

## WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL ABOUT JESUS?

Colossians 1:15-20

Preached by the Rev. Dr. William L. Flanagan  
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Our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is currently engaged in a battle for its spiritual soul. A year ago here in Orange County, a national denominational conference was held. During that conference, a sermon was preached – a very controversial sermon. In fact, that sermon prompted a rekindling of a debate that has been going on in our denomination and in our culture for many years – a debate that cuts to the very core of our faith and what we believe.

The sermon made several assertions; but essentially it said there are actually many ways to God, and that Jesus Christ is but one of them. The title of the sermon was, *“What’s the Big Deal About Jesus?”* I liked the title. It’s provocative. This morning I want to respond using the same title but a different text and a different presupposition that I believe is true to God’s written word to each of us.

You have heard John Huffman and others in recent months from this platform talk about the battle that is going on both in our church and in our society. We have heard about the prevailing winds of postmodernism – how for many truth is now spelled with a small “t” rather than a capital “T.” We have reflected on the proliferation of moral relativism, a kind of “anything goes” philosophy, and the fact that many are holding to the idea that there is no absolute truth. Truth is only what *I* decide it is. Truth is only what truth is for me. And we have also heard how politically incorrect it is to see Jesus as the only way to God, which of course is an affirmation that refutes Jesus’s own words about Himself in John 14:6. John Huffman preached a four-part sermon on that verse in June, where Jesus says, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and no one comes to the Father except through me.”

People who see themselves as faithful and loyal Presbyterians are reflected on all sides of this debate and dialogue. On June 3<sup>rd</sup>, our Session here at St. Andrew’s enacted a resolution that addresses this conflict. We have joined a movement of like-minded confessing churches across the country and, at this moment, over 800 congregations have joined the Confessing Church Movement. A copy of our Session’s statement was made available in June and is an appendix to this sermon.

Exactly what’s made all of this effort and all of this hubbub necessary? . . . Several things: There has been, as many of you know, an ongoing struggle in our church for almost three decades over issues of human sexuality. We have debated exactly what is the authority, inspiration, and the understanding of Holy Scripture. Most importantly is the question of exactly, “Who is Jesus Christ, and what do we exactly believe about Him?” Our General Assembly once again has forced the debate upon us. Another constitutional amendment has been sent down to the 173 presbyteries to vote either for or against. This amendment, called Amendment A, if it passes will eliminate everything that we have clearly put into the Book Order of our church that defines sexual purity, fidelity

and chastity, and any specific standards regarding the ordination of self-affirming, practicing homosexual persons. All of what has guided us would be removed, and our presbyteries would be left without any guidelines or boundaries on these matters.

For me, the debate moves squarely to the issue of biblical authority and, even more specifically, to the issue of Christology. Christology is a theological way of saying who Jesus said He was and is. It is tragic and frustrating that we have to debate these questions that, to those of us who are evangelical Christians, seem so foundational and so biblically clear. In many of my mission endeavors around the world, I have met with pastors who have heard about the issues our denomination is debating and struggling with, and they say, “Why are you even talking about these things?” And, embarrassingly, I don’t have a very good answer for them. But that is where we are today and why I’m taking this opportunity to proclaim my faith to you as well as the convictions of your Session and your church leaders; for we believe that is what our mission statement calls us to do, and what it calls us to be. The church, specifically the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is in need to recover its mandate to transform the world rather than by being transformed *by* the world. Truly, the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.

Bob Davis, the Executive Director of the Presbyterian Forum, says what I believe so crisply and succinctly. I received this e-mail from him on August 29<sup>th</sup>. Bob writes, “The focus of confessing churches is evangelism and discipleship. They need to confess their faith to their community and take steps to ‘*be* the church – here, where they are.’ They want to be active in building the kind of church to which God has called them. They are no longer willing to wait for someone else to give it to them. They want to lift high the name of Jesus Christ, to proclaim that, ‘Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to humanity by which we must be saved.’ Churches don’t want to wait for further study to see if someone else says that they can proclaim what Scripture teaches. They want to understand that Scripture *is* the infallible rule of faith and life – that Scripture corrects us; we do not correct Scripture. They want to affirm that God calls His people to holy lives, that Jesus Christ is the Lord and is the Savior and does transform the lives of human beings.”

