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The Scope of the Redemptive Task

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(Colossians 1:15-20)

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“When I open the chapel door of the Epistle to the Colossians,” Adolf Deissmann once observed, “it is as if Johann Sebastian Bach himself sat at the organ.”¹ The intricate craftsmanship and majestic chords of this short letter are bound to elicit this kind of response in any one engaged in its study, particularly of that pericope which is sometimes called “The Great Christology” (Col. 1:15-20). Our reflection on the six verses which constitute this unit will bring also us to the place where we stand in breathless adoration before the apostle’s staggering description of the redemptive task which God has set Himself in Jesus Christ.

We begin our exegetical analysis on the conviction that this passage in Colossians speaks with particular force to the responsibility God has given to His church for carrying forward the work inaugurated by the incarnation, death, and resurrection of our Lord. In the language of the homileticians we might call Colossians 1:15-20 a mission text. That is the point of view from which we propose to consider it. We shall discover that, while the first announcement of the Kingdom is always that of forgiveness (cf. Mark 2:5 and Col. 3:13), this is not its only word. The church lives in a broken world, and she has

¹ Quoted by Crete Gray, *Colossians and Philemon* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1948), p. 9.

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been created to continue and to expand that healing ministry of our Lord which He undertook in His ministry in order to manifest His determination to redeem man in his totality. (Cf. 1 Thess. 5:23)

Even the word of forgiveness is spoken to men suffering from their own isolation, to people who are ill because they feel that they are trapped in a universe which has reduced them to the level of mere units of energy. The apostle speaks of the total cosmos, man’s whole environment, as lying within the scope of God’s redemptive task. The whole universe has been liberated to move forward with God’s people toward full cohesion, life, and meaning in Christ. That is good news indeed, especially for our day; and to the church has been given the privilege of proclaiming and implementing this Gospel.

As we engage in our reflection on the present pericope, we shall have to keep in mind that the epistle provides little more than the solo part of a concert. Important features of the orchestral accompaniment, if we may put it that way, are missing. We have to be content with those features of the conversation which we can deduce from the letter itself. For we know nothing about the “philosophy” (Col. 2:8) of the false teachers at Colossae except for the light thrown on this subject by Saint Paul’s letter to the congregation in that city. We can be sure that the recipients of this letter understood precisely what the apostle was talking about in every instance. But we do not have their advantage, because

we do not live in the Lycus valley of the first century of our era. Our difficulties are compounded by the fact that Saint Paul was a genius of such proportions that it is difficult at times to determine where his polemics end and his personal formulations begin. It is obvious, for example, that he was addressing himself to people who were being exposed to a certain kind of philosophical jargon; yet how many words Paul borrowed from his opponents for use in his own discussion is hard to tell in specific cases. Yet our task is not so complex as to make it impossible for us to outline in a general way what it was that Paul intended to combat.

The letter to the Colossians makes clear that the apostle was dealing with what might be called some kind of incipient Gnosticism.² The Colossian philosophy contained in embryonic form what later became a very complex system of thought and doctrine. Like the Gnostics of the next century, the "philosophers" of Colossae addressed themselves to the question "How could a God, who is pure spirit, create this material universe?" Like the ancient Greeks, the Colossian teachers held that matter itself was inherently evil, and that the creation of the universe therefore was a catastrophe of cosmic proportions. How could a good God, they asked, create such an evil world?

They sought to answer this question in a way which reminds us of the later doctrine which assumed that between the realm of Light and man's universe there existed a chain of intermediary beings, each

one less perfect than its predecessor.³ The last in the sequence was so far removed from God's perfection that he ventured to create this material universe. The whole series of interlopers, so to speak, was spoken of as "the Fullness"; they filled up the gap between a perfect God and an imperfect world.

