

COLOSSIANS 1:16–17 AND THE THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF CHRIST AS CREATOR AND SUSTAINER

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One of the key passages in the New Testament that proclaims Christ to be both Creator and Sustainer is Colossians 1:16–17. While most published works have treated Colossians 1:15–20 as a complete whole looking at its structure and content as a possible hymn, this present effort focuses on the Creator-Sustainer formula contained within verses 16 and 17. This text articulates this formula by its usage of prepositions combined with variations of πᾶς, its choice and usage of verbs, and the prevailing historical-cultural context. After demonstrating Christ’s role as Creator and Sustainer from Colossians 1:16–17, this paper will explore the theological implications of Christ as Creator and Sustainer that are applicable to the Christian’s daily life and fellowship with the Triune God.

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Introduction

One of the key New Testament passages that sets forth Christ’s transcendent relation to the creation as its Creator and Sustainer is the profound text of Colossians 1:16–17. This passage immediately follows a declaration of Christ as Redeemer (Col 1:13–14), as the God-Man who is “the image of the invisible God” (1:15a), and as the exalted eternally begotten Son of God who is supreme over all creation [“firstborn of all creation”] (1:15b). This last line, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως (1:15b), launches Paul into defending Christ’s preeminence, evidenced by the usage of the verb κτίζω and πᾶς in the following verses. In so doing, Paul covers the biblical doctrine of

Christ as Creator and Sustainer.¹ This essential doctrine is not only important to the creation science movement, but also it provides a fuller and more robust understanding of Christ as Redeemer and Head of His Church.

Before focusing on verses 16 and 17 in Colossians 1, it is important to note at the outset that most exegetes and theologians engaging in these verses do so in the context of interpreting Colossians 1:15–20 as a hymnic unit. In this regard, much debate has gone forth as to whether this section of the epistle is an early church hymn that Paul has inserted and reworked. In fact, the ideas concerning the various aspects (wording, strophic structure, etc.) of this section of Scripture and its grammatical nuances are diverse and form a large body of publications with one suggestion even claiming that Colossians 1:15–20 was a social protest hymn against the ideals of the Roman empire.² Most scholars do consider Colossians 1:15–20 to have a hymnic structure although a few have dissented and considered this to be a diversion from the key theological points that Paul is making or that the section is a form of poetry with Hebrew origins.³ The approach of this paper will focus more on the content of

¹ While this present paper is a focus on Christ as Creator within the context of Colossians 1:16, properly understood, creation in the full theological picture was a work wrought by all persons of the Godhead. Though the standard orthodox expression of the agency of the three persons with respect to divine acts has been “from the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit,” the Leiden Synopsis from the early 17th century in the Dutch Further Reformation diverges slightly and describes this doctrine as follows: “We assign this work of creation jointly to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, because all the workings of God that are called ‘outward workings’ are indivisible – although, as in other works, so too in the work of creation a different mode and order of operation may be noted. For the Father created the world by himself through the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Son created the world by the Father through the Spirit, and the Spirit created the world by the Father and the Son, as is well known from these passages of Holy Scripture: Gen 1, Job 33:4, John 1:2, 3, 1 Cor 8:6, Col 1:15, etc. Hence this creation of the world is attributed sometimes separately to God the Father (1 Cor 8:6), to the Son (John 1:3, Col 1:16; Heb 1:2,10), and to the Holy Spirit (Job 33:4); sometimes jointly, either to the Father and the Son (as 1 Cor 8:6) or the three persons together (as Gen 1; Ps 33:6).” See Johannes Polyander and Henricus Hamers, “Disputation 10” in *Synopsis of a Pure Theology Vol 1*, William Den Boer and Riemer A. Faber, eds. (Oxfordshire: Davenant Press, 2023), 96–97. Thus, 17th century Puritan Thomas Manton declared in distinctly trinitarian terms, “All things were created for him—that is, for the honour of the Son, as well as for the honour of the Father and the Holy Ghost.” See Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton Vol. 1* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1870), 438. However, in a more recent synopsis, MacArthur and Mayhue echo the historic position on the workings of the Trinity saying, “God the Father is seen as the source; God the Son is seen as the Mediator of the acts of creation; and the Holy Spirit is seen as the agent of these acts. Each person worked fully and in concert with one another in the creation acts.” See John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 214. Therefore, Christ’s role in creation within the Trinity is often seen to be that of agency, in that God created through the person of Jesus Christ.

