

God's Logo

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Colossians 1:15-20

Sermon Series:
Journey of Transformation

Does God have a logo?

The logos you're about to see are ubiquitous. They are designed to create instant brand awareness and team recognition. Take the first few logos—Pepsi, Target and Firefox. It's also likely you've seen this last one in the news lately, given the plight of people in Haiti—the Red Cross.

Logos are also used to identify sports teams. Washingtonians will, no doubt, recognize the logo of the Redskins, under attack by some groups as racist. The next logo is one Americans have grown to either hate or love, the fabled New York Yankees. Does anyone not recognize the omnipresent Nike Swoosh? What about this next team logo? Does it help you to see its mascot? Still, no takers? I'm not surprised—it's my college mascot, the Ohio Wesleyan Battling Bishops, which had the dubious distinction, some years ago, of being named one of college's dumbest mascots by Sports Illustrated.

Who among us doesn't equate Mickey Mouse with the Disney Corporation or Colonel Sanders with Kentucky Fried Chicken? Who can forget the affable Ronald McDonald as the corporate face of McDonalds?

Does God have a logo? I'm serious now. What logo does God

use to create, if you will, brand awareness?

Paul writes in Colossians 1.15: "He is the image of the invisible God." The Greek word for image, *eikon*, refers to an exact likeness or image of something. It's where we derive our English word *icon*. In Orthodox and Catholic traditions, an icon is a work of art to represent a religious theme. Icon has become synonymous, in our day, with the symbols on our computer screens.

Jesus Christ is the exact likeness or image of God. He is God's logo, the visible icon of God. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.

Origen of Alexandria, writing back in the 3rd century AD, described Jesus in his treatise, entitled *On First Principles*. He told of a village with a huge statue—so immense that no one could see the face of the person it was supposed to represent. So, someone miniaturized the statue so people could see the person it honored. Origen said this is what God did in his Son. Jesus is the self-miniaturization of God, the visible icon or image of the invisible God.

Paul continues, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." Firstborn can refer either to the eldest in a family or one who is given preeminence. In Paul's day, firstborns were given preeminence in matters of inheri-

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ance rights. It's obvious from the verses that follow that firstborn equates to matters of preeminence. Paul writes in verses 16-17, "For by him all things were created; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together." The adjective "all" appears four times in these two verses. "All" represents the totality of everything on earth and in heaven—whether thrones, powers, rulers or authorities.

These verses anchor Paul's letter to the Colossians. Paul begins his letter in customary first century fashion—with an opening salutation (1:1-2), thanksgiving (1:3-8) and prayer (1:9-14). Verses 15-23, our focus for the next two Sundays, serves as the theological fulcrum for this letter. The ethical imperatives from this letter all flow from this single passage.

Paul is purposeful about beginning the body of his letter with a poem or hymn to the risen, exalted Christ. This letter is provoked, in large measure, by what Biblical scholars call "the Colossian heresy." This heresy is not well understood, but elements of Gnostic legalism come into play here. I'll say more about Gnosticism in subsequent Sundays, but suffice it to say these Greek-speaking Colossians worshipped a whole pantheon of gods and goddesses. They were quite willing to accord Jesus a prominent place in their pantheon of deities, but they were unwilling to grant him preeminence.

Incidentally, the same tendency exists today. People are willing to concede Jesus the status of a great moral teacher, yet unwilling to give him preeminence. In our pluralistic society, people fall all over themselves to say that all religions teach essentially the same message. There are points of substantial agreement among world religions. Yet, it is also true that world religions teach substantially different things about creation, fall and redemption. Can religions with different conceptions of God all be right about the nature of God? World religions cannot be fused together into a coherent whole unless we jettison some of their cherished beliefs; which, precisely, is what some people are doing today.

Let me illustrate. Christianity teaches Jesus is the Messiah. Judaism and Islam categorically reject Jesus as Messiah. Is Jesus the Messiah or isn't he? If one proposition is true and its opposite is also true, can anything be untrue? Since we can't all agree about Jesus' divinity, let's just say Jesus is a great moral teacher and call it a day.