My dear friend, Dr. Jerry Tankersley, the pastor of the Laguna Presbyterian Church, writes this in this month’s, church newsletter: “We are deeply concerned about the General Assembly’s confession that Jesus Christ is only our ‘unique Savior and Lord.’ (Incidentally, ‘unique’ is the strongest word our General Assembly could come up with.) The implication is that there may be *other* saviors or lords for people in different times and places. ‘Who is Jesus? What is the meaning of His death and resurrection? What does it mean for us to confess Him as our Savior and Lord and as the Savior and Lord of the nations?’ These are very important questions. Our theology of mission is on the line in this discussion and debate. Undergirding this debate is our view of the Bible. Are the scriptures the inspired word of God? How do we interpret them? Are they out of date in doctrinal matters? What is the biblical witness to Jesus of Nazareth? Was He as the creeds say ‘fully human, fully God?’ These are not just matters that agitate the far right wing of the Presbyterian family. These issues strike at the very center of what it means to be Presbyterian in our great Reformed tradition. Therefore, we must engage the debate within the church. One of the six great ends of the church is ‘the preservation of the

truth.' To this end we must be faithful, loving, and zealous, and any other response would not be worthy of Jesus Christ."

Now let me share another story, a personal story; I've never talked about this publicly before. It happened exactly 37 years ago this month. It took place in the sanctuary of the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood. There, the former Los Angeles Presbytery was meeting. The Los Angeles Presbytery in 1964 was what our Synod is today. There were 236 churches and over 700 commissioners to the Presbytery. They could only hold Presbytery in a few of the churches between Santa Barbara and San Diego. I was being examined for ordination. We have an oral examination. That's part of our tradition. At the end of the long process, the candidate stands before the Presbytery, and any commissioner can ask any theological question they want. To say that I was frightened is to put it mildly.

The moderator of the candidates committee asked me the first question. At that time in the mid-60's, there was a book out, a well-known book called *Honest to God* by a man by the name of Robinson. It was a book that would have fit in very well in today's climate of postmodernism. The moderator asked me the question, what did I think of this book, *Honest to God*, which I hadn't read because I knew really what it was about, and it wasn't a book that I was terribly drawn to. One of my dear friends stood up and said, "Mr. Moderator, point of order." There was only one book I could legitimately be asked about in that exam, and that was the Bible. I couldn't be asked about another book. In other words, I could be asked any theological question, but not about any other non-biblical book that had ever been written.

The Moderator had to kind of do a little two-step and rephrase his question, and basically the question of the book came to his mind. And so here is the question I was asked. My first question, before it was opened to the floor, was this, "Who is God?" How in the world do you deal with that? I said, "Mr. Moderator, in all due respect, I need to rephrase your second question, and what I will do is answer the question, not "Who is God?" but I'll answer the question, "Who is Jesus Christ?" and, in doing so, I believe, will answer your initial question.

I passed. And as I thought about that day as I prepared this message, I recalled the apostle Paul answered the question, "Who is God?" in a way much the same as I did, only a little more articulately. And now that leads us to our scripture lesson. Open your Bibles, please, to Paul's letter to the Colossians chapter 1 in the New Testament beginning with verse 15:

"He (Jesus Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 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. 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."