² Mark S. Medley, “Subversive Song: Imagining Colossians 1:15–20 as a Social Protest Hymn in the Context of the Roman Empire,” *Review and Expositor* 116, no. 4 (2019): 421–35. For other analyses, see James M. Robinson, “A Formal Analysis of Colossians 1:15–20,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 76, no. 4 (1957) 270–80; Wayne McGowan, “The Hymnic Structure of Colossians 1:15–20,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (1979): 156–62; Frederick F. Bruce, “The ‘Christ Hymn’ of Colossians 1:15–20,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 (1984): 99–110; Eduard Schweizer, “Colossians 1:15–20,” *Review and Expositor* 87 (1990): 97–104; N. T. Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1.15–20,” *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990): 444–68.

³ John F. Balchin, “Colossians 1:15–20: An Early Hymn? The Arguments from Style,” *Vox Evangelica* 15 (1985): 65–94. In regard to the beginning of the alleged hymn in verse 15 (ὃς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ Θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως), Daniel Wallace notes, “Most scholars now see hymn fragments here and there in the NT, such as Phil 2:6–11; Col 1:15–20; 1 Tim 3:16; Heb 1:3–4; etc.

verses 16 and 17, rather than emphasizing their contribution to the structuring of Colossians 1:15–20. As such, these verses unveil Christ in the Creator-Sustainer formula found elsewhere in Scripture which in the New Testament brings forth a fuller revelation of Christ and the Trinity.⁴

Significantly, Colossians 1:16 begins with a ὅτι conjunction that assigns the reason for the preceding statement: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col 1:15). Louw and Nida express the use of ὅτι as a marker of cause or reason that is based on a previously given evident fact expressing “because, since, for, in view of the fact that.”⁵ Used here, Paul demonstrates that Christ is the image of God and the firstborn of all creation, because He is the Creator, further expressing the glory of the Godhead. Douglas Moo notes, “Christ’s supreme role in creation is now cited as evidence (for; *hoti*) that he is, indeed, the *firstborn over all creation*.”⁶ G. K. Beale notes that the lead in with the ὅτι from verse 15 to verse 16, “now explains the reason for Christ’s preceding titles of divine preexistence, which underscore his sovereignty over the cosmos: Christ is the divine image and ruler over all things because he is the agent of all creation and as such he existed before the creation.”⁷ The high Christology that Paul espouses is grounded in Christ’s work of creation and His sustaining of that creation each moment.

Paul defends Christ’s work in creation and the daily providence of sustaining it by employing a variety of prepositions adjoined to some form of πᾶς. Furthermore, he intentionally chooses and then varies the form of his verbs to emphasize Christ’s creative and sustaining work. Finally, he does all this within a historical-cultural context that was particularly opposed to the supremacy of Christ. These three components of Paul’s argument for Christ as Creator and Sustainer will be examined with application to follow.

Paul’s Usage of Prepositions

The extent of Christ’s supremacy as Creator is emphasized by the use and development of three key prepositions. Each preposition is paired with a form of πᾶς, attached to κτίζω, and has a form of αὐτός as its object. In this construction, the major variance is the preposition, which significantly influences the meaning of the phrase, building Paul’s Christology.

Frequently, such texts begin with a relative clause that has been woven into the syntax of the surrounding prose discourse. Indeed, one of the standard features of Greek poetry is the introductory use of the relative pronoun.”; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 340–41; Jeffrey S. Lamp, “Wisdom in Col 1:15–20: Contribution and Significance,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41, no. 1 (1998): 45–53.

⁴ One of the most clear and succinct passages in the OT that gives the Creator-Sustainer formula is Jeremiah 51:15–16; “It is He who made the earth by His power, who established the world by His wisdom, and by His understanding He stretched out the heavens. When He utters His voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens, and He causes the clouds to ascend from the end of the earth; He makes lightning for the rain and brings forth the wind from His storehouses.”

⁵ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 89.33.

⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon: The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 120.

⁷ G. K. Beale, *Colossians and Philemon: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, eds. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2019), 91.

