

MONOTHEISM AND THE VENERATION AND PRE-EXISTENCE OF JESUS IN PAUL'S THEOLOGY

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The Apostle Paul is, by most accounts, the first and perhaps greatest theologian of the Christian era. Through Paul's writings we see the bridge between the old covenant and the new covenant. Paul's background was thoroughly Jewish by his own testimony: "Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I" (2 Cor. 11:22).¹ Yet he became the most dedicated of the followers of Christ (2 Cor. 11:23-28). Paul's methodology in bringing the message of Jesus and his Kingdom to a new city was to begin by preaching in the Jewish synagogues (Acts 17:2-3; 19:8), but he saw his primary calling from Christ as an Apostle to the Gentiles (Rom. 1:5; 11:13; Gal. 2:8; 1 Tim. 2:7).

Paul sought to present the message of the Gospel as clearly as he could. Yet even in his own time some had difficulty understanding his message and distorted his teaching (2 Pet. 3:15-16). Since the fourth century AD the majority of Christians have interpreted the Scriptures in general and Paul's writings in particular through the lens provided by the creeds voted upon by the church councils at Nicea and Constantinople. Their interpretative schema depicts God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit in the following way:

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven. By the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from the New International Version.

Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

An objective analysis of the history behind this creedal formulation reveals it to be a product of political intrigue and negotiation far more than sound exegesis. Peter's caution about Paul's writings being distorted by the ignorant and unstable was borne out by these events. Richard Rubenstein does a masterful job of revealing what actually occurred behind the scenes at Nicea, concluding: "For most Christians the question of Jesus Christ's divinity was settled at Constantinople in 381."²

The challenge for a 21st-century interpreter of Paul is to see Paul's theology in a clearer, less distorted manner. One of the best examples of modern exegesis of Paul's theology is Professor James D.G. Dunn's *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*.³ In this article we will use Professor Dunn's analysis of Paul's theology as our primary extra-biblical source. We will consider how Paul, with his foundation in monotheistic Judaism, understood and interpreted the veneration of Jesus as Lord within the framework of belief in the one God, as well as pre-existence as it related to Jesus. Would Paul have happily stood and recited the Nicene-Constantinople creed, or would he have scratched his head and wondered how his words could have been so badly distorted?

The creed begins: "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen." Would Paul have recognized and supported this statement? The simple answer is "yes" and the proof is easily found in Paul's writings. In 1 Corinthians 8:6 Paul writes, "yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live." Dunn observes, "The most fundamental Jewish belief was in the oneness of God."⁴ Dunn rightly states that as a devout Jew Paul would have certainly grown up reciting twice daily the "Shema Israel" recorded in Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." As an expert in the Mosaic Law Paul would have understood God's command: "You shall have no other gods besides

² Richard E. Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999, 227.

³ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

or before me” (Exod. 20:3). Paul’s understanding would have, no doubt, been similar to that of one of his near-contemporary Jewish writers, Josephus, who observed, “the first word teaches us that God is one”⁵ and “to acknowledge God as one is common to all the Hebrews.”⁶

The Jews’ strict monotheism was recognized outside Judaism. The Roman writer Tacitus wrote in the second century, “The Jews conceive of one god only.”⁷

Paul reiterates his ongoing commitment to the scriptural emphasis of God’s oneness in his letter to the Romans: “There is only one God” (Rom. 3:30), and to Timothy: “the only God” (1 Tim. 1:17) and “there is one God” (1 Tim. 2:5). So clearly and so uniformly is this articulated throughout Paul’s writings that Dunn observes that “Paul...had no doubts about Jewish monotheism in his own continued affirmation of the Shema.” Paul is “heir of a consistently affirmed and clearly perceived Jewish faith in God as one.”⁸

We may conclude that, with regard to the creed, Paul could have easily affirmed the first section as it serves as a restatement of the Shema and a summary of Paul’s oft-stated views on the oneness of God.

The next section of the creed reads:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven. By the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

The first part of this section, “we believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,” is taken almost verbatim from 1 Corinthians 8:6: “and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ.” This is recognized by many scholars as an “adaptation of the wording of the Shema (Deut. 6:4).”⁹ Paul is essentially offering a new, revised Shema: *There is one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ*. Hurtado, who generally understands early Christian devotion to Jesus as a “binitarian monotheism,” is still forced to admit that Paul’s new Shema is expressed “in a way that maintains

⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 3.91.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.112.

