

CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE

Fourth in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *The Body of Christ* from Colossians 1:9-23
“*He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.*” Colossians 1:17

Jim Brown starred for the Cleveland Browns for nine seasons during the 1950's and 60's. He was simply the best NFL running back—ever. He scored a record setting 126 touchdowns and rushed for another record—12,312 yards. He averaged a mind boggling 5.2 yards per carry. This guy was almost impossible to stop. I used to watch him after being buried under a mound of tacklers, slowly drag his body back to the Browns' huddle, as if everything was broken. What he was doing was conserving his energy, so on the next play he could burst out for another 5.2 yards, if not the end zone. With Jim Brown on their team, Cleveland won a lot of football games.

But something momentous happened three weeks ago. My Pittsburgh Steelers and the Browns have played each other for fifty-four of the last fifty-seven years. On the afternoon of September 9 the Steelers, for the first time, took the lead in the all-time series between these two bitter rivals. The Steelers are now ahead 56-55. I must say to my friends from Cleveland: it doesn't look like that one's going to change anytime soon. These days the Browns don't have any running backs. Or anything else, for that matter. But back to Jim Brown: Someone asked him recently how he wants to be remembered. He replied, “*I don't want to be validated by anybody....Who's qualified to judge me?*” (*U. S. News*, August 13 and 20 2007, 70) Hang on to that statement. It raises the question—Who's the center of the universe?

We're doing a series on *the Body of Christ*. Turn with me to Colossians 1:9-23. The apostle Paul begins the passage by telling the Colossians—and us—about his prayers. He says, “*We have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.*” In the context of being the body of Christ, Paul prays that we know two things. **1. Who Christ is**, and **2. What our relationship to Christ is**. Then, based on that knowledge, he tells us a third thing. **3. How we should live as Christ's body**.

1. Who Christ is. Skip down to verse 15 where we discover the first of three things about Christ. **Jesus Christ is the First Person.** Verse 15 says, “*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.*” You and I have bodies that permit us to be in only one place at a time. But God is a spiritual Being. He is completely unlimited and infinite. He is everywhere present. Therefore he does not possess a body that would limit him. And yet, Paul is saying here that Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, has taken on a human body. We call this the incarnation—God becoming man. This is why the Gospels record the story of the birth of Jesus, and why we treasure it so much, especially at Christmastime. Paul says he is “*the firstborn of all creation.*” Paul is saying that Jesus is fully human. The phrase, “*the firstborn of all creation*” does not mean that Jesus was born before every other person was. Obviously he wasn't. Rather, Paul means that like a firstborn son Jesus is the first and primary heir. As a human being, the creation passes to him. He is the first person.

When Jesus was born as a human being, Paul says he did not lose his divine nature. He is still God. Look at verse 19. *“It was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him.”* In other words, Jesus still possesses all the divine attributes. He is fully God. Admittedly, this is a little hard to grasp. Some years ago the mother of the woman who lived next door to us died. She brought her father to live with her for a while as he sought to overcome his grief, and I got to know him. He was a delightful man. We met often and I attempted to share the gospel with him, but he got stuck on the deity of Christ. “I just can’t bring myself to believe that Jesus is God,” he said. And as a result he never became a Christian. But it’s here we must come face to face with the claims Jesus made about himself. He said he was “the image of the invisible God.” In the upper room Jesus said to his disciples, *“He who has seen Me has seen the Father.”* (John 14:9) The point is, it’s extremely difficult to know who God is, it’s hard to know how we can relate to him, if we must deal with a Being far beyond our ability to comprehend. It’s far easier to believe that somehow Jesus, while fully God, is also fully man. When you know Jesus you know God. He is the first person of the universe.

The second thing we discover about Christ is that **he is the first actor**. In verse 16 Paul says, *“By Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible...--all things have been created by Him and for Him.”* The evidence for the existence of a Creator is unmistakable. But the picture we hold in our minds is rather cloudy: A disembodied voice speaks, and things pop into existence. But if it’s Jesus who is the Creator, the vision changes. We can imagine a person being creative. We can see him in our mind’s eye speaking the words that bring things into existence, or tinkering at his workshop to make some new variation on the visible world. A few weeks ago a group of scientists announced they had discovered several new species of insects and plants in some remote jungle. Think about the remarkable variety of plants and flowers, each one more beautiful than the one before it. Think about the huge number of animals, some of them quite funny looking. Who would have thought up a giraffe with its ridiculously long neck? Or a platypus? I stood reverently at the National Aquarium in Baltimore some years ago watching the rainbowed hues of a thousand different fish. How much fun Christ must have had inventing each one! You see how easily we can relate to the creation process if it’s a person who made it all. So Paul says Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, is the first actor, the first one to act. He brought everything there is into existence.