The first preposition after the introductory ‘ὅτι’ is ‘ἐν’ for the initial clause ‘ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα.’ Translating the preposition ‘ἐν’ may be difficult in a variety of places throughout the New Testament, and this occurrence is one of them.⁸ As Moo points out, the majority of prominent English translations (e.g., KJV, NIV, ESV, NASB, HCSB; etc.) understand ‘ἐν’ with the usage of instrument: “by him all things were created.”⁹ This closely aligns with Old Testament passages pertaining to God’s work of creation by means of verbal utterance (e.g., His Word; Ps 33:6), or other passages describing God’s wisdom in creation (Prov 3:19; 8:27–30). Similar language about creation is used in the New Testament of Jesus Christ (e.g., John 1:3; 1 Cor 8:6; Heb 1:2).¹⁰ However, Moo disagrees with the instrumental usage of ἐν on several grounds. First, understanding ἐν in the instrumental sense would create some redundancy given its overlap with διὰ (δι’ αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἐκτίσται).¹¹ Second, other New Testament creation passages written by Paul use διὰ rather than ἐν (1 Cor 8:6).¹² Third, the formula ἐν αὐτῷ in Colossians often signifies the sphere of action.¹³ Therefore, Moo, and others, suggest that ἐν be understood in this manner, “in Christ,” a conclusion supported by the surrounding context.¹⁴ Gordon Fee concurs, summarizing this passage, “Everything that exists came through the agency of the beloved (eternal) Son, who is expressly identified as the sphere, agent, and goal of the whole created order.”¹⁵

This preposition, ἐν, is paired with τὰ πάντα, expressing the content of Christ’s work of creation. This content is spelled out in the following phrase, “that are in heaven and that are in earth” (τὰ πάντα, τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς). The usage of ἐν in relation to heaven extends the argument of the previous phrase, that all things in heaven and upon earth, originated in Christ. The merism in this phrase refers back to Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” with the Hebrew phrase “the heavens and the earth” (הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ) being equivalent to this statement for the entirety of the created order in Greek. Interestingly, ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς occurs approximately 26 times in the NT but only in this case is it used with a comprehensive scope of everything which is in heaven. And as it is used in this clause in juxtaposition to “upon the earth” (ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς), BDAG aptly defines the NT usage for οὐρανός as “the portion or portions of the universe generally distinguished

⁸ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon*, 120.

⁹ Bortone commented, “the most frequent non-spatial sense of ἐν in Biblical Greek is instrumental/causal”; Pietro Bortone, *Greek Prepositions from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Harris helpfully explains how the frequency of the instrumental use of ἐν in Biblical Greek is comparable to the extensive and varied usage of the Hebrew *beth* in the Old Testament; Murray J. Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 119.

¹⁰ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon*, 120.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ David W. Pao, *Colossians & Philemon*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 96.

¹⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 538.

from planet earth, heaven.”¹⁶ Additionally, Robertson and Davis note that ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς in this instance employs the use of a preposition like ἐπὶ, “to make plainer the precise aspect of the genitive case involved in [τῆς γῆς].”¹⁷ Heinrich von Siebenthal points out that ἐπὶ + genitive is used mostly of position with other examples involving γῆς being Luke 2:14 (ἐπὶ γῆς εἰρήνη; peace upon earth) and Mark 4:26 (ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς; upon the ground/earth).¹⁸ Blass, Debrunner, and Funk note that the use of the article with γῆ and καὶ ἐπὶ, as done here in Colossians 1:16 (καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς), is also meant as a grammatical form of contrast between that which is on the earth and that which is in the heavens.¹⁹

The extent of creation is further taken to include that which is visible and that which is invisible (τὰ ὁρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα). The word ὁρατός is a verbal adjective of the verb ὁράω (to see or behold) pertaining to the capability of being seen or visible²⁰ with τὰ ὁρατά being the visible world.²¹ Clearly the language of this text is setting the stage for the following statement concerning angelic powers also being created by Christ in addition to the visible cosmos. This comprehensive claim to the totality of the created order is affirmed elsewhere in the New Testament such as John 1:3, “All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being”; John 1:9, “and the world was made through Him”; and Hebrews 1:2, “through whom also He made the world.” Bruce, in his commentary on Colossians, provides a succinct integrated synopsis of Christ the Creator in light of the preceding verse (Col 1:15) and says, “What is meant is that the Son of God, existing as he did ‘before all things,’ exercises the privilege of primogeniture as Lord of creation, the divinely appointed ‘heir of all things,’ and ‘He was there when creation’s work began, and it was for him as well as through him that it was completed.’”²²

The extent of the totality of the creation by Christ is further elaborated with “whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers” (εἶτε θρόνοι, εἶτε κυριότητες, εἶτε ἀρχαί, εἶτε ἐξουσίαι). Louw and Nida conclude that, “the series of terms θρόνοι, κυριότητες, ἀρχαί, and ἐξουσίαι in Colossians 1:16 (as well as in Eph 1:21) are understood as being supernatural cosmic powers, whether angelic or

¹⁶ Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 737.