What's the big deal about Jesus? It's a vital question for the whole church, particularly in times of crisis like now. It's a question that Jesus asked His disciples and, echoing down through the hallways of history, asks each of us today as well. In Luke 9:20, Jesus asks the question of His disciples, "Who, who do *you* say that I am?" That's *the* question – a question I believe that this text, and certainly a lot of other texts in scripture, make perfectly clear. In fact, as I thought about this sermon, I thought about the number of passages that I could have used. I could have just as easily preached from the first chapter of John's gospel (1:1-5; 14) that we read a portion of in our responsive reading this morning. I could have read from the second chapter of Philippians (2:5-10), or I could have read from the first chapter of Hebrews (1:2-4), or many other places where the divinity of Jesus Christ is clearly discussed.

But we're going to look just at *this* passage, Colossians 1:15-20. What does this passage say about Jesus Christ? Let's be simple. Let's be clear. I don't have to do a lot of interpreting of this passage. Why? Because it's very clear; if you can read English and understand basic vocabulary, you can grab what this passage says. But let's do a little exegesis. Exegesis means "to interpret." What is the passage saying? Let's take it verse by verse.

### I. The Person of Christ

Leave your Bible open; follow along; check me if I overstate what the passage is saying.

(1) First, verse 15 says what is invisible about God has become visible in Jesus Christ. This is a passage that talks about the incarnation. That's a theological term. What does it mean? It means God was *in* Jesus Christ, that God uniquely dwelt in Jesus, in a different way than He can dwell in us; because *all* of God dwelt in Jesus. Jesus Christ was not half God and half man. Jesus Christ was *all* God and *all* man at the same time. *Everything* about God was in Jesus. And everything that's *human* was in Jesus, too. You ask me to explain that. I can't. That's something we take on faith, because Scripture simply teaches it. So what is invisible about God has *become* visible in Jesus Christ.

(2) The second assertion in the rest of verse 15 and again in verse 17 simply says that He, Jesus, was *with* God when time and creation began. God's agent in creation – now we're going back to Genesis, in the beginning – God's agent in creation was Jesus Christ. Just like the Gospel of John that we read this morning. In the beginning was the Word, not in Bethlehem. That isn't where Jesus began. That is where Jesus became a human being. That is where He was born in human likeness and in flesh, but that isn't where Jesus began. Jesus began at the beginning, with God. He always existed as a part of God. That's what this passage teaches.

(3) Thirdly, Verse 16. He was the God who created all things. The Christian can use the words "God," "Jesus," "Holy Spirit" synonymously. Now we're getting to the question of the Trinity. I'm not preaching on the Trinity. Why? Because I don't fully understand the Trinity. Do you? It's a mystery. How many Gods do we have? Three? No, one. One God, Father, Son, Spirit. There's no real analogy that works for this, folks. Maybe one of the best that I know is H<sub>2</sub>O. Water can be a vapor. It can be a solid. It can be a liquid. But it's still H<sub>2</sub>O – one thing, not three things, one thing. God is one. He is Father. He is Son. He

is Spirit. Jesus is not a junior representation of God. Understand that. Scripture teaches it clearly. What did Jesus Himself say? He said, “I and the Father are one (John 10:30). He/She who has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:9).” That’s what Jesus taught. Either it’s true, or it’s not true. Either He’s telling the truth, or He’s telling a lie. Jesus claimed to be God. He received the worship of His disciples. Think of Thomas: “My Lord and My God (John 20:28).” And what did Jesus say? He said, “Blessed are those who have not seen like you have, Thomas, but have still believed.”

(4) Fourth, the first part of verse 18 says Jesus created the church and rules over it. He is the head of the Church, in order that he might be the head of everything else. The church cannot think the truth or act correctly without the head. Paul uses this analogy so brilliantly in I Corinthians 12:12-27, where he talks about the head of the body – what happens when a head is separated from the body. Obviously, we know, the body dies. The body *must* have a head; and the head of the body of Christ, of course, is Jesus Christ.

