

# **Lord of the Church**

*Colossians 1:17-18*

*And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.  
And he is the head of the body, the church.*

Last time we noted that there are kinds of notions of Jesus, from Jesus is my homeboy to Jesus is my savior. In Col 1:15-16, we concluded that Jesus is actually much more than homeboy or savior; he is Lord of Creation. We observed that he is the rightful heir to all creation because he made all things. He is the visible image of the invisible God in that he exercises God's perfect rule over all creation. Contrary to a lot of Greek philosophy, Jesus is the Agent of creation and because of this God and creation are distinct. Therefore, we worship the holy triune Creator, not his good creation. Jesus is Lord of creation. This morning we are going to focus on vs. 17-18, which expound further upon Jesus as Lord of Creation, but also introduce new layers to the lordship of Jesus. In order to get at what Paul is telling us about Jesus, we'll need to think a little harder. In 17-18, Paul introduces two more Christological titles: Head & the one who holds all together. Let's unpack each title and see where they take us.

### **Sovereign Sustainer of All Things**

Before we jump into verse 18, it might be helpful to know that this entire section 1:15-20 is a poem or hymn. The parallelism throughout the verses is striking. It follows an ABBA structure. Verses 17 and 18a form the middle and focal part of the poem—the Bs—sharing similar language. Notice that both verses begin with "*and he is*" to introduce their titles. Well, what is he? Look at verse 18: "*And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*" Perhaps at first reading, this verse seems rather benign? After all, where are the lofty titles we see in earlier verses? They are buried; in historical context and in Greek. When Paul tells us that Jesus is *before* all things he is making a statement of time and of rank. Jesus was before all created things in **time**. He is the firstborn of creation, the one through whom all created things have been made. So he pre-dates the universe. He is older than dirt, but much, much loftier. This little preposition, "before" tell us of Jesus' preexistence. Now why might that be important? Well, it tells us that Jesus did not begin his existence in the womb of Mary. He is not a created being. He has always been in the company of the Father and the Spirit. And as the pre-existent one, he is superior in **rank**. Jesus is not dependent upon the world as we are. All things that exist were made in, through, and for Jesus Christ. Therefore, he is superior to all things, in time and rank. Jesus is the sovereign Lord *of all things*. Some of you are acting like our next president will be the sovereign of all things. What if McCain gets elected? Jesus is still sovereign. What if Obama gets elected? Jesus is still sovereign. The next part of verse 17 tells us that "*in him all things hold together.*" All things hold together in Jesus. The two words, hold together, are actually one word in Greek, a technical word at that. The word can be translated as "to be composed of, consist", "continue, hold together." In Stoic and Platonic philosophy the word referred to the "*wonderful unity of the entire world.*" With the Stoics it was the Logos, an impersonal, metaphysical *principle* that held all things together. With Plato it was the Demiurge, also an impersonal metaphysical principle. With modern science, it is microscopic strings of string theory or M theory. So what holds all things together with the God? Providence? An attribute of God? Not exactly. It is neither a metaphysical principle nor an impersonal string, nor an attribute. The providence of God holds all things together through a person, the second person of the Trinity—Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one who sustains and integrates all things so that our world does not immediately fall into chaos. The wonderful unity of the world exists because of the personal and powerful touch of Jesus. Which is why we long

for relationship with the divine. Where do you think we got our social impulses, our desires to know and enjoy friendship? From the personal creator and sustainer of all things. He holds all things together. This verb is in the perfect tense, which means that at some point in the past things hold together in Jesus AND continue to hold together in him right now. So in verse 17 we discover that Jesus is both *sovereign*—before all things—and a *sustainer*—in whom all things hold together. He is the sovereign Sustainer of the all things.

