

CHRIST THE IMAGE OF GOD: EXPOSITION AND PRACTICAL-THEOLOGICAL APPLICATION OF COLOSSIANS 1:15

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One of the key and most comprehensive New Testament passages that sets forth Christ's relation to God – interposed between passages proclaiming Him as Redeemer and Creator – is given in Colossians 1:15. This passage exalts his divinity as the image of God and sets the stage for setting Him forth as both Creator of all things and as creation's providential Sustainer. The present exposition and notes will first address what is set forth in this truth that Christ is the image of the invisible God and what is meant by his being the firstborn of every creature. In summary, the verse sets forth Christ's internal relation to God and his external relation to the creation. The profound biblical doctrine put forth in Colossians 1:15 not only has importance to Christology in general, but the modern creation science movement of which this author is a contributor.

CONTEXT – COLOSSIANS 1

Paul wrote to the “saints and faithful brethren” at Colossae who mostly appear to be Gentiles, but have apparently been affected by a combination of Jewish legalism and pagan philosophy and mysticism. Paul began the epistle by blessing the church with a typical greeting, and acknowledging their faith in Christ (vv. 1-8). Then, as he did in Ephesians, presented a powerful prayer that all believers can use as a model of intercession in their own lives (vv. 9-12). He then briefly mentioned redemption in Christ through his blood, and receiving the forgiveness of sins (vv. 13-14). Paul then moved into the foundation for the rest of the epistle, which is the supremacy of Christ in all things including acknowledging Him (v. 15) as the image of God and firstborn of creation, which is the topic of this article.

Colossians 1:15a

ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου¹

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Translation***“He is the image of the invisible God”²***

In the first statement, it begins with “who” (ὃς) or “He” with the antecedent previously in verse 13 being “His beloved Son” (τοῦ υἱοῦ τῆς ἀγάπης αὐτοῦ) or the “Son of His Love” as Lenski noted.³ While verse 15 begins a new stream, the relative pronoun ὃς both ties this together with the previous content, but also emphasizes the importance of the doctrine being introduced. Lenski said, “Paul wants no complete break; at the same time the relative is of the greatest importance because of the mighty statements which it introduces.”⁴ Beale also noted that the antecedent is also “the one in whom we have redemption” in verse 14.⁵ Thus the antecedent here has two meanings that are to be kept in mind in proceeding: God’s beloved Son (v. 13) and the believer’s precious Savior “in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (v. 14).

“He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God” (ὃς ἐστὶν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου). Believers are presented with a profound declarative statement using the linking copulative verb ἐστὶν (εἰμί). The phrase ultimately centers around what is meant by the predicate nominative, εἰκὼν (“image”) with the genitive of apposition (of definition) in the phrase τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου (“of the invisible God”) which is much more emphatic than just the use of an adjective.⁶ Paul used this same phrase in 2 Corinthians 4:4 (ὃς ἐστὶν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ) emphasizing that Christ being the image of God was a fundamental part of his gospel message. Paul’s declaration ought to be easily acknowledged since every person inherently understands that in the present natural world, God is invisible to physical

¹ Greek text is from the *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th rev. ed., eds. Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012).

² Unless otherwise noted, English translation and Scripture citation throughout the text of this article is from the *New American Standard Bible* (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

³ R. C. H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, & Philemon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001) 47–48.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Gregory K. Beale, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019) 80.

⁶ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 95.

eyes (“No one has seen God at any time,” John 1:18). John Calvin provided one of the most succinct definitions and stated, “for Christ is called the *image of God* on this ground — that he makes God in a manner visible to us.”⁷ Modern theologian Douglass F. Kelly noted, “Seeing the heart of the Father in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ is the fullest glory of the New Testament revelation. In the Son, the love of the Father has taken on flesh and blood in our nature, that in some measure we can get hold of.”⁸ Thus, the use of the word εἰκὼν is very important because in Greek thought an image shares and conveys the reality it represents since Christ is the perfect likeness of God.⁹ Indeed, Louw and Nida noted that the semantic range for εἰκὼν covers image, likeness, and representation.¹⁰