¹⁷ A. T. Robertson and W. Hersey Davis, *A New Short Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1933), 230.

¹⁸ Heinrich von Siebenthal, *Ancient Greek Grammar for the Study of the New Testament* (New York: International Academic Publishers, 2011), 273. Notably, the New Testament when seeking to describe sphere pertaining to γῆ, γῆ is almost always paired with ἐπὶ, rather than ἐν. In fact, ἐν with γῆ only occurs 3 times in the New Testament (Matt 5:35; 25:25; Luke 12:51), and only one of those occurrences (Matt 25:25) may suggest that the prepositional usage of sphere is in play. Thus the parallelism in meaning of ἐν and ἐπὶ support the contextual usage of sphere for ἐν.

¹⁹ Friedrich Blass, Albert Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 132.

²⁰ Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* 3rd ed., 719.

²¹ Franco Mantanari, Ivan Garofalo, and Daniela Manetti, *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 1478.

²² Frederick F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2020), 74.

demonic.”²³ Zerwick and Grosvenor note that this series of plural nouns (θρόνοι, κυριότητες, ἄρχαί, and ἐξουσίαι) preceded by εἴτε (whether/or) also denote “hierarchies of spiritual powers.”²⁴ Thus, this addendum to all things in heaven and earth takes the totality of creation by Christ to entail everything including unseen creatures and powers.

In the conclusion of verse 16 we are further told, “all things were created through Him and for Him” (τὰ πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἐκτισται). This phrase includes the other two prepositions joined to a form of πᾶς and linked to the verb κτίζω (διὰ and εἰς). The switch from ἐν (by) at the start of the verse to διὰ (through) in the same sentence helps to express more fully the theme of Christ’s deity and supremacy in relation to creation and His person in the Godhead. Whereas ἐν previously expressed the sphere of the work of creation (it was wrought in Christ), now διὰ expresses the agent of creation (it was wrought by Christ Himself). In my assessment, the use of both ἐν (by) and διὰ (through) in the same sentence helps to express more fully the larger Pauline theme of Christ’s deity and supremacy in relation to creation and His person in the Godhead.

In addition to the emphatic repetition of “all things were created by Him” using διὰ, we also have the addition of “and for Him” (καὶ εἰς αὐτόν). Robertson helpfully notes that, “Once more, the variation of the preposition is a skillful way of condensing thought, each preposition adding a new idea.”²⁵ In support, he cites a related verse from Romans 11:36: ἐξ αὐτοῦ καὶ δι’ αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτόν τὰ πάντα (“For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things”).²⁶ Here in Colossians 1:16, Christ is not only affirmed as the one through whom the creation came into existence, but He also stands at its end as the goal of the universe. This connects to Ephesians 1:9–10 which asserts that God ordains “according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him [Christ] with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth.” It also fits with Christ’s statement in Revelation 22:13 in which he claimed, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

All created things are not only by Him as their first cause, but they are also for Him as their last end. God is often represented in Scripture as the first and the last: “Who has performed and accomplished it, calling forth the generations from the beginning? ‘I, the Lord, am the first, and with the last, I am He’” (Isa 41:4); and “Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: ‘I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me’” (44:6). And as noted previously, similar statements are applied to the resurrected Christ in the New Testament: “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore” (Rev 1:17); or, “The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life” (2:8); and “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (22:13). These expressions tell us of

²³ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 478.

²⁴ Maximilian Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 1996), 604.

²⁵ Archibald T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in Light of Historical Research*, 567.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 567. It is noteworthy that Romans 11:36 directly follows a previous statement on the self-sufficiency of God; “Or who has first given to him that it might be paid back to him again?” (Rom 11:35).

Christ's eternal power and deity because He has been before all creation and shall be when all things in the present world are ended. He is the first sovereign being from whom all things are, and the last end in whom all things are to be fulfilled and consummated.

Thus, this statement of Christ's relationship to creation by Paul is comprehensive in that we can only understand the beginning and purpose of creation in Christ Jesus. These three prepositions, ἐν, διὰ, and εἰς, demonstrate the supremacy of Christ in creation, and build the Creator-Sustainer formula.