⁷ Tacitus, *History*, 5.5.4.

⁸ Dunn, 36.

⁹ Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2005, 49.

a clear distinction between him and ‘the Father,’” involving a “functional subordination of the ‘Lord’ (Jesus) to the one God.”¹⁰ As Dunn notes, “Paul evidences no sense of strain in speaking both of Christ’s lordship and of God as one in the same breath.”¹¹ Paul is able to maintain his strict Jewish monotheism and yet recognize Jesus as Lord.

If this were an isolated text we might be tempted to assume that we are misreading Paul. However, it is not. In the great hymn of praise to Jesus in Philippians 2 Paul clearly says, “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Paul here clearly recognizes that the honorific title of Lord is rightly bestowed upon Jesus by no less than God Himself. Jesus is called “Lord” by his Father. Does this honoring of Jesus as Lord in any way diminish the honor and worship that belongs to the One God? Clearly not, for Paul says that in so honoring Jesus as Lord we are giving glory to God the Father. As Dunn asserts, “The lordship of Christ was not thought of as any usurpation or replacement of God’s authority, but expressive of it.”¹²

An often expressed formula in Paul’s writings is “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:6 and elsewhere). Dunn again observes, “*kyrios* (lord) is not so much a way of identifying Jesus with God, but if anything more a way of distinguishing Jesus from God.”¹³

God has seen fit, according to His wisdom, to share His authority with Jesus. There is nothing particularly new or astonishing about this fact as it clearly recalls one of the first biblical stories — the story of Adam and Eve. In Genesis 1:27, 28 God created the first humans “in His own image” and shared His authority over creation with them when He authorized them to “rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” Here, human beings created in God’s image were granted authority over a portion of God’s creation. That is God sharing His authority with man. Man was given authority by God over the creation, but he himself remained subject to God’s authority, for when he violated God’s command not to touch the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he was made subject to death by that same God who had granted him authority over the earth (Gen. 3:17-19).

When King David pondered the power and majesty of God and then compared man in his feebleness and frailty to that divine power he marveled that God would share His authority with man:

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹¹ Dunn, 253.

¹² *Ibid.*, 253.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 254.

What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?

You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.

You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet:

all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,

all that swim the paths of the seas (Ps. 8:2-8).

Once again, within the context of strict monotheism there is an explicit recognition that God willingly shares His authority with human beings. David, in his position as God's anointed king, had an appreciation of God sharing His sovereign power with David, and in the future with David's heir. Psalm 110:1 says, "The LORD says to my lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'"

Daniel was allowed a glimpse of this future, cosmic sharing of divine authority by God with a human person ("one like a son of man") in Daniel 7:13-14:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Here Daniel explicitly states that this human being is given "authority, glory and sovereign power," that his dominion will extend to all the earth, and that he will be "worshiped" (Heb. *pelah*, lit. serve or be obedient to).¹⁴

Jesus himself would one day be granted this authority. "Son of Man" was Jesus' preferred self-designation (Matt. 9:6 and numerous others). At his trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin Jesus confessed that he would be the fulfillment of Daniel 7:13-14 (Matt. 26:64). Following his resurrection Jesus announced that he had been given "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18). As one who has been granted this authority Jesus chooses to share that authority with his disciples: "You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:28-30). Likewise in Revelation 5:10 Christ grants us a vision of that

¹⁴ *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, Vol. 6, 462. In Daniel 7:27 "the people of the saints" are the object of the same "reverence" (see Montgomery, *International Critical Commentary on Daniel*, T&T Clark, 1979, 304).

future Kingdom authority: “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.”