Third, we discover that Christ is **the first power**. In verse 17 Paul says, *“He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.”* Once again, while Jesus existed before everything else existed, Paul’s emphasis is on his position. He is, as it were, leading the parade! He possesses power great enough to hold all the creation together. Would-be world conquerors try to carve out for themselves massive empires. Conquering is one thing, but then they have to hold their empire together. They must continually send their armies to quell revolts. We’ve been hearing about Myanmar in the last few days, and the pro-democracy demonstrations that have rocked the country. I hope the people who are rising up will succeed. I know Christian leaders in that country and I fear for them. Whether they overcome or not, at some point, eventually, the brutal military regime that controls Burma will lose its grip. Jesus holds not just a country

together but the entire creation. The universe is still expanding. Who controls the speeding planets and the swirling gasses and the black holes? Jesus does. And he does not do it by force of arms. He doesn't send a battalion of angels out to put some wayward star back into its proper spot in the heavens. He spoke the creation into existence, and he maintains it simply by willing it, by thinking it. So Christ is the first person, the first actor, and the first power. He is the real center of the universe. Paul says we must understand this. When we do it affects the way we live.

2. What our relationship to Christ is. Once again, Paul mentions three aspects of our relationship to Christ. The first is, **political**. Look at verse 13. Paul says God “*delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.*” We discussed this a bit a few weeks ago. Satan rebelled against God before the creation of man and established his rogue empire in the perfect and beautiful earth. His aim was to destroy God's creation, but he couldn't do it by himself. Satan is a spiritual being, a fallen angel without a body. The earth is physical. He required a human being to do his work for him. That's why he tempted Adam and Eve and caused their fall into sin and rebellion. They handed the earth over to the devil and plunged all of us as their descendants into sin and darkness and judgment and death. That's why there is so much pain and sorrow on the earth. But God didn't leave it that way. The reason Christ became a man was to take the place of sinful human beings like you and me, and to pay for our sin on the cross. When you and I receive by faith the payment he made to save our souls, and believe that he rose from the dead to save our bodies, Christ sets us free from Satan's dark kingdom. Then he brings us into his own kingdom as each life, each family, each little outpost is liberated. Ken Burns' public television documentary on *The War* which aired the last few days chronicles the battles and struggles of World War II. It took a huge effort to set the world's people free from the tyranny of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. The experience of being delivered from Satan's domain is a lot like what happened in the 1940's. The world we live in is still a battle zone. Sin still exists. We are still surrounded by it. It's still dangerous. But we're part of a new kingdom. Have you entered Christ's new kingdom by receiving him as your savior and Lord? All it requires is repentance, a changing of sides, and trust in Jesus.

The second aspect of our relationship to Christ is what we might call, **physiological**. “*He is also the head of the body, the church,*” Paul says in verse 18. Christ's kingdom is the church. When we trust in Jesus we become part of his church. But it's not just a political relationship. The New Testament uses the example of a body. The head contains the brain. The head directs the movement and activity of the rest of the body. Todd Wagner grew up dreaming about doing what a lot of boys in America dreamed of doing. He wanted to play baseball for the Chicago Cubs. But no matter how hard he practiced, his head just wouldn't send the right signals to his muscles. His head sent him instead to law school. But Wagner got bored being a lawyer. So his head directed him to start an early internet video outfit called Broadcast.com. In 1999 he sold his company to Yahoo for \$5.7 billion. If Wagner had insisted on fighting his head, today he'd be a disappointed, washed up ball player. You and I are the body of Christ. Each of us is a member of the body. Our particular function depends on the spiritual gifts God gives us. You may be a hand or a foot, an ear or an eye. And Christ the head

coordinates things so each part of the body works in harmony with the other parts of the body. Since Christ's physical body is in heaven, you and I have the privilege of carrying out the work he directs us to do here on earth. If we don't follow the head's orders, we're going to end up as Christian failures. If we don't do what the head tells us, the body of Christ is handicapped. But we have a great privilege if we are fully functioning members of the body of Christ!