Usage and Forms of Verbs

The Creator-Sustainer formula of Colossians 1:16–17 utilizes two main verbs: κτίζω and συνίστημι. The first verb, κτίζω, occurs twice, bookending verse 16 (ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα...καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται). Its first occurrence as an aorist, passive, indicative indicates not only that the subject ("all things"; τὰ πάντα) was acted upon or created by Christ, but that this creation was a completed and finished work, referring to the six days of creation in Genesis 1.²⁷

Another interesting aspect of this final clause in verse 16 is that κτίζω is used again but in a different form. Its second usage occurs as a perfect, middle, indicative as ἔκτισται. The first use of κτίζω as noted above in verse 16, was in the aorist (ἐκτίσθη) indicating a completed past event (e.g., Gen 1) while this usage is in the perfect tense indicating a completed event with ongoing effect and implication.²⁸ Rogers and Rogers helpfully note that this "emphasizes the duration and persistence of the act of creation."²⁹ The continuing results in view of the act of creation likely are expressed by the third prepositional phrase (εἰς αὐτὸν). Because every part of creation was completed in and through Christ, everything in both heaven and on earth exists for His glory.

However, the chain of Paul's logic issuing forth from Christ's creative work does not stop with the moment of creation. In the next verse, the act of Christ's sustaining His creation is directly linked to the act of creation. In similar fashion to how he started his exposition of Christ's work in creation, Paul writes, καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν. By utilizing τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ, Paul closely associates the work of *sustaining* to the work of *creating*. Furthermore, the tense of συνέστηκεν is perfect, akin to ἔκτισται. Therefore, the perfect tense of κτίζω transitions the discussion of Christ's role in creation to His present work of sustaining it.

Taking the perfect tense into consideration, we can see that συνέστηκεν is an astute description of Christ's sustaining and upholding activity of what He created in Genesis 1. Barnes aptly notes that this is also "the ascription to Christ of infinite power – for nothing less could be sufficient to uphold the universe."³⁰

²⁷ Another Genesis creation-based example of the aorist-passive of κτίζω is 1 Corinthians 11:9; "οὐκ ἐκτίσθη ἄνθρωπος διὰ τὴν γυναῖκα [neither was the man created for the woman, KJV]."

²⁸ Friedrich Blass, Albert Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 176.

²⁹ Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic And Exegetical Key To The Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1998), 461.

³⁰ Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament Vol. 12 Ephesians to Philemon* (London: Blackie and Son, 1847), 250.

Parallel Old Testament passages echo this same truth: that the one who creates is the one who sustains. We are told: “You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and *you preserve all of them*” (Neh 9:6, ESV).³¹ Hebrews 1:3 repeats this providential doctrine concerning Christ saying that He “upholds all things by the word of His power,” using the verb φέρων for “upholds.” Interestingly, φέρων is a present active participle from the verb φέρω meaning “to bring along” or “to carry.” Thus, Christ is not only Creator, but He sustains and gives life and carries along the creation through His providential goodness. Christ’s work of creation is intimately connected to His work of sustaining His creation.

Historical-Cultural Context

Articulating the role of the Son in creation may seem like an accessory detail for Paul’s Christology in Colossians 1; however, this element of Paul’s theology was essential for the Colossian church. The theological error at Colossae had permeated the church and so Paul writes to expand their understanding of Christology in a way that was directly applicable to their situation.³²

While the Phrygian city of Colossae was largely Greek, there was also a Jewish community present which dated from the times of Antiochus the Great (223–187 bc).³³ It is believed that heresies were developing in the Colossian church over elements emanating from both pagan Greek culture and Jewish legalism which included features of Gnosticism, an unhealthy mysticism with speculative views of spirits and angels, and elements of Jewish myths. Frank L. Cross noted that these were certain features “of the Hellenistic and Judaic religion of the period, such as the ‘rudiments of elements’ (τὰ στοιχεῖα) of the world, angelic mediators, law-keeping, and asceticism, which later filled a prominent place in Gnosticism.”³⁴

One of the problems with many Jewish writers at the time, including Philo and a few Judean sources, was that they gave higher level angels subordinate divine powers in the role of creation.³⁵ It is not hard to see how this would have been enticing to Greeks who were prone to mysticism. In this respect, Keener believes that Paul was attempting to combat this view by giving Christ His rightful place as the eternal Creator. Keener helpfully notes that by “using different prepositions, ancient

³¹ The Hebrew verb *mechayyeh* for “preserve” (מַחַיֶּה) from *chayah* (חַיָּה) is a participle in the piel stem (causative) and means to keep alive and to preserve. The NASB 1995 opts for “give life,” and similar to the ESV, the KJV uses “preservest.”