Clearly, when Paul refers to Jesus as “lord” and honors him as having received authority from God, he is working within a strong biblical monotheistic framework which does not compromise the oneness of God. Paul maintains this in his eschatological vision of Jesus after the resurrection of the dead. In 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 Paul presents a picture of Christ after he has raised “those who belong to him”:

Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he “has put everything under his feet.” Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

This temporal period of reigning on earth following the resurrection and prior to the destruction of the final enemy, death, is presented as a time of bringing the whole earth back into subjection to God. Paul also understands that disciples of Jesus Christ will participate in this rule. 1 Corinthians 6:2-3 affirms: “Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life!” The authority that was originally given to the first humans in Genesis 1 (the first Adam), but was compromised because of sin, has been given to the “last Adam,” a phrase Paul uses to refer to Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:45), and through him to his disciples who will share in that authority after the resurrection. Dunn concludes, “Jesus as Lord shares in [God’s] sovereignty and exercises it at least in part...[serving] as God’s vice-regent.”¹⁵

The next phrase in the Nicene-Constantinople creed refers to Jesus as “the only Son of God.” Does a reading of Paul’s theology reveal his support of such a statement? One need not look far into Paul’s writings to answer in the affirmative. In Romans 1:4 Paul refers to “Jesus Christ our Lord” as being the one who “through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead.”

For Paul, the decisive event which authenticates Jesus’ claims to divine Sonship is the resurrection. This should not be surprising when we consider that Paul came face to face with the risen Son of God (Acts 9:4-9). That personal encounter with the risen Christ completely altered the course of Paul’s life. Dunn cautions that we should not read into this an “adoptionist Christology” as if

¹⁵ Dunn, 255.

Christ only became the Son of God at his resurrection.¹⁶ Paul was undoubtedly familiar with the stories about Christ's beginnings. For his purposes Paul does not find it necessary to articulate a detailed summary of Christ's birth as the Gospel writers do, but he does allude to it (Rom. 1:3, BBE: "who came from the family of David" and Gal. 4:4: "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law"). Paul chooses to devote the majority of his theological reflection on Jesus to his death, resurrection and future coming to reign. These are the key events Paul considers as he articulates the major elements of the faith. This does not negate Jesus' birth and infancy nor the bulk of his life and teachings, but Paul's purpose is not to write a Gospel narrative but to write on the reality of the Gospel and its application in the world and the Church.

The creed continues, "eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father." As we read through the Pauline corpus we quickly discover that the phrase "eternally begotten of the Father" is never used in any of Paul's writings; in fact, nothing even approaching this thought is evident. Paul uses the term "begotten" (KJV) only twice, once in 1 Corinthians 4:15 and once in Philemon 1:10. In both instances Paul himself is the one who does the begetting, and the begetting is a spiritual begetting of the Corinthian Christians and the slave Onesimus. Nowhere does Paul speak of God's begetting of Christ, let alone an "eternal begetting." When Paul speaks of things that are eternal he speaks of God (Rom. 1:20), life (Rom. 2:7), things which are not seen (2 Cor. 4:18), a house not made with hands (2 Cor. 5:1), God's purposes (Eph. 3:11) and glory (2 Tim. 2:10). But nowhere does he use "eternal" to refer to God's begetting of Jesus. We can add to this that the phrases "God from God, light from light, true God from true God" are nowhere to be found in Paul's writings.

Dunn makes a strong case that nowhere does Paul clearly speak of Jesus as "God."¹⁷ The only text where there is a legitimate question is Romans 9:5: "theirs are the fathers, and from them came the Christ insofar as the flesh is concerned, God who is over all, may he be blessed forever. Amen." Dunn prefers the NRSV rendering of this verse "from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen." This reading is a more natural one and agrees with Paul's style of offering benedictions throughout his writings. Dunn finds it difficult to believe that Paul would have here "abandoned the reserve which is such a mark of his talk of the exalted Christ elsewhere."¹⁸ How strange for those who voted on the language of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed to so straightforwardly declare Jesus to be "God from God" and "true God from

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 255.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 256.

true God” when the first and greatest theologian of the Church avoided using the title “God” or even “god” to refer to Jesus.

The creedal emphasis on “begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father” is a blatant introduction of post-biblical Greek philosophical speculation and derives neither from Paul nor from any other New Testament writer. In fact, it contradicts what Paul explicitly says about Jesus in the hymn of Philippians 2:7: “being made in human likeness.” Paul would be, to say the least, surprised, and more than likely angered, that his words have been distorted to say the exact opposite of what he actually did say.