The statement in Colossians 1:15a is affirmed in Hebrews 1:3 which says, “And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature.” In this regard, in John 14:8-9, one has a revealing discourse from the Lord in response to a comment by one of the disciples. “Philip said to Him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father.’” Calvin in his commentary on Colossians stated, “For in Christ he shews us his righteousness, goodness, wisdom, power, in short, his entire self.”¹¹ Therefore, one can conclude that the Lord Jesus Christ is not some vague and blurred facsimile of God, but as Paul stated: “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Col 2:9) and He is “the exact representation of His nature” (Heb 1:3). Lewis Sperry Chafer stated, “The Second Person has ever been the manifestation of Deity and never more so than in and through the incarnation. . . . It follows, also, that the first step to be taken in an approach to the understanding of the Person of Christ is an unprejudiced recognition of His Deity.”¹²

⁷ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentary on the Bible*, 22 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009) 21:150.

⁸ Douglas F. Kelly, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2008) 1:487.

⁹ Cleon L. Rogers Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 461.

¹⁰ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989) 6.96, 58.35, 61.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1948; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1976) 1:341-42.

Christ being the image of God and representing the fullness of the Godhead bodily has all the necessary attributes of deity as the eternally begotten Son of God, which are all fully propounded in Scripture. Christ possesses the following: (1) eternality (Isa 9:6; Mic 5:2; John 1:1-2; 8:58); (2) immutability, his unchanging nature (Ps 102:25; Mal 3:6; Heb 1:10-12; 13:8); (3) omnipotence (1 Cor 15:25; Phil 3:21; Rev 1:8); (4) omniscience (John 2:25; 6:64; 16:30; 21:17); (5) omnipresence (John 14:23; Matt 18:20; 28:20; Eph 1:23); and, other important attributes could be added such as life (John 1:4; 5:26; 10:10; 14:6), truth (John 14:6; Rev 3:7), holiness (Luke 1:35; John 6:69; Heb 7:26), and love (John 13:1, 34; 1 John 3:16).¹³ Concerning these scriptural affirmations of deity, Chafer said, “Thus it is effectively reasoned that, if attributes represent the elements of being and the divine attributes are the distinguishing features of Deity and every divine attribute is fully ascribed to Christ, He is Deity in the most absolute sense.”¹⁴

Another approach that can be taken (as to the use of the term “image”) brings one to the beginning of creation on the sixth day wherein mankind was created. Genesis 1:26-27 says, “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ God created man in his own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” Paul referenced this principal in 1 Corinthians 11:7 (“For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God”). Most importantly, however, when it comes

¹³ For a Reformed orthodox discussion of the two natures of Christ as it relates to his attributes, see Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016) 313-49; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) 3:233-319; and, Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Dialogue on the Two Natures in Christ* (Moscow, ID: Davenant Press, 2018). Wellum helpfully noted concerning the incarnate Christ’s human body as follows: “Scripture does not allow, even in Christ’s glorification, the communication of divine attributes to his human nature. The theological rule of ‘the finite is not capable of containing the infinite’ applies to the human nature of Christ in the states of both humiliation and exaltation” and “Ultimately, to say that omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence are communicated to Christ’s human nature is, in reality, to make it something it is not” (p. 331). The discussion of this issue as a Reformed polemic dialogue to the Lutheran view (ubiquity of Christ’s body) and its application to the Lord’s Supper during the Reformation by Peter Martyr (1499-1562) is particularly enlightening.

¹⁴ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:342.

to addressing the believer's sanctification, he stated, "and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him" (Col 3:10). While theologians have debated what the image of God is in his creation of man, one thing is evident: forming the image of Christ in his elect is the goal of sanctification. Rolland McCune stated, "the purpose of sanctification is a restoration of the fallen image of God in human beings" and "This renewed image via sanctification is variously called the image of Christ, the formation of Christ in the believer or the imitation of Christ."¹⁵ Sanctification is an ongoing process in the life of the believer and culminates in death when the believer is ultimately freed from the presence of sin.