³² The nature of the error that was present in Colossae is debated and such discussion presents a wide variety of perspectives on what comprised the issue at stake in Colossae. For an overview, see Andreas Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2017), 684–88.

³³ James D. Douglass (general ed.), *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church Second Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 240–41; James D. Douglass (general editor), *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary Vol. 1* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 304–5.; Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 214.

³⁴ Frank L. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 313.

³⁵ Craig S. Keener, *IVP New Testament Background Commentary*, 2nd Edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 571.

intellectuals often distinguished kinds of causation, including material ('from'), instrumental ('through'), modal ('in' or 'by') and purpose ('for'); Paul employs three of these for Jesus here."³⁶

Bruce further notes in a lengthy discourse on the "Colossian Heresy" that this declaration of the preexistence of Christ was necessary due to the heretical confusion having its possible roots and origins as coming from these Jewish sects, Greek pagan philosophies, and even Christian gnostic sources.³⁷ That the "Colossian Heresy" directly influenced the statement of Christology in Colossians 1:16 may be evidenced by the usage of κυριότητες in Colossians 1:16. In three of the four places where κυριότητες, a derivative of κύριος, appears (Eph 1:21; Col 1:16; 2 Pet 2:10), it seems to be directly related to angelic authorities.³⁸ Thus, when Paul demonstrates Christ's supremacy as Creator over all things, this statement is not limited to the physical realm. Christ's supremacy is over all created entities in the unseen spiritual realm as well. In this regard, Bruce says,

Probably with special reference to the "Colossian heresy" it is now emphasized that, if all things were created by Christ, then those spiritual powers which received such prominence in that heresy must have been created by him. The denizens of the upper realms as well as the inhabitants of earth owe their being to his creative power—the invisible forces of the spirit world as well as the visible and material order. Whether invisible or visible, all had Christ as their original creator, and all have him as their final disposer.³⁹

Indeed, not only are these fallen angelic powers created entities, but we have the victorious declaration concerning these creatures in Colossians 2:15 that, "When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him."

Concerning religious legalism and angelic powers, Colossians 2 provides the reader clarity on circumcision (vv. 11–14), Christ's defeat of principalities and powers (v.15), food, drink, new moons, sabbaths (vv.16–17), false humility and the worship of angels (v.18), and ascetic measures causing a neglect of the body (vv.19–23). Yet, the reader should note that the clarification on the issues of doctrine and practice occurs after Paul writes the high Christology of chapter 1. Paul's Christology lays the groundwork for his discussion on the false teaching and the practical issues it posed for the Colossian church. Christ's work of creation and sustaining His creation is part of the counter to such issues. Thomas Manton notes,

The design of God was that the whole creation should be put in subjection to the Word incarnate—not only this lower world, wherein man is concerned, but the

³⁶ Keener, *IVP New Testament Background Commentary*, 571.

³⁷ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 81.

³⁸ TDNT states regarding κυριότης, that it denotes "Power or position as lord" and "In the NT its first use is for the members of a class of angels." See Werner Foerster and Gottfried Quell, "Κύριος, Κυρία, Κυριακός, Κυριότης, Κυριεύω, Κατακυριεύω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 3:1039.

³⁹ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 74.

upper world also. Our Redeemer, who hath bought us, hath an interest in all things that may concern us, that they may be disposed of to his own glory and our good and advantage. All are at the making and at the disposal of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁴⁰

Christ's work of creation gives Him sovereignty over all creation and is the perfect antidote to a heresy that elevates creation beyond its appropriate place.

Theological and Practical Application of Christ as Creator and Sustainer

What are some of the consequences of Christ as Creator and Sustainer? There are four primary applications that develop directly from Colossians 1:16–17 and its teaching on this doctrine. First, because Christ created all things and sustains all things, all things are subject to Him. Second, because all things are subject to Christ, all things must worship Christ. Third, the pinnacle of Christ's creation work is the creation of new life in the dead sinner in the work of regeneration, and His sustaining that sinner for him to grow in the joy that is in eternal life. Fourth, Christ's work as Creator-Sustainer demonstrates His Providence in relation to all things.

All Things Subordinate to Christ

First, because Christ created all things, all things are put in subjection to the Word incarnate, for His own glory and for our ultimate good. We are told in Hebrews 2:8, "You have put all things in subjection under his feet, for in subjecting all things to him, He left nothing that is not subject to him..." Notably, this passage emphasizes the preeminence of Christ over angels by opening with the question, "For He did not subject to angels the world to come, concerning which we are speaking" (Heb 2:5). The author of Hebrews extends the flow of the previous chapter that concerns Christ's supremacy over angels, an argument that begins with the work of Christ as Creator and Sustainer (1:2–3).

