

The Supremacy of Christ

My favorite stop at the local fair each year is the / “House of Mirrors.” Its fun to walk through the mirrored halls with everything distorted; big people become small, small become big. Its fun as long as you can get out! Imagine being trapped, unable to get out! That's actually how I feel sometimes in this world. I feel I'm living in a house of mirrors when I look through the mirrors of our world - the media: television, newspapers, social media, talk radio – all are mirrors that shape (or mis-shape!) our perception of the world into what someone wants us to see. Like the “House of Mirrors”, things that are really small appear big and things that are really big appear small. The foolish behavior of the famous is big; it gets prime time coverage, while virtuous behavior is hardly noticed, rarely celebrated. Indeed, is our culture even certain what virtue is anymore?

As we become a more pluralistic culture, people see a different world around them, they have different worldviews, different wisdoms. / Years ago the city of Denver was visited by a remarkable trio of personalities. Denver hosted the national atheistic convention with guest speaker, / Madelyn Murray O’Hair who told her audience there was no God. Later that year New Age / enthusiast and film star Shirley Maclain spoke there and said she was God, as well as all the rest of us. Then / evangelist Billy Graham brought his crusade to town and preached the good news that Jesus was God: three different mirrors, three different ways to see world.

/ In Madelyn O’Hair’s atheistic mirror this world, and all of us in it, is a cosmic accident. The wisdom of atheism attempts to explain the vastness of the universe, the marvelous complexity of life, without acknowledging a Creator. In Mclain’s New Age mirror we see a different picture. This universe is no accident; it is a god, a divine immanent force in all things; every rock, tree and person is part of the universal oneness. How different the wisdom and worldview of scripture.

As our world becomes more pluralistic we can understand the struggle of the early church a little better. Last week we noted the early church had / two problems: the persecution of Christianity that resulted in religious harassment, / and the perversion of Christianity that results in religious heresy. Paul’s letter to Colossians is more concerned with the influence of other philosophies and religions perverting Christianity into “heresy.” / The Greek word translated heresy, *hairesis*, originally meant “choice.” But over time in the Church it came to mean a particular kind of choice, a choice to deny revealed truth and to accept truth mixed with error. / So, what was the Colossian heresy? There are hints throughout the text, but Paul never explicitly defines the false teachings the Colossians were exposed to. Most scholars believe it was an emerging collection of beliefs in the ancient world that permeated all Babylonian, Greek, Egyptian and even Jewish religion. / These beliefs eventually became a fully developed system of thought called Gnosticism in the next century and many Christians were drawn to it. It was

one of the major heresies of the early Church.

/ It appears that the Christians in Colossae were already being attracted to these beliefs. At the core of this belief were some basic ideas. / Physical or material things are evil; / spiritual things are good. Therefore for God to be good / he had to be totally spiritual. Since this world is physical / God could not have been directly involved in its creation nor have any interest in it.

/ This view of the world has consequences. / Since man is part of the created world this view saw humanity as trapped in a physical nature. / Man can be saved however if he becomes enlightened about these basic beliefs, if he pursues the spiritual and de-emphasizes the physical. The result of this spiritual enlightenment was called / “pleroma” which means “fullness” or “completed-ness”. Finally the belief that the physical and the flesh were evil impacted people’s view of morality in two opposite ways. / Most felt they should deny themselves of fleshly pleasures, others reasoned since the flesh was unimportant / sins of the flesh were of no concern. In either case the physical and spiritual were opposed to each other.

/ How might these beliefs influence the Colossians’ understanding of Christ? One problem was for Jesus to be good and divine / he could not have been physical; therefore his physical nature must have been an illusion. / And clearly he could not have had anything to do with creating this world. / The purpose of the pre-gnostic Christ was essentially to help us escape this material world. Now

listen as Paul describes in contrast to these views what a Christ-centered worldview is, notice the difference: / *The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. / He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. / For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (Colossians 1:15-20).*

Paul makes it clear that / Christ is divine, above all things. Christ is the God we can see. / In Christ is the fullness of God, the *pleroma* of God. He not only / created this world, he sustains it. Everything in this world, all the thrones, powers, rulers and authorities, ultimately answer to Christ. / He is the firstborn over all creation, which means he is Lord over all creation. / He is firstborn over all the dead because he came into the world, took on flesh and allowed himself to die on a cross and then through his resurrection demonstrate his authority over death itself. Paul says, Christ is not against this world. / His purpose is to reconcile this world with heaven, make peace between the spiritual and the physical. He came to bring

together heaven and earth by shedding blood that was both divine and human. In the first sentences of his letter Paul counters the major doctrines of this pre-gnostic heresy that apparently is getting mixed in with the Colossians' Christianity.