The false teachers at Colossae were quite willing to concede that Jesus Christ might indeed be one of these intermediary beings. However, they kept insisting that there was more to the Gospel than the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. A fuller understanding of the divine mysteries, they held, would reveal that the world lay in the control of astral powers, "the elements of the world," as Paul calls them (Col. 2:8). Did not these beings expect to be appeased by various cultic observances (Col. 2:16-19) and a system of ascetic discipline? (Col. 2:20-23)

The Colossians lived in an age when people were terrorized by the stars. They felt that they were trapped in a universe of seven planets, each one ruled and run by a "power," an angelic being of mischievous intent. They lived at a time when the coming of the Epiphany star meant a great deal more than it would today, for a heavenly body able to cut across the set patterns of the planets would be understood to speak of a power outside of a universe dominated by hostile powers. In fact, that star was intended to testify to a God who ruled above the "elements of the world" and had provided liberation from them in the person of His Son.

³ Cf. Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1954); Engl. trans., *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963). This is still the best volume on this particular subject.

² Cf. Robert M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University, 1959), p. 160.

There were, then, two major elements in the theosophy — that's what we would call it today! — of the Colossian teachers. They thought of matter as being evil, and they thought of the universe in which man lived as being controlled by astral powers. Paul addressed himself to these issues, but without getting involved in a complex philosophical argument. The apostle always kept in mind his basic task of proclaiming the scope of God's redemptive intent in Jesus Christ. His answer to the problem of evil was the bold conviction: the Creator is also the Redeemer; and the Redeemer is the Creator. This implied that there was no astral power which God did not create and no terror from which He did not redeem man. In fact, "fullness" was to be found in Jesus Christ alone; any chasm between God and man had been filled by Him as both Creator and Redeemer. The universe therefore was not a giant trap, nor was matter inherently evil.

To make this last point unmistakably clear, the apostle chose to dwell on the incarnation of Jesus Christ. His opponents had raised the issue: Did not the human body need to be disciplined in order to purify the mind and release man's powers of thought? Paul's answer can be put as follows: "Look at the people who try to practice this principle. If you examine the lives of these teachers and their adherents, you can see quite clearly that all this rigmarole of fancy wisdom is in fact completely ineffective for keeping the desire for self-indulgence under control" (Col. 2:23). As a matter of fact, Paul observed, Christ Himself had taken on a body of flesh (Col. 1:22 and 2:11) in order to reconcile the universe and all that is in it, including man in the totality of

his being. For had not Christ assumed the body of man, consisting as it does of matter? And had He not done so in order to have God's fullness reside in Him bodily? (Col. 2:9)

We must now address ourselves in detail to the pericope under discussion. In it Paul describes Christ's relationship both to the universe and to the church. His words may be thought of as creating two concentric circles, at the center of which is Jesus Christ. The inner circle represents the church, of which Jesus Christ is head; the outer one stands for the universe, of which Jesus Christ is lord. The burden of Colossians is that the head of the church is also the Lord of the universe.

And now to our text! Here follows a translation:

He [Christ] is the Image of the invisible God, the Firstborn of all creation; for in Him everything in heaven and on earth was created, not only things visible but also the invisible orders of thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers: the total universe was created through Him and for Him. He exists before everything; and in Him all things cohere.

He is, moreover, the Head of the body, the church. He is the Beginning, the Firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent. For God resolved to have His total fullness take up permanent residence in Him and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself by the act of creating peace through the blood of His cross — through Him alone to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven!

Our text consists of two major components. The key word in each is *πρωτότοκος* (vv. 15 and 18). In its first occurrence this term is used to describe Christ's re-

lationship to the universe; in the second instance it is part of Paul's statement on Christ's headship of the church. We shall take up our text under the two major divisions suggested by the use of this key expression.

I. CHRIST AS LORD OF THE UNIVERSE (15-17)

Our pericope begins with the statement that Jesus Christ is the "Image of the invisible God." The Greek word for "image" is εἰκών. It has been suggested that this word came to Paul's mind because the city of Iconium was located not too far from Colossae. That city had got its name from the legend that an image of Zeus had fallen to the ground there in the shape of a black meteorite. If the apostle intended any such reference, he would at once be setting forth the radical difference between the revelation that had come in Jesus Christ and all pagan notions of their gods becoming visible. In this opening statement Paul points out that when God chose to become visible He took on the form of a man.

