

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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Responding to the Headship of Christ

by Dan Trygg

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things have been created through Him and for Him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and all things are held together by Him. ¹⁸ He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, in order that He might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹ For all the fullness was pleased to dwell in Him, ²⁰ and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, making peace through the blood of His cross; ...through Him, whether the things on earth or things in heaven. ²¹ And you, being formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, ²² but now He has reconciled you in the body of His flesh through death, in order to present you before Him holy and without blemish and irreproachable -- ²³ if indeed you persist in the faith, having-been-firmly-established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a servant.”

Col. 1:15-23

Who is He? Colossians 1 is one of three great Christological chapters in the New Testament (cf. Jn. 1; Heb. 1). There is a wealth of information listed here for us to ponder, and attempt to grasp, about who Jesus is, what He came to accomplish in His earthly sojourn, and how that all relates to us. We find out, from John 1, that He was the eternal Word, who was *with* God, and yet somehow *was* God. All three of these chapters acknowledge Him as *the agent of creation*, having existed before *any* created thing. John emphatically says that nothing came into being apart from Him (1:3). The apostle Paul tells us that He created everything in the heavens, as well. All invisible and spiritual beings, whether they be angels, thrones, dominions, rulers, principalities, authorities, or anything else, they were made *by* Him, and *for* Him. Whatever strength and abilities they may have, their potential capacities were designed and given to them by Him. Not only did He *create* all things, but He also *sustains* them, or keeps them together (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3). Nothing would live apart from Him.

Beyond all these things, He is described as “head of the body of the church”. We misunderstand the term “head”, because it is a word picture with a very different meaning in our cultural background than it had for a first century Greek-speaker. The Greek word, *kephalē*, meant “source, origin, one who brings another to completion”. It could also mean “top, or crown”, or it could refer to the origin or “head” of a river. The metaphorical usage of the word did *not* mean “authority, ruler, or boss”, however, as it does in our English background. Instead of emphasizing authority over, as our persistent English concept, it was a word picture for someone who sought to encourage and empower another, one who provided strength, resources, opportunities, training and support to assist another person to develop their full potential. It was a *servant-role*, not a dominating, “lording-over” type of role. Oftentimes, the “head” would *go first to prepare the way* for whomever he or she was in this relationship of supporting or empowering. At other times, the “head” would *prepare a safe environment*, conducive for the growth of those he sought to develop, and would entrust them with his or her resources and authority so that they could stretch and grow by real-life experiences. At all times, the “head” would *provide strength, counsel or encouragement to the other person to help them develop and come to their completion*. The “head” did *not* control or “boss” others in order to aggrandize him or herself. That would frustrate the most fundamental concept of what “head” meant in the common use of that term, since it would keep the person they were serving from developing their *own* skill and self-judgment. All the “top-down”, “boss”, “ruler” or “authority” concepts that have come to be associated with the word “head” in our religious culture have been carried *into* these passages from outside the language of the NT. They were foreign to the mind and purpose of Paul, the author. We have totally *turned the intended word picture upside down*, and have taken it to mean the *exact opposite* of what it was intended to communicate.

Can this be true? *Can we honestly get things so messed up that we turn them completely around?* Allow me to use another example that also illustrates the same phenomenon. There is another Greek word that literally means the “first-leader”. It is used four times in the NT (Acts 3:15; 5:31; Heb. 2:10; 12:2). In the King James Version, this word was translated as “prince” on the first two occasions, then “captain” and “author” in the Hebrews passages. The choices of “prince” and “captain” definitely have a flavor of “ruler” or “boss” that *reflects the minds of the early translators* of this term into English. They *assumed* that “first-leader” would refer to a leader *of a higher rank*, the first in the sense of one embodying more control and authority. In truth, the Greek term meant something very different. The “first-leader” was actually the *“first-risk-taker”!* *He laid his life on the line to make a way for others to follow*. There are two outstanding word pictures that illustrate this. The first example is that of a man who would tie a rope around his waist and throw himself into a raging sea, in order to swim across to a point of safety and secure a line for other men to follow. *He was the first-leader*. In another scenario, when a troop of soldiers was forced to go

single file into a narrow pass, or to cross a precarious place, the “first-leader” was the man who went first, putting his life at risk to see if the way was safe for others to follow. The “first-leader” was literally the “first-one-across-leading-others”. Functionally, the term had *no* connotation of “authority over” others, and it was a function that was a “serving-role”, not a “bossing-role”. *The concern of the “first leader” was for the safety and welfare of those for whom he risked his life. The reward was their safety, not their servitude or obedience. His risk enabled them to succeed at their mission, even if his life was lost in the process.* The “first-leader” was respected for his self-sacrifice and given recognition and honor.