## Jesus, the Head of the Body

What about our next title? Verse 18 reads: “*And he is the head of the body, the church.*” What are we to make of this head body metaphor? What does it mean for Jesus to be our head? Where does this head language come from? Some Greeks would have associated the head with Zeus. After Greek mythology had been somewhat eclipsed by the more metaphysical thinkers like Plato, Zeus took on more philosophical proportions. In an Orphic fragment we find that he was considered the head and his body was the cosmos. That the whole universe was one with Zeus, making it divine. Is this how we are meant to read this metaphor? We know this can’t be the case with Jesus because Paul tells us that he was before all things and all things were made through him (1:16, 18). Jesus and his creation are distinct. He is no Zeus. What then are we to make of Jesus being a Head and what of the Body? Well, in Jewish society, there were heads of households, clans, tribes, and even the nation. Our reading from Exodus 18 tells us when Moses actually appointed heads among the Hebrews:

able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens.<sup>22</sup> And let them judge the people at all times...Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them *heads* over the people.

**Able, godly, trustworthy** men as heads over the people. What did they do? They *ruled* over the people in justice and ensured *provision* and *protection* for their people. They acted like fathers to their clans, possessing authority, offering protection, and ensuring provision. They are referred to as *paterfamilias*, fathers of families. The *paterfamilias* engendered loyalty, not through austere commands, but through *personal relationships*.<sup>1</sup> He functioned as a kind of kin and King, fathers and rulers. They were able, godly, and trustworthy giving authority, protection, and provision to their households, clans, and tribes. Interestingly, as Israel organized itself more and more, leaders like Moses and Joshua faded and the Judges emerged. We are told that Jephthah the judge became head of Israel. One of the interesting things about Jephthah is that his family actually kicked him out as a young man because he was born from another woman. He was a step-son. But he was also mighty and strong, so in a leadership pinch Israel went to get him and despite the scorn and ostracism he had received he returned and led his people to victory. In the face of rejection, he served. Instead of demanding personal justice, he sought the protection of his people. Grace. Jephthah ruled as an **able, godly, gracious, trustworthy** judge. Husbands, fathers, are you able, godly, gracious and trustworthy with your families? Can your wife trust you when you are alone, with a computer, or is there the constant

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, 4.

threat of pornography sneaking into your soul, into your marriage, destabilizing your family? Are you godly, God-fearing? Or do you fear the disapproval of others more than approval of God? Are you so concerned with impressing the buddies that you belittle your wife when they are over? Are you more prone to demand or to serve your wife when the people are over? Do you have the character of a *paterfamilias*—able, godly, trustworthy? As the judges of Israel faded and the kings took their place, the *paterfamilias* continued. Perhaps the most famous Jewish king is King David, who saved Israel from Goliath and the Philistines, defeated many more enemies, and expanded the territory of Israel. In psalm 18, David is described as *head* over Israel and many nations. Yet, despite his great power and expansive rule, David was known for his close relationship to his people and to his men. He was not aloof. He ate with them, fought with them, sought counsel from them. He ruled in relationship with his people. David was head, a *paterfamilias* to an entire nation. David was *kin* and David was *king*. He was **able, godly, gracious, trustworthy**. It is in this history of “heads” that we arrive at Colossians 1:17, where we find Jesus, head of the body, the church. How does Jesus fit as head? Jesus is kin and he is king. Fatherly god and sovereign ruler. Far from being the impersonal, cosmic head of the universe, we are meant to see that Jesus is kin and king to the church. He offers **able, godly, gracious, and trustworthy** care and rule for his people. As such, he is an example to all, especially to men: “*But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.*” Men, don’t be the jerks of Bud Light commercials, but the able, godly, gracious, and trustworthy heads of your households.

## **I Believe in Jesus But Not the Church**

And what of the body, the church? From the heads of tens to the head of millions, the *paterfamilias* were vitally connected to their bodies, their people. Israel would have ceased to exist apart from their heads. Their society would have devolved into mass chaos, anarchy, thievery, and backbiting. So it is with the church. She can not exist apart from her head. Jesus provides able, godly, and trustworthy leadership for the church. He provides authority and vitality for the church. There is no body without a head...and just as there is no body with out a head, so there is no head with out a body, there is no Christ without the church. Jesus is not a distant savior, he is the head of a **community**. The church is a family. Well, at least what it’s supposed to be. But there’s a problem. The church in America is very un-church. A lot of people like Jesus, they just don’t like the church...and they’re in pretty good company...with Bono. In U2’s song “Acrobat”, from the album *Achtung Baby*, Bono articulates this fairly common perception of the church:

No, nothing makes sense, nothing seems to fit.  
I know you'd hit out if you only knew who to hit.  
And I'd join the movement  
If there was one I could believe in  
Yeah, I'd break bread and wine  
If there was a church I could receive in.  
'Cause I need it now.  
To take the cup  
To fill it up, to drink it slow.