(5) Fifth, verse 18b. Jesus was the first to rise from the dead. The centerpiece of our faith, the event by which our whole faith holds together, is the Easter event, the resurrection. There are some who believe today the resurrection isn’t really an event. It’s just kind of a metaphor. But Scripture doesn’t teach that. Scripture teaches, the creeds of the church teach, that Jesus lived, died, and rose from the dead – in a particular time, in a particular place, in a literal way, that body was crucified, dead, buried, and rose from the dead. That’s incredible! But our faith rests on conviction that this happened – literally, historically, happened! And if it happened, it’s the greatest thing that *ever* happened! And if it happened, all the other miracles are not a big problem are they? If it didn’t happen, as Paul says in the 15<sup>th</sup> Chapter of I Corinthians, “If the resurrection didn’t happen, then your faith is in vain.” Forget about it! Forget about this sermon! Forget about everything that this church stands for, because it all evaporates into nothingness. He was the first to rise from the dead. He is not a dead hero, a misguided martyr, but the living, resurrected Christ who is present here, now, in the Holy Spirit.

(6) Sixth, verse 18c, the last part. He has supremacy and title to all things. His final triumph of the resurrection has given Him the right, the privilege, the credentials to be the Lord of all.

(7) Seventh, verse 19. Here is the capstone of this first section. You see, this first part of the passage – all of this that I’ve been teaching so far – is under the category of the “person of Christ” describing who He is. And that section concludes with verse 19, which says, everything we know about God, the very essence of God, dwells in Jesus Christ. All that God wants us to know about Himself is in Jesus Christ. It doesn’t say *everything* about God is in Jesus Christ, because there are still mysteries that we haven’t figured out yet. There are still things that even Jesus hasn’t told us, like when He’s coming again, like when we’re going to die. There are a lot of questions, a lot of mysteries left unanswered. But everything that God *wants* us to know about who He is He has shown us and revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

## II. The Work of Christ

That is what this passage teaches about His person. As we move to verse 20, we read about a second area, which is His work – the work of Christ, what He came to do. Verse 20 says only through Jesus Christ is reconciliation with God possible, and we receive this reconciliation through the peace that comes when we acknowledge His sacrifice on the cross. Reconciliation with God. “Reconciliation” – that’s a big word. It’s an important word. It’s an important word in our culture, where there needs to be reconciliation, which is the restoring of something that has been broken. And Jesus reconciles us to God.

Why is this necessary? Why do we need this? We need it because of a problem. We have a problem. By we, I mean all of us, unless perchance there is someone sitting here this morning who is perfect. If that’s you, then you don’t need to listen to this. Well, maybe you *do* need to listen to this, if you’re perfect. The problem of sin – that’s why it’s necessary. Look at Romans 3:10-19. We have rebelled; we have become separated through our selfishness, our self-centeredness, our disobedience. You see, God is perfect. He’s perfect, and He will not bring anything into His Holy Presence that also isn’t perfect. So unless you’re perfect, you cannot be in the presence of God. Isn’t that wonderful news? That’s bad news, folks, that’s not good news; that’s bad news. Unless you’re perfect, you can’t be in the presence of God.

Well, what do I do then? Do I work at being perfect? That’s tricky, folks, that’s hard; because even if you *could* become perfect from now on, you’d still have to deal with all the imperfection that went on before. You see, there’s a problem, and the problem has a result. The result of sin is very simple. The result of sin is death (Romans 6:23). The wages of sin is death, separation, not just physical death, but a death that results in an eternal separation from God forever. That’s hell fire and damnation, folks, pure and simple. That’s what it is, but it’s what Scripture teaches – that the wages of sin, the wages of being imperfect is death. So far, it’s bad news. You’re in trouble; I’m in trouble. Scripture teaches that a penalty must be paid for the wages, the results of sin in your life. A penalty *must* be paid, and the penalty *is* death.