F. F. Bruce, one of the foremost biblical scholars of our day wrote, / "An intelligent appreciation for the doctrine of Christ is the best safeguard against most forms of heretical teaching." Paul's teaching about Christ not only protects first century believers from heresy, but us as well. Today's heresies are not the same as those of first century. But people are still trying to figure out the nature of this world, and our relationship to. Many ideas are popular; few are Christ-centered.

Perhaps the prevailing worldview among intellectual elites today is / nature-centered, naturalism. This view manifests itself in at least two ways. / There is a secular naturalism or materialism, the belief that natural, material causes are sufficient to explain all that exists. There is no supernatural. Everything exists in the natural realm, including humans. Humans can be explained by physical, chemical and biological process. / There is also a religious version of naturalism. Nature is revered as sacred, not a personal, rational reality but an impersonal, incomprehensible reality. Man's purpose is to resist the urge to personalize or comprehend nature, certainly not to control or manipulate it, but to submit to it become one with nature. Many extreme environmentalists of our day embrace a religious naturalism. / In both its manifestations, the nature-centered worldview

assumes that the material world has always existed; it did not begin at a particular time; it was not created. / Therefore whatever we experience in life that is personal, moral or rational comes from what is impersonal, a-moral, non-rational. / That means that you and I are either accidents or illusions. In a nature-centered worldview Christ could not be more than human. / To the secular naturalist he is a wise spiritual leader like Confucius or Socrates; to the /religious naturalist Christ is an enlightened spiritual master who understands his oneness with all things; / think of Yoda with a beard.

Today we hear from many / naturalist preachers, scientists like / Richard Dawkins and / Stephen Hawking, philosophers like / Daniel Dennet, / Sam Harris and / Peter Singer, authors like the late / Christopher Hitchens. A generation before these the most charismatic prophet of naturalism was / Carl Sagan who presented his naturalistic religion in an impressively packaged series called “Cosmos.” He claimed, “We are not children of God, but children of the Cosmos. / Nature is all that is or ever was or ever will be.” Television shows, magazine articles, respected leaders in every profession accept this idea without question. Those who believe Christ created this world are seen as anti-intellectuals. So, like the Colossians, we are surrounded by ideologies tempting us to change how we think about Christ, to reinterpret Christ, to fit him into a nature-centered, materialistic world.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, / *Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased to save those who believe* (1 Cor 1: 20, 21). Paul would tell us it is foolish to have a nature-centered worldview; it is foolish to believe we are children of the cosmos, to believe nature is “all that is or ever was or ever will be.” Let me say a word to the university students. Don’t be intimidated by professors who ridicule believers. / I remember well a condescending conversation I had with a university professor. She said, “You’re an intelligent young man. How can you still believe all that religious stuff?” I would run into these kinds of statements many times in my twenty plus years attending the university. And there surely were times when I had doubts, when I felt I could not honestly believe what I had been taught by people I loved and respected. To be fair, I don’t believe everything I was taught by my spiritual mentors. But in the end, what most strengthened my commitment to Christ were people in the church with great faith who introduced me to people in the Church with great minds. / Believers like Oxford professors C.S. Lewis and / J.R. R. Tolkien, philosophers like Elton Trueblood and Francis Schaeffer. Later I would learn of scientists like / Max Planck, founder of quantum physics, / Stanly Jaki world renowned physicist, / Francis Collins, director of the National Institute of Health, / Owen Gingerich, / John Lennox, / Alister McGrath and / John Polkinghorn, scientists at Cambridge, Harvard and Oxford, all devout

believers with / Christ-centered worldviews. I was taught early that faith and science was not incompatible; in fact the opposite was true, faith produced the greatest scientists. / Galileo, / Newton, /Bacon, / Kepler, / Faraday, / Locke were giants of science and faith. It's no different today. Scores of professors profess the gospel alongside science and philosophy in such / academic halls of fame as Harvard, Yale, Oxford, MIT, Berkley, Chicago, Stanford and of course Texas Tech.

So don't be fooled! It is foolish to believe in naturalism and dangerous too. / Ideas have consequences. Belief in naturalism leads to other troublesome ideas. If nature is all there is, / then there is no absolute source of truth, no absolute source of truth that is above us. Without that we are free, no change that. We are not free, we are compelled to construct our own arbitrary ideas of truth and morality. This is called moral relativism and it is rampant in the world today. If there is no absolute moral standard then actions and decisions cannot be judged by standards of right wrong but other standards like does it work? (*Pragmatism*). But if our standards are judged by the question "Does it work?" we must define what we mean by something working. And who will define that? / Ultimately, those in power. And when power is the ultimate authority then society turns into anarchy, authoritarian control. It was the growing prominence of naturalism that led former Pope John Paul to describe the modern western world as / "a culture of Death."