In this connection we are reminded of that day during the ministry of Jesus when Philip asked Him to show the disciples the Father. Jesus replied to this request by asserting that in seeing Him the disciples had seen the Father (John 14:9). What men know about God they must learn fully in and through Jesus Christ alone. Such knowledge is enough to excite any intellect. It deals in nothing less than the cosmic scope of God's redemptive intent.

The image-terminology used by the apostle may be an echo of the creation story, particularly Gen. 1:26, 27. There we

are told that God made man in His image. Man was made to be God's representative on earth, exercising dominion over the things God had created for him. Man was made not only to be himself something of a creator, but also to exercise the authority of God over God's visible creation. The thought of rule and authority are both inherent in εἰκών, as witness the fact that in the ancient emperor cult, as it was practiced in the days of Paul, the word "image" was used of the king, who was described as "the living image of Zeus."⁴ Paul's use of this term is intended to underline the fact that Jesus Christ became incarnate to be the second Adam. That is to say, in Him we were to see what God intended us to be when He first made man.

There is in the concept of the image the suggestion, furthermore, of Jesus Christ serving as Mediator between God and man. Among men He represents the invisible God; before God He represents us. He is, in His person, the Bridge between the regions of the invisible and the realm of things that we can see and touch. He chose to come as the Image of God to tell us that the creation of this material universe was no catastrophe at all, but that its existence is the handiwork of that God who is both its Creator and Redeemer.

The next great word that is used of Jesus Christ is the term πρωτότοκος. If we are to appreciate Paul's thought, we must understand this term in its Biblical sense. At Ex. 4:22 Israel is spoken of as God's "firstborn son." This is a way of speaking about that people, on the one hand, as

⁴ Cf. the example quoted by *Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich*, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1956), p. 221, Col. 1.

being a nation but, on the other hand, as being separate from the rest of the nations of the world. Again, when Reuben is spoken of as the firstborn of Jacob's sons (Gen. 49:3), the passage intends not only to speak in terms of chronological priority but with reference to the responsibility of the firstborn to exercise the authority of his father over the other sons. In time, this word was applied to the coming Messiah, as in Psalm 89:27: "I will make Him the Firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth."⁵

It may be useful at this point to indicate how frequently the personal pronoun occurs in this section with reference to Jesus Christ. We have the combinations "in Him," "through Him," and "for Him." In addition, a number of the individual sentences begin with the form "He." Even the structure of the pericope was designed to revolve around the person of Jesus Christ and His personal relationship both to the universe and to the church. Our text says that "in Him everything in heaven and on earth was created" and that "the sum total of all things came into being through Him and for Him." (Col. 2: 16, 17).

Well might we wonder what would prompt Paul to structure his sentences in this way. What we probably have here is the kind of elaborate exposition on the opening word of Gen. 1:1 (*bereshith*)

⁵ It is not difficult to envision what the Arian heretics of the fourth century did with this phrase in their contest with Athanasius and others who accepted the Nicene Creed. The wording itself was included in an ancient creed from Syria, dating from before the Nicene Creed. Cf. August Hahn, *Bibliothek der Symbole und Glaubensregeln* (Breslau: Morgenstern, 1877), p. 67.

that occurs in rabbinic materials.⁶ After all, Paul was trained as a Jewish rabbi, and there is no reason why he should have forgotten this kind of procedure when he became an apostle. Just as in Rom. 4:3-8 he chose to employ the second hermeneutical principle of the great teacher Hillel,⁷ so here he engages in a discussion of Jesus Christ according to a pattern that he had possibly learned at the feet of Gamaliel.

According to the rabbis the word *reshith* in Gen. 1:1 meant four things: beginning, sum total, head, and firstfruits. Paul chose to make the application to Jesus Christ. It is Christ that takes priority over all things. All things came into being through Him and cohere in Him. He is the Head of the body, His church. And He was the first to rise from the dead. Jewish teachers of the first century, moreover, held that the preposition *be* in *bereshith* had three meanings: "in," "by," and "for." Paul applied this triple possibility to the person of Jesus Christ, pointing out that *in* Him, *by* Him, and *for* Him all things were created.⁸

Paul uses the collective τὰ πάντα for "all things." The universe is no assortment

⁶ C. F. Burney, "Christ as the *Arche* of Creation," *Journal of Theological Studies*, XXVII (25/6) (Jan. 1926), pp. 160-171.