What does Scripture teach? All throughout Scripture through the Old Testament, we understand that the remission, the forgiveness of sins only comes through the shedding of blood. Hence, we have this whole Old Testament sacrificial system where animals were offered in the temple and killed, hopefully to satisfy the requirement of God in order to redeem the people of God. And all through the Old Testament, we learn about lambs being slaughtered. Then, we see this One named Jesus who comes and says, “I am the Lamb of God, who will take away the sin of the world. I am the Perfect Sacrifice.” You see, only perfect animals could be offered in the temple, and only a perfect sacrifice could redeem us, could save us. *I* can’t die for your sins, and you can’t die for mine, because you’re not good enough, you’re not perfect. It takes a perfect sacrifice to do that. A penalty must be paid.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord? You better believe it! You were there. As Jesus hung on that cross, your name was on His heart and mind – your name, my name. And, dear friends, I’ll drive it home even further. If you were the only one who had ever

*been* imperfect and the rest of us were all perfect, Jesus would have come and died *just for you*. That's how powerful it is; that's how personal it is. For as Jesus hung there on that cross, you remember his cry of dereliction? "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me (Matthew 27:46)?" Remember that? What happened? Why did Jesus do that? *All* of His life He had been in perfect relationship with God, and now hanging on the cross, he says, "God, where are you?" Why does He say that? Why is He separated from God on the cross? I'll tell you why. It's because, at that moment, Christ *became* sin. He didn't sin. He became sin. He became the sin of the world – your sin, my sin, the sins past, present, future were placed on Him. I don't understand that; but I know this, it separated Him from God. "Where are you?" He said. It was the true agony of our Lord's sacrifice.

And then after that, He said, "It is finished (John 19:30). What I've come to do is complete. My mission is accomplished. I have done it." And then, "Into your hands I commit my spirit (Luke 23:46)." And He gave up His human life, and He died. A penalty *must* be paid. He paid it. That's good news.

But here's even better news. It is *God's gift* to us. And, dear friends, that gift is so wonderful. You see, God is too rich to sell the gift, and you and I are too poor to buy it. It's free. It's offered to us freely. It is given as a gift.

Now what does this gift provide? Let me just run through quickly some of the things the gift provides.

(1) It provides forgiveness. I John 1:9: If we *confess* our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us. And there are two promises in this verse – not just to forgive us, but to *cleanse* us. To cleanse us from what? All unrighteousness, except? No. *All* unrighteousness. Period. We can be forgiven and cleansed.

(2) Peace. The peace, a tranquility that passes all human understanding.

(3) There is no condemnation. That's a part of the gift. We are justified by God through our faith, not through our effort, not through our works, not through our righteousness, but through our faith. And God does not condemn us. You all know John 3:16, probably. Do you know John 3:17? Jesus said, "I did not come to the world to condemn the world, but that through me the world might be saved." There is no condemnation. The gift is given freely, and we're not condemned.

(4) Eternal life. That's John 3:16: God so loved He gave, and whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

(5) A new freedom. Galatians 5:1. It's talked about a lot of places in the New Testament that we are now set free to live a life of abundance and purpose, direction and meaning.

(6) A new creation. II Corinthians 5, a wonderful passage: The old is passed away. Isn't that wonderful! The old is gone, and the new has come. A new life, a new way of living,

a new way of understanding the meaning and significance of life, not just in this world, but in the world to come as well.

(7) An abundant life. Jesus concludes the Gospel of John by saying, "I've come to give you life, life full, life abundant (John 20:31)." These are some of the things God's gift provides. What a gift it is!

Do you know you have that gift? If I were to go around the sanctuary this morning with a microphone and stick it in your face and say, "Are you absolutely sure that you are a Christian? Are you absolutely positive that you are going to heaven?" You know how I think a lot of you, if not most of you, would answer that question? You'd say, "Well, I think I am; I hope so." But do you know that there is a promise in Scripture that can make you absolutely sure? It's found in Romans 10:9. Check it out right now. Turn to it. It says simply this, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord and if you believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." Period. It doesn't say if you're a good Boy Scout, it doesn't say if you do a good turn every day, it doesn't say if you go to church. You see, going to church won't make you a Christian any more than sleeping in the garage will make you a car. It's what we believe. If we confess with our mouths and believe in our hearts, we will be saved. That's what's involved. Scripture makes it very clear.