One debated aspect of the image of God is based on Exodus 20:4 which says, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth" (repeated in Deut 5:8). In light of this, Herman Bavinck claimed that God is "unpicturable," since his form was not revealed to the Israelites, as noted in Deuteronomy 4:12 which says, "Then the Lord spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form—only a voice." One could also reference Deuteronomy 4:15 which says, "So watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire, so that you do not act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure."¹⁶ However, John Frame noted that these passages do not say that God is without form – only that God did not display his form to them on Mount Sinai.¹⁷ Frame's contention is that God is not "unpicturable in any straightforward sense" but that He does in the Old Testament image himself in the numerous theophanies that occur. Furthermore, in the gospels, Jesus Christ is God's image *par excellence* as already noted in this article (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3). Of course, mankind was made in his image as well (Gen 1:27). The chief thing to take from these passages in Exodus and Deuteronomy is that God prohibits worship by images, not because He cannot be imaged, but because the Old Testament was based on the revelation of God's invisibility. Ultimately, God alone has the exclusive and sovereign right to make images of himself. For the modern church, believers must remember the admonition regarding Christ: "though you

¹⁵ Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity*, 3 vols. (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010) 3:143.

¹⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:182.

¹⁷ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002) 589.

have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls” (1 Pet 1:8).

Colossians 1:15b

πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως

Translation

“the firstborn of every creature”

“He is the image of the invisible God, *the firstborn of all creation.*” The second part of verse 15, contains the adjective πρωτότοκος which like εἰκὼν (noun), is predicate and anarthrous, thus directing the reader to important qualities about the Lord Jesus Christ. The nominative πρωτότοκος, like εἰκὼν, is copulatively linked to the subject (Christ) via ἐστίν and is described with the genitive of apposition (of definition) in the phrase πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως (“firstborn of all creation”). Regarding πρωτότοκος, this compound word has an etymology of πρῶτος (first) and the verb τίκτω (to birth, bring forth, travail) can be used to indicate a literal firstborn, but is mostly used in the New Testament to point to an important attribute of Christ – later developed by Paul in relation to Christ’s resurrection and his church in verse 18 that states, “the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.” Greek grammarian A. T. Robertson noted that this phrase by Paul has an important parallel to the logos (λόγος) of John 1:1-4 (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.”).¹⁸

The common English gloss of πρωτότοκος as firstborn in many translations might appear to some people to imply some sort of actual beginning point. However, Rogers and Rogers note that for the Greek definition within its usage in the New testament, “The word emphasizes the pre-existence and uniqueness of Christ as well as His superiority over creation. The term does not indicate that Christ was a creation or a created being.”¹⁹ Chafer stated, “There is no attribute of Deity which is not declared

¹⁸ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931) 4:478.

¹⁹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, *New Linguistic and Exegetical Key*, 461.

to be in Christ and to the full measure of infinity.”²⁰ Vincent commented, “As image points to revelation, so first-born points to eternal pre-existence.”²¹ Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown more fully expanded on this idea and said, “Even before His incarnation He was the image of the invisible God, as the Word (John 1:1-3) by whom God created the worlds, and by whom God appeared to the patriarchs. Thus His essential character as always ‘the image of God,’ (1) before the incarnation, (2) in the days of His flesh, and (3) now in His glorified state, is, I think, contemplated here by the verb ‘is.’ first-born of every creature. . . .”²² Moreover, 1 Peter 1:20 affirms Christ’s eternal preexistence prior to creation saying, “For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world.” Thus, the overriding theme of this usage of πρωτότοκος would be the concept of preeminence in combination with eternal preexistence. In this respect, John Owen identified the connection to Revelation 3:14 where Christ himself declares that He is “the Beginning of the creation of God.”²³ Owen further stated, “that is, he who is before all creatures and gave beginning to the creation of God.”

Also worth mentioning is that multiple theologians of notoriety make the important point that the concept of firstborn points to the familial privilege and inheritance rights associated with such status as being the firstborn. Quite interestingly, believers have this privilege of the firstborn, in addition to that of the use of the concept of image, used together in a parallel verse in Romans 8:29 as applied to Christians as those predestined in Christ: “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image [εἰκόν] of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn [πρωτοτόκος] among many brethren.” The promise also receives elaboration in 2 Corinthians 3:18 (“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image [εἰκόν] from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”).

Ultimately, Christ is the firstborn to consummate preeminence over all creation. Owens said, “And hereunto he subjoins the end and design of

²⁰ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:340.

²¹ Marvin R. Vincent, *Vincent’s Word Studies in the New Testament*, 4 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1887) 3:468.

²² Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Old and New Testaments*, 2 vols. (Hartford, CT: S. S. Scranton & Company, 1871) 2:373.

²³ John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. W. H. Goold (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1854) 79.