Paul goes on to refer to Jesus as the “first-cause, the firstborn out from the corpses, in order that He might come to be in all things first-being...”. Are these primarily pictures of *authority*, or are they pictures of *provision*, risk-taking “first-leader-ship”, and a *readiness to serve*? These terms do move from the idea of “source, origin”, in the case of “first-cause” (more akin to the idea embodied in *kephalē*), to one of rank and prestige. “Firstborn” originally had to do with inheritance accorded to the oldest son. This title came to refer to *both* a “birthright”, a double portion of inheritance, (Gen. 26:27-34), and a “*blessing*” which passed on the position of leadership to the next “chief”. Usually, these were conferred upon the eldest son, but they could also be given to another, or even stolen, as in the Biblical story of Jacob and Esau (Gen. 27:35,36). Reuben lost his position. The birthright went to Joseph, and the blessing to Judah (Gen. 48; 49:9,10). Ephraim is made “firstborn” over his older brother, Manasseh, and even over all Israel (cf. Gen. 48:20; Jer. 31:9). David was made “firstborn” over all the kings of the earth (Psa. 89:19-27). Obviously, this has nothing to do with birth order. David wasn’t even the oldest son of Jesse! It is a position of leadership. Certainly, the reference to Jesus as “firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15) *is* meant to be understood as a picture of rank and authority. This is not intended to be a description of “the first one born”, because He was the Creator of all, and was not a created being Himself. It means He is the “Chief”, the one with the double portion and the position of leadership. In Col. 1:18, like the idea of “first-leader”, the word could embody *both* (1.) the idea of the “first one having come from among the corpses” into resurrection life (also making a way for us as our “first-leader”); and, (2.) the notion of rank, authority and privilege that accompanies the birthright and blessing. Finally, the word translated here as “being-first” also implies prestige, rank, and recognition. It is important to remember, however, that Jesus *earned* the right and reward of such recognition by virtue of His humility and readiness to be an obedient servant (Phil. 2:5-11), again being to us a “first-leader”. In the Kingdom of God, empowerment and prestige come to those who are willing to *not* hold onto power, honor or resources *for themselves*, but will humble themselves and *use what they have to serve others*.

Who am I? As a part of His creation, verse 16 tells me that *the purpose for my very existence is in relation to Jesus*. I was not only created by Him, but also “for Him”. I was alienated from God by sin, and hostile in my attitude and perception toward Him, as evidenced by the choices I made that were evil, unhealthy and contrary to His heart. Yet, now that I am *in Christ*, He has restored me into relationship *with Him*. I have been transferred from the authority of darkness to the Kingdom (reign, rule) where Jesus is King (1:13).

What is His purpose? Since He is the “head” of the body, and I am now a member of this congregation, I can expect that *He intends to be the source, and origin of my strength and giftedness*, and that *He intends to bring me to completion*. Part of His purpose is described in vs. 22, “that He might present [us] as set-apart ones (dedicated to God, separated from common life to serve Him), unblemished (without any defects, faults or scars), and irreproachable (without any grounds of accusation)” (cf. Eph. 5:26,27). We can either gloss over this entire enterprise, and say, “God’s grace will miraculously do this to me when Jesus comes back”, or we can view this as a set of objectives He has in mind for us to be working on *now*, in our present earthly lives. If you view it one way, you just sit back and wait. Some, like the “wicked (unsound) and lazy (irksome) slave”, who buried his talent in the ground (Matt. 25:14-30), are doing just that. They are *irresponsibly* living as *they* choose, doing *nothing* to fulfill *the Master’s purpose* for their lives. However, if you see these objectives as something God wants to do *now*, then *our active participation is required!* Furthermore, if He is now our head, and if He truly wants to bring us to completion, meaning *maturity*, then His purpose can only be accomplished by our stretching, growing, and stepping into responsibility.

What do I need to do? The verb in the beginning of verse 23, translated as “continue” in most English versions, could be rendered as “stay on” or “remain on” or “live upon”. The contrasting word, translated as “and not moved away from” helps to clarify the intended meaning. *We are to remain, continue, and stay “upon” the faith* (or trust) that our foundation has been established and settled in, and *let nothing pull us away from that*. Paul is not talking about holding onto some basic theology. *He is talking about holding onto, and continuing in, a foundational relationship*. He is referring to going on with Christ, to be more committed, more radically devoted, to Him (holy), ...to pursue healing and restoration from past hurts, wounds, scars and faults (unblemished), ...and to learn to live with more integrity, love and skill so that our faith can be seen to be a good thing by all (irreproachable). He is wanting us to grow up, to come to completion. *He will do what He can to prepare the way, but we have to make the choices.*