One final story. In April 1962, I was in my first year at Princeton Theological Seminary. I just happened to be at Princeton when it was celebrating its 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, the Sesquicentennial. California just celebrated its sesquicentennial. And Princeton Theological Seminary, being the erudite institution that it is, invited speakers from near and far. It invited the great preachers, the great theological minds from all over the world. And there was one speaker noteworthy above all, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth. Now I know that if I went around the sanctuary today and said, "Have you ever heard of Karl Barth?" you would probably say, "No." Karl Barth, perhaps one of the greatest Reformed theological thinkers of the twentieth century, wrote his church dogmatic, his theology (I think it's about 15 volumes – if you put it on a shelf, it would take several feet of space. I have two of those volumes dusty on my shelves. Dr. Barth has footnotes in that theology that go on for four pages. Dr. Barth's theology was Christo-centric; it was centered in Jesus Christ. I don't agree with everything he ever wrote. I don't understand everything he wrote. But Dr. Barth packed the Princeton University Chapel, because people came from all over America to hear him speak. An amazing man! I was his waiter and his driver. I got to be with him a little bit. I have a signed copy of one of his commentaries in my office that I treasure. I saw his well-worn Greek New Testament on his bedside table that he used for his daily devotions. A grandfatherly man with a twinkle in his eye and one of the great minds of the twentieth century.

I was present in the Princeton Seminary Campus Center when a press conference was given to the national media, and the place was full. That's how he got on the cover of Time Magazine. I think it was James Reston of the New York Times who asked Dr. Barth this question (almost a question like I was asked in my ordination exam), "Dr. Barth, if you could take your dogmatics and distill it down into one sentence, what would

that sentence be?" I saw Dr. Barth's eyes twinkle, and here was his answer. Are you ready for this? "Jesus loves me; this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

Incredible! A faith so profound! Who can understand it? The church dogmatics. Who can even comprehend how deep, how profound this faith is? And yet, so simple! A child, a little person can understand. Jesus loves me. He loves you.

Perhaps, just perhaps there are some here this morning who understand this in a fresh or new way for the first time. This may be your moment to surrender your life to the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. Maybe He is speaking to you. Perhaps Jesus can be a bigger deal than you ever in your wildest dreams could conceive. Jesus is a big deal. He's the biggest deal that ever was, and He can be your God. He can be your Savior. He can be your Lord. He can be your Friend. And I'm convinced that there are some in the church who think they know, who think they believe, who have this vague kind of assent to a god in the great by-and-by, the great somewhere-out-there. But God doesn't want to be out there. He wants to be in here with you. And if God's just out there, even though you may believe in Him out there, you've missed it, just like our beloved denomination is missing it – our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that is majoring on the minors and debating issues that aren't at the core of our faith and don't understand what Scripture and the creeds are confessing.

Dear friends, it's personal. It's not private. It's personal. I'm going to conclude this sermon with a simple prayer. I'm going to pray it slowly, and I hope that you – each and every one of you – can pray it with me. And perhaps for some of you, you'll be praying this prayer with a fullness of heart for the first time, as you open yourself, or reopen yourself, as you dedicate yourself, or rededicate yourself to Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Oh, God, I come to You because I believe in You. I believe that You loved the world. I believe that You sent Your only Son to die for the world. I believe You died for me. And now, in Your presence, I openly confess my sinfulness, for I have done a lot of things I shouldn't have done. God forgive me. Also, I've left undone a lot of things I should have done. God forgive me. Here and now, I accept Jesus Christ as my Savior and my Lord. I put my life into Your hands. I commit my life to you from this moment forward. Give to me the strength to serve you, the courage to be true, and the faith to be strong, for I ask this in the matchless and wonderful Name of Jesus Christ, who is the Lord. Amen.

*NOTE: This manuscript was transcribed directly from the audio tape with only slight editing.*

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