The creed goes on to confess of Jesus: “Through him all things were made.” Dunn spends several paragraphs considering 1 Corinthians 8:6: “one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came.” It must be noted that this appears in the context of Paul’s clear statement that there is “one God” and that Jesus is the “one Lord.” Nothing in the statement “through him all things were made” should be read as contradicting the fact that there is “one God.” Dunn interprets this thought by way of Wisdom. In Proverbs 8:22ff Wisdom is personified. According to Dunn Wisdom should be read as an “extended metaphor” depicting God connecting to His “creation and His people.”¹⁹ It is wisdom that pre-exists. Jesus is the embodiment of divine wisdom which has existed from the beginning. What wisdom began to do from the beginning of creation found its greatest fulfillment in Christ. Dunn points us in the direction of Joseph Klausner who includes in his list of seven things that were “created before the world was created” “the name of the Messiah.” Klausner understands this to mean that although the Messiah himself did not personally exist before creation, “the idea of the Messiah” existed before creation.²⁰ This is borne out in the New Testament and evidenced in Revelation 13:8 which speaks of “the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.”

God created the universe through wisdom, which reaches its greatest fulfillment in the Messiah, who by his cross and resurrection brings to fruition God’s original plan and purpose for creation. It was not in some pre-existent state that Jesus was present and an active participant in the creation of the heavens and the earth, but by His wisdom God’s creation reaches its zenith in the cross and empty tomb of Jesus.

The creed continues: “For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven. By the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.” This is an explicit confession that the pre-existent Christ became incarnate as a human being. We have already demonstrated that pre-existence for Paul should not be seen as “personal” but rather as the pre-

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 272.

²⁰ Joseph Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1956, 460.

existence of wisdom, which is a metaphor for the transcendent God reaching out to create and to come in contact with His creation. This reached its greatest fulfillment in Jesus' death and resurrection. This certainly was "for our salvation" as the creed confesses, but Paul would certainly not be in agreement with any thought of a personally pre-existent Christ coming "down from heaven" and becoming "incarnate." Dunn cautions us not to "collapse the metaphor" of pre-existent wisdom into a "straightforward statement of historical fact."²¹ We have already noted that Paul does not find it necessary to spend time and space discussing the virgin birth. We do not have to assume that Paul was unaware of these facts, but they simply were not the most important for his purposes. Paul does not seem to be very interested in focusing on the story of Jesus prior to his death and resurrection. If Paul believed that Jesus indeed came down from heaven and became incarnate, he certainly never expressed it in his writings.

Where Paul alludes to Christ as being "heavenly" or "from heaven" (1 Cor. 15:45-50), Dunn contends that he is speaking of the resurrected Christ, not a pre-existent Christ. This far better fits the context and content of Paul's statements within the framework of his "Adam Christology." In Romans and 1 Corinthians Paul contrasts the first Adam with the last Adam, Jesus. When Paul says "just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven" (1 Cor. 15:49), it only makes sense that we would be made in the likeness of Jesus, who is currently in heaven and whose return from heaven we eagerly await. Paul's own testimony of his desire to "know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow to attain to the resurrection of the dead" (Phil. 3:10-11) gives support to the notion that Paul is focusing on the resurrected Christ. Paul wants to be like the risen Christ, not the pre-existent Christ.

For Paul there is no doubt that Jesus was a man. Paul would certainly never be confused by those who were believers in a Docetic Christ who only appeared to be a man. For Paul, Jesus was most definitely a man or more accurately, "the man" (1 Tim. 2:5: "the man Christ Jesus"). Jesus, the man, came into existence at his birth. Prior to his birth the idea of Jesus the Messiah was present from the beginning of creation, and found its fulfillment in Christ's death and resurrection. Jesus the man has been exalted to the right hand of God where today he is the prototypical last Adam. He will one day come from heaven to resurrect the dead who will be raised up to be like him. This is Paul's theology regarding pre-existence. The creed on this point is foreign to Paul's thinking and must be seen as a distortion of Paul's theology.

The second section of the creed concludes: "For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose

²¹ Dunn, 288.

again in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”

This is taken, almost verbatim, from Paul’s writings, and is probably among the oldest and most reliable portions of the creed. In 1 Corinthians 15:3, 4 Paul summarized his understanding of the faith: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” Paul says that “on [this] you have taken your stand” (v. 1). This is the bedrock of the Christian faith. Perhaps the oldest creedal statement can be summarized: “Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.” While this summary of Paul’s understanding of the faith does not specifically affirm that Christ died by crucifixion, Paul attests to that fact elsewhere in his writings: “Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified” (Gal. 3:1). Paul also refers once to Pontius Pilate (1 Tim. 6:13).