⁷ This second *middoth* is known as the rule of analogous ideas (*gzerah shawah*). By this rule various words which occur in the Old Testament and have similar or identical connotations are treated alike. The entire sequence of ideas which attaches to a word in one passage is made to bear the same sequence of ideas in the other. Cf. Ernest A. Trattner, *Understanding the Talmud* (New York: Thomas Nelson's, 1955), p. 191.

⁸ Wisdom and Torah were at times identified with *reshith*; cf. W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: SPCK, 1958), pp. 147 to 153.

of disconnected data. It contains "thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers" (Col. 1:16). It is quite possible that these terms were taken from the language of the false teachers as names for angelic powers in control of the structures of life and of the universe. If this is the case, Paul chose this way of reminding his readers that all such secondary powers and phenomena were created by Jesus Christ and for Him. They are part of the order of things over which Christ Himself ruled.

Orders, forms of existence, or whatever one might want to call them, are given us as part of our life here. These, too, are involved in God's work of creation, in the Fall (Rom. 8:20), in reconciliation, and consummation. Paul expressed this insight in terms and concepts of his time with a view to underlining man's solidarity with the universe around him. Both man and the structures in which he lives, in fact, the total cosmos, lie within the scope of God's creative power and redemptive task.

To Jesus Christ Paul ascribed the forces that hold the world together. "All things cohere in Him," he wrote. For once Paul resorted to a philosophical term familiar to us from secular sources of that age (*συνίστημι*).⁹ Like its English derivative, "system," it connotes cohesion. What Paul says here is similar to what we are told in Heb. 1:3: that Jesus Christ "upholds all things by the word of His power." That is to say, it is He that prevents the world from sinking back into chaos.

The apostle did not have a Newtonian conception of the universe as a huge machine. In the days of the apostle men of

faith were sure that the universe was open toward God, being upheld at every moment by divine power. We can find something of an analogy for this conception in the way a picture is created on our TV screens. Each second, we are told, a white dot races across the screen 40 times to create the image we see. Each creation belongs to that moment; its cohesion is preserved by the restless racing of this unit of energy. In much the same way God's creative power is at work throughout the universe at all times, and the source of that power is Jesus Christ.

What Paul says on this point is of great relevance for us who live in the open universe of the Einstein age, where everything is in movement, and where men shrink in terror at some of the things they themselves have created out of energy and matter. For 20 years now we have lived in the atomic age, every moment heavy with the reminder of the force that resides in matter. But the apostle speaks of one who is Lord of all, even of our terror.

II. CHRIST AS HEAD OF THE CHURCH (18-20)

The Old Testament occasionally moves very quickly from the creation of the world to the choice of Israel as God's people. Psalm 136:9, 10 would be a case in point. The apostle follows this method. From his remarks on the cohesion of the cosmos he proceeds at once to a statement on Jesus Christ as the head of the body, the church (Col. 1:18). He was using no mere metaphor when he wrote this. He intended to describe the reality of Christ's rule and direction over the church as that community which was created to carry on His own work until the time of His re-

⁹ Plato and Aristotle use this word to reflect the thought that the universe owes its coherence to the mind of God. Cf. also Ecclus. 43:1-28.

turn. The apostle's terminology is a reminder of the fact that the church is a living organism, for Paul does not speak of the church as a body of Christians, but rather as the body of Christ Himself. As the body of a human being is that individual organized for action, so the church as Christ's body is that group of people which exists to do Christ's work here on earth. In and through the church God's Word becomes incarnate among men in more than a figurative sense.

Jesus Christ qualifies as the Lord of the universe and head of the church by virtue of the fact that He rose from the dead. In that act He became preeminent throughout the cosmos. Against that background the apostle does not hesitate to speak of the total fullness of God residing in Jesus Christ for the purpose of reconciling all things to God.