The point Paul is making in this hymn is that Jesus is in a class by himself. He is not a mere creature, he reigns eternal as the Creator. He exists as God, with God, from the very beginning. He is incomparably greater than all the rank of heavenly hosts. He is without peer and without equal.

Let me caution us about listening too much to contemporary culture to arrive at our understanding of Christ. One author calls this modern chauvinism, of thinking that our

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modern age is superior to every other age. There are risks associated when the church becomes ancient, but refuses to be modern, just as there are risks for churches to become thoroughly modern, but ignore the rich legacy of the past. That's why I'm firmly committed to worship that is both ancient and modern. There are churches in this area that do contemporary worship well, just as there are churches that specialize in ancient worship. We seek to do ancient and modern equally well.

I have supped too long at the table of modernity, so, for a few moments, I want to go ancient and see what we can learn from the first four centuries of the church. The first heresy that threatens the early church is that Jesus is fully God but not really human. The gospels portray Jesus in all of his humanity. He lives in a human body and accepts the limitations that go with his human body; namely, that he can't be in two places at once. He experiences the full range of human emotions. He weeps over a friend's death, experiences fatigue and becomes hungry and thirsty. The gospels portray Jesus to be utterly and completely human.

The Apostles' Creed, in large part, was written to affirm Jesus' full humanity. Notice the vivid use of the words, "born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried." Jesus, like all other people who ever lived, was actually born, suffered and died.

The second great heresy of the church follows from the first. If Jesus is really human, then he can't be divine. Yet the four gospels teach that Jesus is eternal as God, with God from the beginning. Jesus asserts his Messianic mission. He claims the status of divinity. His teachings and miracles witness to his unique stature as God in human form.

The 4th century theologian Arius postulated on the basis of this word "firstborn" from Colossians that Jesus is a created being and, as such, is less than God. Arius' claim caused such a firestorm that a church council was convened to produce the Nicene Creed. "We believe...in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made...."

The Council of Chalcedon, in 451AD, articulated language that has become the enduring standard of Christ's identity. "Our Lord Jesus Christ is complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man...of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood...."

Jesus is, at one and the same time, truly God and truly human. He is not a *tertium quid*, a Latin phrase originating from these 4th century Christological debates to suggest that Jesus is somehow part human and part divine. He is fully God and

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fully human. His divinity does not detract from his humanity; neither does his humanity detract from his divinity. As Paul expresses it in verse 19, Jesus Christ manifests all the fullness of God in bodily form.

Okay, so what? So what difference does this sermon make in my life?

Because Jesus is fully human, he is perfectly able to enter into our humanity. Jesus knows first-hand human despair, rejection, loneliness, pain, bereavement and suffering. The Bible says he was tempted in every way, as we are (Hebrews 4:15). That's why Jesus can be tender and sympathetic with us.

We sang the beloved carol "Away in the Manger" last month. I've been singing this carol for years, but I never really paid close attention to the words. This year the line, "The little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes," jumped out at me. I started thinking about "no crying he makes." Really now, didn't Jesus cry as a baby? If Jesus is fully human, why wouldn't he cry as an infant? He doesn't get a free pass from all the travails of babyhood.

Jesus didn't abandon his divinity when he clothed himself in humanity. He enters fully into the human condition. I referenced John Stott last Sunday, who said he couldn't believe in a God who is immune to pain. God enters fully into our world of pain and suffering precisely in order to redeem it.

Because Jesus is fully human, he can fully enter into our human-

ity. But the converse is also true. Because Jesus is fully divine, he is uniquely qualified to redeem humanity. He has the power to transform and redeem us.

We're inviting you, this year, to begin a journey of transformation. It's a journey because there are steps you must take in God's Big Story of redemption. But it's also a journey of transformation. Transformation is not achieved by human ingenuity and hard work. Transformation is what God does in Jesus Christ. Jesus, in his full divinity, has the power to transform your life!