In contrast to pagan or open-theist versions of merely the reworking of preexistent materials or the reduction of a primeval chaos to order, the amazing beauty and life of the original creation *ex nihilo* ("out of nothing") is here ascribed to Jesus Christ. What had no existence before the creation and space-time-mass continuum was brought into being through the eternal Son of God. The universe did not exist until God commanded it to be: "He spoke and it was done" (Ps 33:9–11). Every form of matter and life owes its origin to the Son of God.

Paul's words in Colossians 2:18, "Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind," are directly applicable today. The inclination of humans to want to worship angels because of their might and power is both illustrated and rebuked by the testimony of John toward the end of his revelatory experience: "And when I heard and saw, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed me these things. But he said to me, 'Do

⁴⁰ Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, Vol. 1 (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2008), 438.

not do that. I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book. Worship God” (Rev 22:9). While angels are noble, powerful, and spiritual creatures, we must also keep in mind that they are the work of Christ’s hands. And when Hebrews 1:3 says that Christ “upholds all things by the word of His power,” we should take note that the sustaining cause of all, including angels, is Christ. As with all visible creation, the angels also live in a continual dependence upon Christ as their Creator and Sustainer, and without His upholding influence, they would soon be annihilated. Indeed, angels are dependently and constantly in God’s worshipful service: “Bless the Lord, you His angels, mighty in strength, who perform His word, obeying the voice of His word!” (Ps 103:20). Every created entity, including angels, is subject to Christ because of His work as Creator-Sustainer.

Worship

A second implication of Christ’s supremacy as Creator-Sustainer builds upon the first. Because all things are subject to the one who created them and sustains them, all things must worship that same person. Christ deserves the worship of all creation because of His role as Creator and Sustainer. One must consider the words of John when in Revelation 4:11 he writes, “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.” The elders before the heavenly throne who proclaimed Christ’s worthiness, began with His work in creating the universe. This act exhibits His glory in the seemingly infinite complexity of all the systems of the universe in both the biological and physical aspects of creation. Paul said, “His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made” (Rom 1:20).

Honor is rightly due to Christ from His elect who ascribe and acknowledge His perfections and power displayed in the creation because in performing it, He demonstrated His omnipotence and awe-inspiring creativity. And thirdly, we have the reason: “of Your will they existed, and were created” (Rev 4:11). In other words, all things were created for His own good pleasure and according to His own will, not out of necessity, because He is completely self-sufficient (aseity). In fact, the chief verse often cited for God’s self-sufficiency also follows the Creator-Sustainer formula: “The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things” (Acts 17:24–25). All that exists is of His good pleasure and is done solely according to the counsel of His own will.

Since Christ is above all things, then we should prefer Him above all things. This admonition is of great use to draw our hearts and minds away from all temporal and earthly things that so easily distract and discourage us. We should fix our eyes upon Christ and after Him we should diligently seek, because He is the first and the last, the beginning and the end. It is for an everlasting blessedness and for the enjoyment of an eternal God that our souls were made. Thus, we have the great statement of faith in the Westminster Larger Catechism, “Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify

God, and to fully enjoy him forever.”⁴¹ And concerning the benefits received through Christ’s creation and sustaining of all things, it is imperative upon humanity, created in God’s image, to respond in thankfulness. We are the only earthly creatures that verbally can give thanks to Christ. Unfortunately, great swaths of humanity including many professing Christians have few thoughts or care of praise and thanksgiving to God who has numbered the hairs of their heads. For many in this world, God is removed from their sight, because they look for all their perceived needs from the creation and not the Creator. However, a right view of Christ and His care for us will cause praise and thanksgiving to God, who determines the strength of our lives and the length of our days. And we will also acknowledge that every good gift comes from Him who hears our prayers and causes our lives to continue to exist every moment.