Did Paul know about the ascension as the creed asserts “he ascended into heaven”? It is clear that he did. Paul writes in Ephesians 4:8-10: “This is why it says: ‘When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.’ (What does ‘he ascended’ mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)”

Paul is certainly aware not only that Jesus descended to the grave but also that he ascended to heaven. While Paul here describes the post-ascension Christ as “fill[ing] the whole universe,” this probably should be understood poetically. Paul clearly states elsewhere that Christ currently is at the right hand of God: “Christ Jesus, who died — more than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us” (Rom. 8:34).

Was Paul looking forward to the return of Jesus? Without a doubt we must answer “yes.” 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 is one of the clearest expressions of this hope in the Scriptures: “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.” Not only was Paul looking forward to Jesus’ return, it was a source of pastoral encouragement to bring comfort and edification to grieving Christians (1 Thess. 4:18).

Paul understood that when Christ returns he will reign until he has “destroyed all dominion, authority and power” (1 Cor. 15:24). This is summarized in the creed simply as “coming to judge the living and the dead.” The purpose of judgment is to bring everything in creation under God’s authority. Will the Kingdom of Christ have “no end” as the creed asserts? The kingdom will certainly have no end. Christ will reign over the kingdom until he

has brought everything under submission to God, at which time the unending kingdom will be turned over to God Himself and everything, including Christ himself, will be subject to God's reign (1 Cor. 15:24-28).

We have evaluated the second section of the creed in light of Paul's theology in all points except one — the personal, salvific nature of Christ. The creed says, "for us and our salvation" and "for our sake." This is crucial for our understanding of Paul's theology. For Paul, all that Christ did was for humanity. "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). Christ died for our sins, not because of our righteousness, but because of our sinfulness: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). If we accept this in faith it results in our salvation: "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9). Through baptism we participate in both the death and resurrection of Jesus: "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection" (Rom. 6:4-5). When we do this we can have confidence that we are no longer under God's wrath: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:1-2). The death and resurrection of Jesus are the key events that result in our salvation. Without those events, in Paul's understanding, there is no salvation: "For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (1 Cor. 15:16-19).

In Christ then, there is the coming together of the cosmic and the personal. The Kingdom will be worldwide in scope, but those who enter that kingdom are saved individually through faith in Jesus Christ.

In the final section of the creed we give particular attention to the phrase: "With the Father and the Son he [the Holy Spirit] is worshiped and glorified." Those who formulated the creed determined that "the Son" (Jesus) and "the Holy Spirit" deserve to be "worshiped and glorified" alongside God "the Father."

Would Paul agree? Do we have evidence in Paul that the worship of God can be shared with Jesus? Dunn cautions us to be careful about attributing worship to Christ. He notes that Paul's "normal worship terms (*eucharistein*, *eucharistia*) are always addressed to God and never to Christ."²² Also the term *doxazo*, "glorify" is used only of God and not of Christ, as are *latreuo* and *proskuneo*. Dunn concludes, "Such uniformity in Paul's usage should certainly make us

²² *Ibid.*, 258.

hesitate before asserting that Paul ‘worshiped’ Christ, since the evidence more clearly indicates otherwise.”²³ Those famous hymns that are often referred to as proof-texts for the worship of Christ (Phil. 2:6-11 and Col. 1:15-20) are not properly “addressed to Christ, but give praise to God for Christ.”²⁴

Dunn rightly acknowledges that Jesus is venerated as the exalted Lord but sees this as stopping short of worship. For Hurtado this veneration of Jesus is a mutation of Jewish monotheism.²⁵ For Dunn this need not be the case. He notes an “ancient distinction between ‘worship’ and ‘veneration.’”²⁶ He points out that at the second Council of Nicea they ruled that “worship” is to be offered to God alone while “veneration” could be given to the saints. Dunn carries that distinction over to God and Christ. To God alone worship is due; to Christ veneration is due.