I can't let you go.  
And I must be an acrobat  
To talk like this and act like that.

Bono articulates a common view of the church. What is that view? Conflicted. "*And I'd join the movement **if** there was one I could believe in. Yeah, I'd break bread and wine **if** there was a church I could receive in.*" He wants the church but there are too many ifs. He wants to be part of the *movement* and *communion* of church, but says he can't, that there's no church he can *believe or receive* in. In a city like Austin, there are a lot of people who feel the same way about church; they want the *movement* and *communion*—community and purpose—but they can't find a church they can *believe* in. I understand. You look around and find churches that are **fortresses**—filled with combative soldiers that enforce their message and pronounce judgment on others from behind the safety of their high and holy walls. Or you find **shopping malls, pop church fluff**—that contain salesmen who market the church to the world, dressing her up like the culture and dressing down the message of Jesus, selling short the needs of the culture *and* the teachings of Jesus. Or **cemeteries**—lifeless churches that are joyless, irrelevant, stodgy. Our churches look like fortresses, shopping malls, or cemeteries! I can't blame you for not liking the church, for not receiving in her, for not joining the movement. So what are we to do? Opt for Jesus but opt out of the church. Believe in *Jesus*, just not the church? So when we say we believe in Jesus not the church, we are *conflicted*. We need the church but don't want to commit. BUT if we are honest with ourselves, something is wrong with that, with believing in Jesus but not the church. After all, the church was Jesus' idea. Speaking to Peter, Jesus said: "*Upon this rock I will build my church.*" And if we examine our experience, private belief in Jesus isn't enough; it lacks a community with whom we can share our struggles to believe. It lacks encouragement to hope in the Lord of creation. It fosters selfish, proud independence. You see, you are a sinner in need of grace just like me and everyone else. But in the church, that grace is multiplied through community and you come to know the head and the body, as Christ would have it. A unified, imperfect people that are being changed from one degree of glory to the next. Living in forgiveness, godliness, grace, and trustworthiness. And I am happy to say that the landscape of church in Austin and in America is changing. I can point to numerous churches in our city that are not fortresses, shopping malls, or cemeteries. But instead, they are communities of imperfect people clinging to a perfect Christ, who accept one another as they are accepted, in the gospel of Jesus Christ. If you are looking for a perfect community, you have a double standard. You aren't perfect. And perhaps you are just making excuses to commit to the community, to share your life, because you are afraid. Don't be. The church, our church, is filled with sinners who hope in a sovereign savior, one who can change us. So when we say we believe in Jesus not the church, we are *hypocritical*. Because Jesus is the Jesus of the church, the head of the body. You see, we sing the song of the acrobat. We talk like this and act like that. Many Christians and Jesus believers are acrobats—they talk like this (I believe in Jesus) and act like that (I don't receive his church). So it is with Bono—he finds himself in a conflicted state of believing but not receiving. *But at least he's honest enough to admit it.* Where are we this morning? Are you an acrobat? I'd like to call you away from acrobatics to truly be the church, to more profoundly know Christ. You see, the apostle Paul would have us believe that Jesus and the Church are inseparable. That you can't have Jesus without the church, as a head

is to a body, a father to a family, so is Jesus to the church. So what are we to make of this middle section of the Christ poem? *And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*<sup>18</sup> *And he is the head of the body, the church.* We are meant to see that the same Jesus that is Lord of Creation is Lord of the Church. Not only that. The Jesus who is the sovereign sustainer of all things, is also the sovereign sustainer of the church. He is her head. And as head he is able, godly, gracious, and trustworthy. As we will see next week, as firstborn from the Dead, Jesus inaugurates a new age of new creation. The church is the focal point of his new creation activity; the recreation of a people created by the Spirit as a missionary community. The church is a teaser of things to come, a display of the new creation. As the firstborn from the dead, the beginning of a new humanity, Jesus promises the power to be a church that is something that is compelling, attractive, and glorious.