It may be that Paul wanted his readers to hear certain Old Testament echoes in his use of the word "fullness." In Ex. 40:34 we are told, for example, that the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. In 1 Kings 8:10 a cloud fills the house of the Lord in such measure that the priests cannot enter. These statements may of course be applied to our Lord Jesus Christ as the incarnate presence of God. It is more probable, however, that the apostle has here borrowed a term from his opponents to make the bold assertion that whatever it takes to fill up the gap between God and His creation is to be found in Jesus Christ as both Creator and Redeemer. We must note that the apostle does not make the claim that a little bit of God is to be found in each man. Plato and many others after him have said that much. Paul insists that the total fullness

of God resides in one person alone, and that person is Jesus Christ.

As Lord of the universe and head of the church, Jesus Christ came to reconcile all things to God. The verb ἀποκαταλλάσσειν is a double compound (ἀπό plus κατά), implying restitution to a previous order of things. Its use serves to recall not only that the world was created as something very good but also that, after the Fall, it is God's purpose to return the universe to its original condition. This is its destiny, even if men should blunder into the devastation of the planet on which they live. Jesus Christ became incarnate in order to heal the many rifts in the universe, whether they be cosmic, historical, or personal. That is what Paul suggests by his reference to the Cross as the source of peace and of wholeness. (Col. 1:20)

Among the Jews it was said that the Passover lamb created peace in the land.¹⁰ Possibly the apostle Paul had this in mind. With the aorist participle εἰρηνηποίησας he refers to a single event in the past, the crucifixion, as the means of cosmic redemption. At the very heart of all reality we find this sacrifice. In Jewish thinking, the person who offered a sacrifice identified himself with the victim. By the victim's death life was restored to the person who brought the sacrifice. In the instance of Jesus Christ it is God who chose and offered the sacrifice. Peace and life everywhere derive from this act, into which we

¹⁰ Graves were whitened and roads were made smooth to facilitate the coming of pilgrims to Jerusalem; and a whole month was set aside before the festival for deciding judicial questions for the purpose of creating conditions of peace and good will. Cf. Emil Hirsch, *Jewish Encyclopedia*, IX (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1912), 553.

are incorporated by baptism. (Rom. 6: 3-6)¹¹

Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks of a this-worldly or secular Christianity¹² as a religion dedicated to the service of the total man in his total environment. The massive problems of our day suggest that we need to give serious thought to the relationship of redemption to creation. Our pericope speaks with particular emphasis on this point. As men once lived in terror of the stars, so they are now haunted by the question of meaning in the universe. Colossians addresses itself to that issue in accents which Eastern Orthodoxy, incidentally, has never forgotten, and that the "younger churches" of the world beg us to remember.¹³

It may be worth noting, in conclusion, that Ernst Käsemann takes Col. 1:12-20 to be part of an early baptismal liturgy and verses 15-20 as a reworking of what was originally a hymn of Gnostics to the *Kosmokrator*.¹⁴ In the original, he argues, there was a reference neither to the church

¹¹ Franz Leenhardt, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1961), pp. 152—156.

¹² Cf. Ronald Gregor Smith, "Diesseitige Transzendenz" in *Die Mündige Welt* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1956), pp. 109—112, where Smith comments on the following quotation from a letter of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "Wie sind wir 'religiös-weltlich' Christen . . . ohne uns religiös als Bevorzugte zu verstehen, sondern vielmehr als ganz zur Welt Gehörige? Christus ist dann nicht mehr Gegenstand der Religion, sondern etwas ganz anderes, wirklich Herr der Welt."

¹³ Cf. W. M. Horton, *Christian Theology* (New York: Harper's, 1958), p. 126. Byzantine architecture with its central figure of Christ as *Pantokrator* or *Kosmokrator* would provide a good case in point.