For Paul, then, all that he says in honor of Jesus Christ is “held within the bounds of his inherited monotheism. Jesus as Lord does not infringe on God as one, and even the highest accolade given to the exalted Christ is ‘to the glory of God the Father.’”²⁷

Summary and Conclusion

We have been considering how Paul, raised as a devout and orthodox Jew with a bedrock foundation of strict monotheism, would have viewed the veneration of Jesus by Christians and what, if any, understanding Paul had of the pre-existence of Jesus. We used the Nicene-Constantinople Creed, which has served as a kind of litmus test of Christian “orthodoxy” for over 1500 years, as a basis of comparison. We asked the question “Would Paul have happily stood in a modern-day church service and recited the creed?” After reviewing Paul’s words as recorded in the Bible with the interpretive assistance of Professor James Dunn and others, we are forced to conclude that, while there are certainly sections of the creed that Paul could, without a doubt, recite, there are other sections which present an understanding of Christ that Paul would find not only confusing, but completely contradictory to the Scriptures that he had available in his time, and his own understanding of the nature of God and the person of Jesus.

Paul never stopped believing in the One God that he was taught as a Jewish boy growing up reciting the Shema weekly in the synagogue and twice daily in his home. When he came to meet the risen Christ he incorporated his understanding of Jesus into his existing understanding of God. He was never

²³ *Ibid.*, 259.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 259.

²⁵ Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, London: SCM Press, 1989, 124.

²⁶ Dunn, 260.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 265.

forced to abandon that belief. He simply expanded it. He confirmed the Shema, "The Lord our God, the Lord is one," by restating it as "We believe in one God, the Father," and associating with Him the risen Christ as the "one Lord." Paul never identifies Jesus with the One God but rather he clearly distinguishes Jesus from God. Paul could never honestly say of Jesus that we was "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God" as the creed asserts. For Paul, Jesus is never the One God. The One God is the Father of Jesus. Jesus is the Lord, the Son of God.

For Paul, Jesus was not "eternally begotten." Jesus did not personally exist prior to his birth. Paul never spoke of the pre-existence of Jesus. He might have used the biblical image of the pre-existence of Wisdom which is a kind of "extended metaphor" of God's connection with His creation and which found its greatest fulfillment in the creation of Jesus. But that is the closest Paul comes to speaking of Jesus as pre-existent. In Jewish thought the "idea" of the Messiah existed from the creation of the world, but the Messiah himself did not. As for the creedal assertion that Jesus was "begotten, not made," it is a clear contradiction to Paul's assertion that Jesus was "made in human likeness" (Phil. 2:7).

Would Paul have supported the creedal assertion that Jesus is worshipped "with the Father and the Holy Spirit"? Throughout his writings Paul is careful to distinguish between the worship of God and the veneration of Jesus. Jesus is certainly worthy of veneration and honor as the risen Son of God and God's vice-regent who will one day come to reign. We certainly should bend the knee in honor and respect and acknowledgement of Christ as our King. However, Paul never attributes to Jesus the true worship that is exclusive to God. Paul never gives "glory" to Jesus. When the knee of submission is bowed to Jesus it is to the glory of "the Father," not Jesus (Phil. 2:6-11). God is glorified through Christ, but Christ never usurps God's glory and Paul explicitly says that when Christ's mediatorial rule over the earth has accomplished all that God intends, then Jesus will submit himself for all eternity to the Father.

For Paul, the One God remains the One God. Jesus is venerated as Lord and Messiah. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises of the "Son of Man" who is given "authority to rule." Jesus is the fullest expression of God's creative purposes for mankind. But this person whom the creed calls "God from God" and "true God from true God," who is "eternally begotten, not made" and who with "the Father and the Holy Spirit is worshipped," would be completely unrecognizable to Paul and does violence to the bedrock foundation of monotheism which Paul steadfastly maintained throughout his life and teaching. All Christians should strive to emulate the thinking and practice of Paul, the first and greatest theologian of the Church, and make his confession the pattern of our confessions of faith. The Nicene-Constantinople Creed should go the way of the selling of indulgences and other gross distortions of the faith which "ignorant and

unstable people” have introduced “to their own destruction.” This would lead to ongoing reformation of the Church or, better yet, restoration of “the faith once for all entrusted to the saints.”²⁸

²⁸ 2 Peter 3:16; Jude 3.