

## *Good, Fallen, Redeemed*

Colossians 1:15-20

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*

### I

The other day I went grocery shopping at Kroger. Into my cart went strawberries and a pineapple, carrots and broccoli, onions and garlic, dried small red beans, oatmeal, milk and yogurt, and a score of other food stuffs in bags, packages, cans, and cartons. I've shopped at Kroger for about 27 years, and when I was a child, my mother shopped there too. Back in 1883, Barney Kroger and B.A. Branagan started what they called the Great Western Tea Company in Cincinnati, Ohio. Now called Kroger, the company has over 2,500 stores in 35 states.

Kroger is not the only company that I, a follower of Jesus Christ, have dealings with. I recently tried to list all the businesses, governments, corporations, institutions, and organizations that I interact with on a more or less regular basis, or have purchased major products from. I came up with 93 of them—and since I'm sure I forgot some, the true number is probably about 100. The list includes huge corporations like Apple and Dell, Hyundai and Nissan; governments like the city of Goshen, the state of Indiana, and the United States; medical providers like Wellington and Weddell; financial institutions like Interra, Everence, Vanguard, and Edward Jones; the schools I've attended; and a big boatload of Mennonite institutions. If you sat down and listed all the organizations you interact with, I'm guessing it would be about as long and varied as my list. This is simply the nature

of modern life. Unless you're a radical hermit who grows all your own food, never buys anything, never banks or saves for retirement, and avoids contact with everyone right down to the mailman, then you inevitably have to deal with a wide-ranging assortment of institutions and organizations.

## II

Most organizations are a mix of the good and the not so good. Let's go back to Kroger for a moment. Two years ago, the Kroger corporation began an initiative called "Zero Hunger, Zero Waste," which hopes to end hunger in the communities around their stores and to eliminate waste throughout their corporation by 2025.<sup>1</sup> It sounds wonderful, like something Jesus himself would heartily approve of, and if they succeed they will have accomplished a tremendous amount of good. However, in the 135-year history of Kroger, it's quite likely that they've also done things that harmed people or the environment. I don't know this for a fact, but perhaps they've even done things that we in this room would call evil.

I have no desire to pick on Kroger. They probably aren't so different than virtually any other organization you can think of: sometimes they do good; sometimes they fail to do good; and sometimes they may do evil. In organizational life, this ambiguity basically goes with the territory. For instance, Jenny and I jointly own a S corporation called Dan Schrock Spiritual Direction Inc. I set this up in 2007 to provide some legal protection for our personal assets in case I would ever get sued for doing something in my work as a spiritual director. I sincerely hope that I, as the sole practitioner of the corporation, do at least a little bit of good for other people which, in the grace of God, contributes to the mission God has up and running in the world. But I'm also aware that through this corporation

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thekrogerco.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/National-9-18-17-Kroger-Zero-Hunger-Zero-Waste-News-Release.pdf>

I could do harm. That's not my intention, but it could easily happen in a dozen different ways.

So far this morning, I've tried to establish two things. First, that we human beings are inevitably caught up in the life of organizations. If you get a paycheck or a Social Security check, then you're involved in at least one organization. You're also involved in another organization by attending Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship. Second, I've tried to suggest that every organization is capable of both good and evil.

### III

Colossians 1:15-20 does not specifically name organizations. Even so, the language of this text is so expansive that it includes everything in the world that you or I can think of. In the language of this passage, every reality in this world, whether visible or invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers, is gathered up and enfolded into what it wants to say about Jesus Christ. Nothing in creation or in human society is excluded from this text.

Colossians 1:15-20 is one of the most significant, weighty passages in the New Testament. It's more important theologically than, say, the tiny books of Jude or Titus or Philemon. It says at least 3 things about the relationship between Jesus Christ and entities that make up the world.

First, it says that everything in the world was created good. Why? Simply because everything was originally created through Christ and for Christ. Kroger, Goshen College, Thor Industries, Mennonite Mission Network, Goshen Health, the state of Indiana—in their creation, Christ was somehow present and active. Not only that, but in Christ all these things hold together. Maybe the image of glue works here. Jesus Christ is the glue that holds the world together and keeps it from falling apart.

Personally, I'm very drawn to this imagery. It seems to many of us that major pieces of the world are currently flying apart, perhaps even the foundation of democracy itself. This text calmly asserts that regardless of how things look on the surface, all things really do hold together in Christ. In the crisis of war, all things hold together in Christ. In a diagnosis of cancer, all things hold together in Christ. In whatever nasty situation you can imagine, all things mysteriously but wonderfully hold together in Christ.

Second, everything in the world is fallen. The passage implies this rather than stating it obviously. It's not just that individual people have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, but every institution and reality has too. That includes all of our Mennonite institutions: Bethany, Goshen College, AMBS, Mennonite Mission Network, Everence, Mennonite Education Agency, Indiana-Michigan Conference, and this congregation. Our institutions try to do good, to follow Jesus and collaborate with God's mission, but sometimes they mess up badly. Many years ago, I attended a Mennonite congregation where the two male pastors insisted that the Bible only permitted men to be in leadership. Women were not allowed to lead anything. One of the pastors put it like this: if there's a woman in leadership, then it means there's a man somewhere who shirked his God-given responsibility to step up and fill that leadership role. This kind of misguided thinking caused great harm to women and girls in the congregation.

Third, this passage proclaims that at some point in the future, all things in heaven and earth will be reconciled to God through Christ. There will be decisive and universal peace. Think about that for a moment. Exxon Mobil will be reconciled to God through Christ. So will Apple, Google, and Microsoft. Lockheed Martin. Boeing. The Republican Party and the Democrat Party. The Taliban. General Motors. Volvo. The city of Goshen.

Indeed, our text even goes so far as to say that right now, this great work of reconciliation has already happened. Of course, this is a great mystery. In what way have God and the neo-Nazis already been reconciled to each other through Christ? I have no idea. Yet that's what Colossians 1 wants us to trust in, to build our hope upon. All things in heaven and earth, all persons and all institutions, all spirits and powers and principalities, are in the process of being reconciled to God through Christ. The text says this began through the death and resurrection of Christ, but it gives no details beyond that. The grand reconciling work of God has present and future components that we, in our limited human understanding, cannot now grasp.

#### IV

Colossians 1 affirms three crucial points.

1. All institutions were created through and for Christ. They are intended to be good, to serve God and participate in God's good work.
2. But sadly, all institutions have turned away from this good and have caused evil of one sort or another. They have sinned, and in significant ways block what God wants for the world.
3. All institutions, and every last thing or person or reality that we can think of, will someday be fully reconciled to God. This is the foundational accomplishment of Christ: to collaborate with God the Creator in fashioning a new creation which lives with God in peace.

I don't know about you, but this expansive vision gives me great hope. God's got this. I don't understand all the details of how and when, but God's got this. When our bones grow weary and our heart drags, we can remember that God's got this. When an institution does something stupid, something damaging, it helps to

recall that God's extraordinary ability will one day find a way forward to a land of peace. Thanks be to God.