¹⁴ Ernst Käsemann, "A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy," *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson, 1964), pp. 149—168.

nor to the blood of the Cross. Günther Bornkamm, on the other hand, takes Col. 1:12-20 as an early Communion hymn.¹⁵ And C. Masson has argued that Col. 1: 15-20 comprises an early Christian hymn of praise, to which was added the clause, "And He is the Head of the body, the church."¹⁶ These are interesting suggestions and constitute attempts at explaining why the terminology of this pericope is so different from much of the rest of the Epistle to the Colossians.

If any of these surmises are valid, we get an interesting insight into what the early Christians sang about in their services. If, perchance, Paul was quoting from a baptismal liturgy, we get an unforgettable glimpse into his method, consisting as it did of reminding the Colossians of the commitment they had made at their baptism to that One who is both Lord of the universe and Head of the church. Such an observation would take us back to our own baptism, where we, too, were incorporated into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to share with Him in the task of redeeming the world.

* * *

If we were to be asked to formulate a set of theses on the present pericope as it pertains to the redemptive task of the church, they would read as follows:

I. Articulation

The Gospel is the good news that—

1. Jesus Christ is both Lord of the uni-

¹⁵ Cf. Martin Dibelius, *An die Kolosser, Epheser und Philemon* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1953), pp. 10, 11.

¹⁶ Charles Masson, "L'Hymne Christologique de l'Épître aux Colossiens I, 15-20," in *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie*, CXLVIII (1948), pp. 138—142.

- verse and Head of the church (Col. 1:16, 17);
2. Jesus Christ is both the Creator and the Redeemer of all that is in the world (John 1:1-5; Col. 1:15-20);
 3. Nothing less than the total universe is the object of God's redemptive intent in Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:20);
 4. God has acted within history to undertake a sequence of redemptive acts which find their fulfillment and meaning in Jesus Christ (Psalm 136; Eph. 1:9, 10);
 5. As the last of these mighty acts in history, God has created the church to be the embodiment of His redemptive purposes (Rom. 12:3-13; 1 Cor. 12:4-13);
 6. God designed this church to be His servant in the task of bringing the knowledge and awareness of their redemption to men of every age and nation (Matt. 28:19-20);
 7. As the consummation of the church's redemptive task, God will gather His children from every age and culture to be His people at worship in the presence of the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world (Rev. 5:6-14).

II. *Implementation*

NOTE: The numbering of items under "Implementation" is designed to relate each section to the correspondingly numbered sentence under "Articulation."

In her task of service and proclamation, the church has the responsibility of—

1. a. Reminding herself that she carries on her work within a world that continues to be upheld and sustained by Jesus Christ;
- b. Declaring to others that the church is that community through which Jesus Christ offers Himself as the Lord of all the structures of human existence;
2. a. Reminding herself that her members have been chosen to continue that work of restitution which was begun by the Lord in His incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection;
- b. Declaring to others that she has been entrusted with the task of addressing herself with every available resource to man in the totality of his being with a view to offering the opportunity for individual wholeness in the service of the living God;
3. a. Reminding herself that the individual is not to be understood or treated in isolation from his total "situation";
- b. Declaring to others the full scope of God's gracious purpose of redeeming the individual as a creature living in solidarity with all of God's creation;
4. a. Reminding herself of that sense of meaning which is found by incorporation through baptism into God's sequence of saving events;
- b. Declaring to others that man's need for a sense of history is best met by remembering God's redemptive acts in acts of worship, specifically in partaking of the Lord's Supper;

5. a. Reminding herself that she has been created as a redeemed fellowship, whose task it is, by the quality of the interpersonal relationships within her own community, to manifest the consequences of being restored to wholeness;
- b. Declaring to others, by her works of mercy, her understanding of human need as the opportunity of losing her life in order to find it;
6. a. Reminding herself that as the embodiment of God's redemptive purposes she has the task of creatively relating her words and works to many and diverse cultures in the entirety of their needs;
- b. Declaring the good news to others in words, symbols, acts, and values native to the respective cultures to which she is ministering;
7. Reminding herself and proclaiming to others the good news that all of history, including its many languages, races, and cultures, is in the process of being gathered up under the lordship of Jesus Christ as He moves through history in triumph over His various enemies until such time as they shall have been overcome.

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