God in this whole mysterious work; which was, that the Son might have the pre-eminence in all things. As he had in and over the works of the old creation, seeing they were all made by him, and all consist in him; so also he hath over the new on the same account, being the beginning and first-born of them."²⁴

SYNOPSIS AND APPLICATION

Christ the Image of God

Ultimately, Colossians 1:15 specifically asks one to consider in light of the whole of Scripture, "In what respect is Christ the image of God?" First, one must remember that as God and of the same essence, but the second person of the Godhead in the economy of the trinity, Christ resembles the Father. The present text aptly says, "He is the image of the invisible God" and this theme Paul repeated later in the same epistle: "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form" (2:9).

In Christ's person, which the disciples beheld and had interaction, John testified, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (1 John 1:14). The glory is such as was suitable and becoming to God's only Son. The early post-Reformation Dutch theologian Petrus Van Mastricht noted, "The Son, as he is by his nature the most perfect apograph of the Father (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3), provides the archetype as well as the exemplar."²⁵ Thus, the Father is in no other way to be adequately known but as He has revealed himself in Christ.

In fact, salvation and communion with God is declared in Scripture as being linked to this revelation of God's perfect image in Christ. Paul stated in 2 Corinthians 4:4 that the unregenerate have had Satan blind their minds "so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." In this respect, as God shines forth in Christ, so does Christ shine forth in the gospel. In the gospel record, there is Christ's doctrine, testifying miracles, and the purpose for which He came into the world; this is the chief means by which the virtue and power of God is conveyed to believers for the changing of hearts and lives in sanctification: "beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being

²⁴ Ibid. 79.

²⁵ Petrus Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 4 vols., trans. Todd M. Rester, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021) 3:306.

transformed into the same image from glory to glory” (2 Cor 3:18). In other words, one must have this sight of God represented in Christ to commune with Him and progress in sanctification. While this original view of Christ in his person was only known to a few who actually saw his glorious works and heard his words, believers now have the distinct privilege of an infallible record of these things in the holy Scriptures which believers would do well to meditate upon incessantly. Mastricht said, “With the eyes of our mind, we should be totally fixed upon the glory of the Lord, beholding it as in a mirror, that we may be transformed into the same image (2 Co 3:18), that is, as one who would paint a picture looks frequently upon the living autograph.”²⁶ Theodore Beza, the Genevan reformer, noted that the process of sanctification following regeneration and justification speaks to the restoration of God’s image in the believer: “Indeed, the end of it that pertains to us is this: that He may bring us to the image of God lost in the first Adam to eternal favor.”²⁷

Another application of Colossians 1:15 is to consider the whole of Christ’s incarnation in his miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit, his earthly ministry which included countless miracles, and his atoning death, burial, and resurrection. This consideration is especially important given the kenosis heresies, which not only harassed the early church but also now seem to be plaguing modern Christianity being heavily promoted by many Charismatics and Word of Faith preachers. As a recent example, Robert Morris, the pastor of a large multi-campus megachurch in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, recently preached on resurrection Sunday in 2023 that “even though Jesus was fully God, he completely laid down his divinity when he was on this earth, completely, so that he could be fully human” and Morris considered this statement to be so fundamental that he called it “theology 101.”²⁸ In regard to a recent discussion on the subject of the incarnation and kenosis heresies of various types, the reader is directed to a recent article written by Mike Ricardi and for a more extensive discussion, a relatively recent book by Stephen J. Wellum.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Theodore Beza, *Justification by Faith Alone: Selected Writings from Theodore Beza, Amandus Polanus, and Francis Turretin* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2023) 14.

²⁸ Justin Peters Ministries, “Robert Morris Teaches Full-On Heresy About Jesus” [video online] (18 August 2023, accessed 29 January 2024) available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bD131lhMZR0>.

²⁹ Mike Ricardi, “Veiled in Flesh the Godhead See: A Study of the Kenosis of Christ,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 30 (Spring 2019): 103-27; Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*.