The third aspect of our relationship with Christ is what we might call **presentational**. Look at verse 22. *"He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach."* Jesus Christ restored our relationship with God so he could present us to God as a beautiful product of his workmanship. In October 1957 my uncle Bert drove up to our house in Pennsylvania in a brand new Edsel. I was ten years old and while now we know the Edsel as a colossal failure, to me at age ten, it was the most fabulous car I'd ever seen. I even thought its lemon sucking grille and its gull wing tail lights were the epitome of style. The Edsel had a revolving speedometer and push buttons for the automatic transmission set in the hub of the steering wheel. The Ford Motor Company, of which my uncle was an executive, spent today's equivalent of nearly \$50 million to present the car to the media. But soon the cheers turned to snickers. Back in 1958 a new Edsel cost between \$2500 and \$3800. That was a lot of money to be the butt of jokes. But people should have waited. That same Edsel my uncle took me for a ride in might cost you \$100,000 today if you bought it in new-car condition. Christians are often despised today. The church is not often beautiful. But just you wait. On the day when Christ presents you and me to the Father as perfect specimens of his grace, we will be seen as priceless. Yes, you and me! Priceless! It's a great privilege to be related to Christ. We are free citizens of his glorious kingdom. We are connected to him as parts of his body. And we will be presented with great cheering to God the Father.

Paul says we must understand these things, because when we do it profoundly impacts how we live. That's part **3. How we should live as Christ's body**. Because of Jesus and because of our relationship with him, there are three things we are called to do.

The first thing we are to do is **live by the standards Christ sets**. Go back up to verse 10. Paul says, *"Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please him in all respects."* People please the person they most highly value. Someone asked Donald Trump, "What is your favorite book and why?" He answered without hesitation. *"The Art of the Deal* by Donald Trump. It was a great read in 1987, a number one bestseller then, and nothing has changed." Who does Donald Trump think he is? Whose standards does he live by? Donald Trump thinks he's the center of the universe. A whole lot of people think like he does--"it's all about me." I was talking to a husband who spent all the time we were speaking complaining about his wife. It took me two minutes to realize that at least half of the difficulty their marriage was having came because he was set on pleasing himself. When you and I become Christians, we must realize that we aren't the center of the universe any longer. Jesus is. So if we belong to Christ we must make every effort to live according to his standards. We seek to please him and not ourselves. And when we do that it changes everything. It heals relationships. It produces happiness

and gratitude in the other person. When you are set on pleasing Christ it doesn't matter what the other person does. You are focused on a set of unwavering standards that keep you on track and that transform your life.

The second thing we are to do is, **leave the world better than you found it.** Andrew Carnegie made a huge fortune in the steel business. By the time he died he had given most of it away. He thought if a man died rich he had somehow failed. Compare this to a tale of two computers. Bill Gates has given away \$42 billion. Steve Jobs has given away zero. Which one thinks he is the center of the universe? In verse 10 Paul says to the Christian, "*bear...fruit in every good work.*" The fruit Paul is talking about doesn't mean being religious. It's doing what is good and right and true. When we live according to the commandments Christ has given we overcome evil, we counter the selfishness of the world, we cancel out sin and corruption. For example, if you grew up in a home that was damaged by other people's sins, if your parents divorced, if the members of your family were scarred by selfishness and ugliness, you have the opportunity to break those chains for your children. You can give your kids the blessings of God, and they will pass them on to their children. How much better that is than simply letting continue in the next generation what you experienced as a child. So, live your life according to the commands of Christ and leave the world a better place than you found it.

The third thing we are to do is, **make sure you get where you're going.** Verse 12 says, "*Giv[e] thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.*" The inheritance of the saints is eternal life. It's heaven. The "Mighty Mac" is the four mile long suspension bridge that carries thousands of cars each day between the upper and lower peninsulas of Michigan. It's one of the engineering marvels of the world. In 1989 however, a woman driving a Yugo at high speed across the "Mighty Mac" hit gale force winds that lifted her car off the bridge and dropped her 150 feet into the water of Lake Michigan. If you understand who Christ is, and understand your relationship with him, then you will know that you are not living purely to get the best you can out of this life. Your goal is heaven. Far too many people set off for heaven but because they have not determined they will live by the standards Christ has set, and they're not committed on leaving the world a better place than they found it for their children and for the kingdom of Christ, they get blown off the bridge between earth and heaven. Make sure you get where you're going. God is a God of grace. He forgives us when we fall. He restores us when we slide into the ditches of life. But you must not take that for granted.

There is nothing more valuable or more important in life than to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. We must understand who he is. We must understand what our relationship to him is. As the body of Christ, the church must help each other to live by his standards, to improve the world we leave to our children, and to make sure we each get to heaven. We can't do it alone. So let's support each other and let's help each other to serve him.

Preached by Dr. Rick Perrin on September 30 2007 at Cornerstone Presbyterian Church, 5637 Bush River Road, Columbia SC 29212 and Dutch Fork High School. Tel. 803-772-1000
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