At both ends of the life spectrum we are making decisions about life not based on the eternal value of created life but on the temporal pragmatics of keeping people alive. Value is determined by convenience. And whose convenience are we talking about, those who are in power. From suicide (killing ourselves), to homicide (killing others) to infanticide (killing children) we are becoming a culture of death. For more than a generation we have taught in our schools, dramatized in our movie theatres, articulated in our literature, alluded to in our advertising a naturalistic philosophy which teaches that life is merely the result of a cosmic accident, that humans are the result of an irrational biological process, that there is no meaning, no purpose, no love behind it all. Is it any wonder that these biological accidents are living lives without purpose, take lives for no apparent purpose. Ideas have consequences!! C. S. Lewis wrote in maybe his best book, *The Abolition of Man*, a hauntingly prophetic word. / “In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.”

/ What a different world when we can escape Naturalism’s House of Mirrors and embrace instead the Christ-centered Worldview of Colossians. We believe in the supremacy of Christ – He is the image of invisible God. / There is more in this universe, than this universe. There is the one who created this universe. “For by

him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together.”

To be a Christ-centered people is to understand that the Christ we worship is the creator of the cosmos. / Which means this cosmos is not an accident that just happened, not is it an illusion or prison to escape. / Christ-centered people receive this universe as a gift from its creator; / we enjoy it as a world uniquely designed to be our habitat; / we care for it as a precious and divinely crafted work of art entrusted to us. How different that is from other ways to view this world.

/ Further, the one who created the world also entered the world he created; became known as Jesus of Nazareth. Christ came into this world so that / God could be known personally. Christ came into this world because / God wants to be known personally. And so, as a Christ centered people, we proclaim that Christ is more than an extraordinary man, more than a spiritual guru, / he is nothing less than the image of God, or as the writer of Hebrews says, / the exact representation of, the portrait of God. When we see the Christ as he is revealed in Scripture (which is nothing less than the testimony of those who actually walked and talked with him in the flesh) we are looking into the very face of God! Jesus said to his disciple Philip, / *If you have seen me you have seen the Father.* Or as the little boy in his art class said, / “I’m going to draw a picture of God.” His teacher said, “Son,

don't you know. No one really knows what God looks like." The boy thought for a moment and then confidently said, "They'll know when I'm finished!" Christ said much the same thing. You will know who God is, what he is like, / when I am finished.

We believe in supremacy of Christ. Scripture informs us we are not accidents or illusions, we are nothing less than the handiwork of God remade in Christ. Paul writes, / *We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.* As a Christ Centered people, we have no doubt that there is purpose in life, in our life. Why do we see such senseless tragedy in our society, kids killing kids? Why do athletes making millions find it impossible to stay out of trouble? Why do people get caught up in groups that preach violence and hate. Why do cults collect believers who end up committing mass suicide? Because their lives are empty. They have no greater purpose to live for. / Purpose gives life an anchor that steadies us as we navigate the shifting and stormy currents of culture. For an anchor to be effective it must be stronger than the current. A current-centered life is tossed to and fro. Christ centered people sing the old hymn, / *We have an anchor that keeps the soul steadfast and sure while the billows roll. Fastened to the rock that cannot move, grounded firm and deep in the Savior's love.*

/ We are a Christ centered people, created for Christ to worship him, to

praise him, to glorify him because he has supremacy over all things. So we must not live as if Christ did not exist, as if this world was all there is, ever was or ever will be. We must not live as children of the cosmos because the cosmos is not our center, Christ is our center; he is the center of all things, he is before all things and all things were created by Christ and for Christ and it is Christ who sustains all things.

None of us would say this world is all there is. But it is not enough to say it we must live it. Our lives must declare our belief that Christ has supremacy. He has supremacy over all our worldly possessions so we will not live for earthly possessions. He has supremacy over all earthly pleasures, so we will not live for earthly pleasures. He has supremacy over our jobs, so we will not live for our work. He has supremacy over our retirement, so we will not live for retirement. He has supremacy over our families, so we will not live for family. He has supremacy over our very life, so we will not live even for this life but be willing to lay down our lives for him, even as he laid down his life for us.

And here is the great irony. When we give Christ supremacy in our life, he increases the enjoyment of our life. We will value our possessions, our pleasures, our jobs, our retirement, our family and our very lives far more when we value them less than Christ. Later in this letter Paul says to those who would make Christ the center of their lives.

/ So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him... / For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness (Colossians 2:6-7, 9-10).

/ So let us not be fooled by the foolishness in this world. Let us escape the house of mirrors that distorts our perceptions of what is true. Let us be Christ-centered exalting Christ as supreme over all things, as the song says “Above all else”, and in so doing experience the true pleroma, the true fullness of life, the fullness of Christ himself living within us.