To summarize briefly the biblical evidence for Christ as being fully God and fully man in his earthly ministry, some notable demonstrations of his divine power will be provided. At his birth in a manger, a star appeared, and angels proclaimed his birth to the shepherds. When He was swaddled as an infant, the wise men came and worshipped him. When He and his disciples were in danger of being swamped in a shipwreck, He commanded the wind and the waves and they obeyed Him. When Jewish authorities demanded tribute for the temple, a fish brought the exact price for the tax in a coin in its mouth. In addition, one has the countless miracles Christ performed in that “these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31). When Christ was hung dying on the cross, the rocks were split, the graves opened, the sun darkened, and the forces of nature put into a rout. These are but just a few things to remember that one might especially admire God’s image in Jesus Christ because in his earthly humanity, the perfections of the Godhead shined forth in the highest brilliance. Thus, whatever attributes one conceives to be in his person, word, and works, the same may be concluded to be in the Father also.

As a practical consideration of what Christ as the image of God means to creation, one needs to be reminded that while man was created in the image of God, he resembles the Lord imperfectly; and this is true even before Adam fell and brought corruption into the image. Christ on the other hand, the only and eternally begotten of the Father has this high perfection which his Father has. In short, while there is some resemblance of the image of God in man, Christ is begotten like God. In consideration of this, God is recovering fallen man from his depraved estate in his elect believers by bringing forth a pattern of holiness or Christ-likeness in believers’ new nature. Paul told, “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom 8:29). In fact, none was fit to restore this original image of God in Adam that was lost, but God incarnate made visible in Christ. God who is a pure spirit, and humanity (as his created beings) have an immortal soul that dwells in flesh have Christ (the Word made flesh) so that believers also might represent the perfections of God and progress in sanctification (following initial salvation) by Christ’s example.

Christ as Firstborn

The second main point made in Colossians 1:15 is that Christ is called the “the firstborn of every creature,” that is, born of God before any creature had any existence. This refers to Christ as eternally begotten of the Father and of his own essence and equal with Him before anything was created and brought forth from nothing (*ex nihilo*). In the Colossians text, some of the adversaries of the eternality of Christ think they triumph, and say, “the firstborn of the creatures is a creature.” There are several answers to this false claim. On the eternity of Christ, more discussion will follow. However, for the moment, one also needs to remember that Christ had two natures since He was indeed the God-man. As God, Jesus is the Creator and not a creature, as the apostle John noted, “All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being” (John 1:3). As man, however, Christ did assume a human body at his incarnation in which “the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.” In other words, this double consideration of Christ’s eternality and incarnation must not be forgotten. As Paul noted regarding the former: Christ “was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh” (Rom 1:3).

Of Christ’s eternality which speaks to his deity, John also noted Christ saying in John 17:5 as follows: “Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.” This passage is taken from Christ’s prayer to the Father shortly before his crucifixion; it is one of the clearest biblical statements of his preexistence. There, Jesus declares that He existed prior to the world’s creation in Genesis 1, which is equivalent to saying that He is eternal. Calvin said, “This is a remarkable passage, which teaches us that Christ is not a God who has been newly contrived, or who has existed only for a time; for if his glory was eternal, he himself also has always been.”³⁰ Indeed, Jesus had previously claimed eternity and unity with Yahweh, saying, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58).

The eternal Christ in his incarnation “took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men” and “humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (Phil 2:7-8). He was looking and praying toward a future glory: “Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2). Praise God, this future glory involves a redeemed race of rebels who will enjoy it with Him. As

³⁰ Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentary*, 18:169.

Jesus prayed, "Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world" (John 17:24).

Now what is the practical intention and application in giving Christ the designation of the firstborn? First, one needs to understand the intention that from this a person is able to know of the identity and similarity of nature between the brethren, which is Christ's humanity. Hebrews 2:14 declares, "since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same" and "He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (v. 17). This sameness of humanity and brotherhood also applies to the believer's sanctification as Hebrews 2:11-12 says, "For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying, 'I will proclaim your name to my brethren, in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.'"

Also as having the title of firstborn, this implies authority over Christ's elect brethren and the blessing of birthright. Isaac's blessing in Genesis 27:29 which foretold of Christ stated, "May peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you; be master of your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you." Going even further, sovereignty was also implied in the birthright in a kingly manner, as Psalm 89:27 prophetically says, "I also shall make him My firstborn, The highest of the kings of the earth."

