because we are marred by sin, but nevertheless the Bible does call us the "image" of God. Thus, the wording about being the image of God is the same for us as it is for Christ. We maintain that the words in the Word must be read and understood in their common or ordinary meaning unless good reason can be given to alter that

meaning. In this case, the common meaning of “image” is “likeness” or “resemblance,” and it is used that way every time in the New Testament. Surely if the word “image” took on a new meaning for those times it referred to Christ, the Bible would let us know that. Since it does not, we assert that the use of “image” is the same whether it refers to an image on a coin, an image of a god, or for both Christ and Christians as the image of God.

3. God delegated to Christ His authority to create. Ephesians 2:15 refers to Christ creating “one new man” (his Church) out of Jew and Gentile. In pouring out the gift of holy spirit to each believer (Acts 2:33 and 38), the Lord Jesus has created something new in each of them, that is, the “new man,” their new nature (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15; Eph. 4:24).

4. The Church of the Body of Christ was a brand new entity, created by Christ out of Jew and Gentile. He had to also create the structure and positions that would allow it to function, both in the spiritual world (positions for the angels that would minister to the Church—see Rev. 1:1, “his angel”) and in the physical world (positions and ministries here on earth—see Rom. 12:4-8; Eph. 4:7-11). The Bible describes these physical and spiritual realities by the phrase, “things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible” (1:16).

5. Many people think that because Colossians 1:16 says, “For by him all things were created” that Christ must be God, but the entire verse must be read carefully with an understanding of the usage of words and figures of speech. The study of legitimate figures of speech is an involved one, and the best work we know of was done in 1898 by E. W. Bullinger. It is titled *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* and is readily available, having been reprinted many times.

First, the student of the Bible (indeed, of language and life) must be aware that when the word “all” (or “every” or “everything”) is used, it is often used in a limited sense. People use it this way in normal speech in countries and languages all over the world. I (John S.) had an experience of this just the other day. It was late at night and I wanted a cookie before bed. When I told my wife that I wanted a cookie, she said, “The kids ate all the cookies.” Now of course our kids did not eat all the cookies in the world. The implied context was the cookies *in the house*, and our kids had eaten all of them. This is a good example of “all” being used in a limited sense, and the Bible uses it that way too.

For example, when Absalom was holding a council against his father, David, 2 Samuel 17:14 says that “all the men of Israel” agreed on advice. “All” the men of Israel were not there, but the verse means “all” who were there. Another example is Jeremiah 26:8, which says that “all the people” seized Jeremiah to put him to death, but the context makes it very clear that “all the people” were not even present, and people who came to the scene later wanted to release Jeremiah. 1 John 2:20 (*KJV*) says of Christians, “ye know all things.” Surely there is no Christian who actually believes that he knows everything. The phrase is using a limited sense of “all,” which is determined by the context.

The point is that whenever one reads the word “all,” a determination must be made as to whether it is being used in the wide sense of “all in the universe,” or in the narrow sense of “all in a certain context.” We believe the narrow sense is called for in Colossians 1:16, and we give more evidence for that in point 6 below (For more on the limited sense of “all,” see the note on John 2:24).

6. An important figure of speech in Colossians 1:16 is called “encircling.” Bullinger notes that the Greeks called this figure of speech *epanadiplosis*, while the Romans labeled it *inclusio* (p. 245), and he gives several pages of examples from the Bible to document the figure. He writes: “When this figure is used, it marks what is said as being completed in one complete circle...giving completeness of the statement that is made.” With that in mind, note that the phrase “all things were created” occurs at the beginning and end of the verse, encircling the list of created things: “For by him **all things were created**: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; **all things were created** by him and for him.” The things that are “created” are not rocks, trees, birds and animals, because those things were created by God. These things, “thrones, powers, rulers and authorities,” are the powers and positions that were needed by Christ to run his Church, and were created by him for that purpose. The figure of speech known as “encircling” helps us to identify the proper context of “all things”—that it is the narrower sense of the word “all,” and refers to the things needed to administer the Church.

7. The phrase in verse 17 that “he is before all things” has been used to try to prove that Jesus existed before everything else. However, the word “before” (here *pro*) can refer to time, place or position (*i.e.*, superiority). This leads us to conclude that the whole point of the section is to show that Christ is “before,” *i.e.*, “superior to” all things, just as the verse says. If someone were to insist that time is involved, we would point out that in the very next verse Christ is the “firstborn” from the dead, and thus “before” his Church in time as well as in position.

Buzzard, pp. 51 and 52
Dana, Letter #25, pp. 221-227
Racovian Catechism, pp. 91-94
Snedeker, pp. 446-450

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