Christ as Creator-Sustainer in Regeneration and Sanctification

Third, in addition to Christ’s work of creation of the universe and all it contains, Christ’s work of creation is evidenced in the work of regeneration and sanctification. The work of regeneration by the power of Christ is fundamentally a new creation, which carries scriptural allegory with God’s handiwork in the Genesis 1 account towards His own ends and purposes. Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” Also note the usage of Genesis 1:1 language in 2 Corinthians 4:6, “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” Describing regeneration in terms similar to Genesis 1, Paul argues that God’s creative power creates life in the dead sinner’s heart. In the next chapter of 2 Corinthians, Paul relates the believer’s union with Christ to the work of new creation: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, *he is* a new creature...” (2 Cor 5:17). The Scriptures present Christ’s work in salvation as a creative work. What a profound thought to contemplate our regeneration in this light since such an effect comes from Christ who is of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, so that a depraved and fallen man may be recreated with a capacity to love, please, and serve God. What was lost in the first created man, Adam, can only be recovered by Christ our Creator and Redeemer: “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive” (1 Cor 15:22).

Furthermore, if the fear and reverence of this awesome Creator is the essence and first place of true wisdom, to whom should we seek for more power and wisdom in our ongoing sanctification but from the all-wise Creator Christ? The Scriptures employ the creative work of God as one of the grounds for continued growth in holiness. The parallel letter to Colossians, that is Ephesians, depicts the work of salvation as a creative work that results in sanctification. Paul writes, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works...” (Eph 2:10). This text parallels the words of Colossians 1:16 by employing the passive form of κτίζω and the phrase “in Christ” (κτισθέντες ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ). Being created in Christ in

⁴¹ Westminster Confession of Faith, The Larger Catechism (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1985), 129.

salvation results in the work of sanctification to good works. Later, Paul continues, “and put on the new self, which *in the likeness of* God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Eph 4:24). Again, Paul uses *κτίζω* to refer to the state of a new believer. That person is created in the image of Christ, and continues to grow into that image until glorification.

Christ and Providence

Finally, Colossians 1:16–17 demonstrates Christ’s activity in working out His Providence. The Scripture is clear, God is the Creator and Sustainer of all things. In this respect, Daniel rebukes Belshazzar, king of Babylon, for his blasphemous idolatry, saying, “But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and all your ways, you have not glorified” (Dan 5:23). Paul also sets God forth as Creator and Sustainer in his evangelism to the idolaters at Athens, saying, “Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since *He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things*” (Acts 17:23–25). Moses acknowledges God’s providence in delivering and sustaining the Israelites, as he says, “Was it I who conceived all this people? Was it I who brought them forth, that You should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries a nursing infant, to the land which You swore to their fathers?’” (Num 11:12). Yet, the question Colossians 1:16–17 would have us ponder is, “How often do we consider that our very being, life, and daily operations upon this earth would utterly cease if it were not for the sustaining hand of Christ?” He is truly Lord over all things, but Christ also gives us our very being and existence and does preserve and keep us until we will be taken out of this earth to heavenly glory.

In the doctrine of the Godhead, this respect is due not only to God the Father, but our Lord Jesus Christ as noted in Colossians 1:17. Why must all things subsist and be upheld by Christ our Creator? Primarily, because preservation is a continuance of the creative power that was exhibited during the creation week and a logical extension thereof. Christ’s purpose and will in creation brought a thing to exist, but His will and providence in preservation makes it continue to exist. You could also say that the same omnipotency and efficacy exhibited by God in the original creation is necessary also to sustain it. Nothing can come into existence without Christ and the will of God, and nothing can continue to exist without His power and good pleasure.

Christ sustains all life not only directly but also indirectly by providentially providing the means that all creatures need. It is impossible to cut off the dependence of any created entity, whether life or non-life, from Christ because in the final analysis, no created thing has self-sufficiency to maintain and support itself. While devices of mankind’s engineering may exist for a season without the engineer, all things in nature depend upon the omnipotent God who made them because they have the entirety of their whole being and continuing function from Him. In fact, at this stage of our scientific understanding of physics, we still do not know exactly what keeps the subatomic particles of atoms from flying apart. Thus, if God were to withdraw His upholding power, the creation would cease to exist because it has no

other being than what God is pleased to bestow upon it. Unless we acknowledge Christ's intimate presence with us and His preservation of all things, the activities of this life will degenerate into a vain and needless superstition. A cold and careless lack of respect toward God concerning our continual dependence on Him every moment leads nowhere but to a practical atheism. Thus, we should establish a practical reverence and regular habit of acknowledging Christ's providential upholding of all things. This brings about trust and dependence in His goodness and care for relief in all our predicaments and necessities. When we relinquish ourselves from all worldly confidences and put all our trust in Him, we will also at all times be constant in prayer and supplication seeing that all things subsist by Him.