However, thirdly and most importantly, while Christ is called the firstborn of every creature, it does not imply that He is to be considered a created creature since one is told from the verse following Colossians 1:15 and other places in Scripture that Christ is Creator. Furthermore, one should note that He is called the firstborn not the first created. In this respect, it must be understood that this pertains to Christ's divine nature and eternal generation of the Father before all creatures ever existed. Proverbs 8:23 says regarding Wisdom (Christ), "From everlasting I was established, from the beginning, from the earliest times of the earth." Thus, Richard Muller helpfully noted, "the Wisdom of God is begotten from eternity (Prov. 8:22-24); Christ is the Wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24); therefore Christ is begotten from eternity."³¹ Muller continued to say that according to traditional Reformed orthodoxy based on the Scriptures, "This

³¹ Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003) 4:286.

generation is, moreover, eternal and perpetual, and unlike the generation of things in the physical world” and “this generation of the son is defined as an act of both the Father and the Son, of the one generating and the one generated, actively performed by the Father, passively accomplished in the Son.”³² Most appropriately, Muller connected this to Colossians 1:15 stating that this is not metaphorical but “a genuine filiation flowing (*fluens*) from the Father according to which the Son is the true image of the invisible God, the representation of the glory and character of the Father’s person (cf. Col.1:15; Heb. 1:3).”³³

Practical Application

The application of all this is that believers may give Christ his due honor; for God will have all men to honor the Son as they honor the Father (John 5:23) since Christ is equal in power and glory. The setting forth of Christ’s glory is a debt due to Him from all creatures. Thus, believers are to praise Christ both in word and deed, in mind and heart, and daily practice, which is an application one can never accomplish without understanding the dignity of his person. In humanity’s natural fallen state, men are prone to have low thoughts of Christ. Therefore, as his redeemed elect, believers should often revive the considerations that represent Christ’s worth and excellence. Furthermore, in consideration of redemption, believers ought to place all hope of salvation in Christ and may make use of Him to his indwelling purposes which he came to accomplish. In raising thoughts to the consideration of the dignity of the person of Christ who accomplishes salvation, Hebrews 3:1 says, “Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession.”

A final practical application is to show how the image of God may be recovered as believers are changed into the likeness of Christ, for He is the image of God. His glorious merit should not only be precious but also an example for believers. A great advantage is not only to have a rule but an example because mankind is so prone in his nature to want to imitate. Therefore, Christ came incarnate to be an example of holiness. In Christ’s earthly tenure, He had the interests of flesh and blood to mind as well as those He came to save and thus showed an example of how a holy life is possible to those elect that are renewed by his grace. Along this line, the great Puritan minister John Flavel helpfully noted, “He [Christ] pressed to

³² Ibid. 4:287.

³³ Ibid.

holiness in his doctrine, and was the great pattern of holiness in his life, Matt. 11:28. 'Learn of me, I am meek and lowly.' And such his ministers desire to approve themselves, Phil. 4:9. 'What ye have heard, and seen in me, that do.' He preached to their eyes, as well as ears. His life was a comment on his doctrine. They might see holiness acted in his life, as well as sounded by his lips. He preached the doctrine, and lived the application."³⁴

Christ obeyed God in human nature in the midst of a sin cursed world that therefore believers should obey, please, and glorify God in a self-denying manner. The foundation of this of course, is laid in the new birth. The Holy Spirit that formed Christ from the substance of the Virgin is the same Spirit that is ready to form Christ in those who believe. God makes new creatures in Christ Jesus so that there is not only Christ's example but also Christ's power.

Believers should then let the excellence and dignity of Christ's person be more upon their minds and hearts as they think often of these two topics in Colossians 1:15 - that He is the image of the invisible God in that believers might "be imitators of God, as beloved children" (Eph 5:1). While one cannot be the true image of God as Christ, the believer can "become partakers of the divine nature" (1 Pet 1:4). In fact, there is no greater goal for the Christian than to live in the nearest resemblance to his Creator. Furthermore, one should consider again that since Christ is Lord of the entire creation, and therefore called "the firstborn of every creature," one should be subject to Him with greater diligence by use of practical means appointed by God in prayer, worship, meditation upon his Word, and loving service. Those who do not have so deep a sense of the magnificence and authority of Christ will be reckless with their faith. Truly, Christ is not only the messenger of God, but also his express image, and the firstborn of every creature; and not to believe Him, obey Him, and love Him, is to rebel, not only against one's heavenly duty, but also one's complete remedy and law of recovery.

³⁴ John Flavel, *The Whole Works of the Rev. Mr. John Flavel*, 6 vols. (London: W. Baynes and Son, 1820) 1:130.