

Article

Paul's Christology in the Corinthian Letters

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Abstract: To explore Christian origins, we need to explore Christology, and to study early Christology, Paul's Corinthian letters are indispensable. In these letters, Paul spoke of Jesus in various ways: fundamentally as a human who died and rose again; sometimes as Yahweh, the one God of Israel; and somehow in distinction from God. While there are various options for understanding Paul's discussion, the best explanation is that Paul viewed Jesus as the epiphany, manifestation, human personification, or incarnation of the one God. Paul's language was consistent with Jewish monotheism, used categories of thought available in both Jewish and Hellenistic circles, and did not explicitly delineate two divine persons or two divine centers of consciousness. Instead, he described one transcendent God who became incarnate. In short, for Paul, Jesus is the God of Israel in self-revelation.

Keywords: Christology; Corinthians; deity of Jesus; incarnation; trinitarianism

1. Introduction

One of the central issues of early Christianity—probably the central issue—was the identity of Jesus Christ (Green 2010, p. 60).¹ To explore Christian origins, we need to explore Christology, and to study early Christology, Paul's Corinthian letters are indispensable. The Corinthian correspondence is particularly helpful in understanding early Christology because we have an undisputed text written by a major leader, the apostle Paul, very early in the history of Christianity, ca. 55–56 CE (Carson et al. 1992, pp. 282–83). Indeed, the epistles of Paul are the earliest Christian writings available (Hurtado 2003, p. 81; Meeks 2003, p. 7). This article will examine significant statements about Christ in Paul's Corinthian correspondence and draw conclusions about his view of Christ.

Why is it worthwhile to look afresh at Christian origins and early Christian discourse about Jesus? First, traditional biblical interpretations have developed in the matrix of Western theology and philosophy, but contemporary Christianity is increasingly becoming non-Western. Revisiting Christian origins, particularly early Christian discourse about God and Jesus, places us at the intersection of Jewish, Hellenistic, and emerging Christian thought. It helps us reconsider the connections between the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures and between Greco-Roman and Christian worldviews.

Second, there is a relatively new majority view among New Testament scholars that a high Christology emerged in the first century from a Jewish context (Chester 2011, p. 22). The implications need to be explored more fully. My goal is to integrate these current ideas to produce a coherent whole, provide alternative lenses, and offer original insights, particularly a fresh understanding of Paul's Christology.

Since some of this article's conclusions may differ from traditional theological views, this investigation will seek scholarly corroboration for every significant exegetical or hermeneutical point to minimize the danger of eisegesis. I will support every link in the chain of reasoning with credible scholarship, although the resulting conclusions may be original and unique.

2. Significant Language in 1 Corinthians

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to answer questions and address problems in the church (Gundry 1994, p. 370). Since he sought to unify a divided church and resolve questions



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about his authority, he did not propound novel or controversial views of Christ. Thus, the basic Christological concepts in the letter must have predated Paul and been characteristic of early Jewish Christianity (Hengel 1989, p. 18; Hurtado 2005, pp. 25–28, 37). He did not justify his belief in Christ's deity but assumed it, evidently because it was not disputed among early Christians (Hurtado 2010, pp. 107–8). The NT contains no evidence of a debate over Paul's exalted view of Jesus (Blomberg 2004, p. 712). Most early Christians must have accepted his descriptions, including Palestinian Jewish people (like Peter in 1 Cor 1:12), Hellenistic Jewish people (like Paul himself), and Gentile people (like the Corinthians).

1:1–2. Paul identified himself as an "apostle" of Jesus and identified the church in Corinth as being "sanctified" by Jesus. He attributed to Jesus both commissioning authority and sanctifying power, transcending the power that Jewish people attributed to humans. Paul used the phrase "in Christ" to speak of God's saving work on behalf of humans. He further identified the "saints" as those who "call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ". In this context, to speak of Jesus as "our Lord" is to give him a divine title and, from a Jewish perspective, even to identify him with or as Yahweh. (See the discussions of 1 Cor 1:30–31 and 16:21–24.) To "call on the name" indicates a ritual act of worship, a formal invoking of the name of a deity particularly in sacrifice, prayer, praise, or worship (Dunn 2010, p. 1; Capes 2004, p. 128; Hurtado 1999, p. 198). In the Hebrew Scriptures, people invoked the name of Yahweh in this fashion.² Indeed, there is little evidence that this phrase ever applied to anyone other than Yahweh for Jewish people (Capes 2004, p. 128).

Paul employed the name of Jesus as the functional equivalent of Yahweh. To identify and define Christian believers, he used a formulaic phrase indicating that believers everywhere prayed to and worshiped Jesus. Indeed, the phrase may have been a common description for the entire Christian life or at least Christian worship (Hurtado 1998, p. 109). Some argue that in the religious context of the NT, to worship (προσκυνέω) a deity is complete only when it involves sacrifice, and since no sacrifices were offered to Christ, we have less than full worship of Christ in the NT (North 2004, pp. 198–99). However, the ritualistic invocation of the divine name is associated with sacrifice in the Hebrew Scriptures, and sacrifices were abolished and replaced with the "sacrifice of praise" in the NT (Heb 10:1–14; 13:15). Here, the ritualistic invocation of the divine name is transferred to Jesus in the NT equivalent of sacrificial worship.

1:3. Paul invoked both God and Jesus in pronouncing grace and peace upon believers, a remarkable expression for a monotheistic Jewish person. From the outset, we see a duality that goes beyond typical OT expressions. Paul made a distinction between God and Jesus yet associated or equated them in some way. The OT priestly invocation of God's name upon God's people provides an insight (Norris 2009, pp. 41–42; Wolfson 1970, p. 147). The priests pronounced grace and peace upon God's people by calling the divine name Yahweh over them (Num 6:22–27). Paul adapted this blessing by naming Jesus instead of Yahweh. To describe Jesus as separate from Yahweh but performing the works of Yahweh would compromise OT monotheism, and there is no indication that Paul intended this meaning. The alternative is to view Jesus as performing the works of Yahweh by being the extension or expression of Yahweh. Paul did not speak of grace and peace coming from God and Jesus as two different beings but from the one God of Israel as revealed in Jesus. ("God our Father" and "Lord Jesus Christ" share one preposition (Richardson 1994, p. 261).)

1:7–8. The Hebrew Scriptures speak of "the day of the LORD" as the day of judgment (e.g., Joel 1:15; 2:11, 31–32). Here, Paul looked for the personal return of Jesus Christ and identified the end-time judgment as the "day of our Lord Jesus Christ". Jesus fulfills the role of Yahweh in eschatology.

1:9. Paul spoke of Jesus as God's Son only seventeen times.³ He did not use it primarily as a divine title but to describe Jesus as a true human who was born, died, and rose again to fulfil God's plan of salvation for humanity (Rom 5:10; Gal 4:4–5). Moreover, Paul connected this title with God's self-revelation to him, referring to his Damascus Road en-

counter with the exalted Christ (Gal 1:15–16; Kim 1981, p. 230). Theologically, the term “Son of God” serves a twofold purpose in the NT. First, by contrast with the title of “Father”, it underscores the authentic humanity of Jesus Christ in submission to the transcendent God (Longenecker 1970, pp. 98–99; Hahn 1969, pp. 306, 340; Pelikan 1971, p. 189). Second, by identifying the work of the Son as the work of God through the Son, it describes God’s manifestation and action in human flesh (Richardson 1994, p. 270, citing Kümmel). The NT writers, then, “rejected the idea of another person (in our sense of ‘person’) other than the Father, the invisible God” (Dunn 1998a, p. 267). Rather, “the Son” is a “metaphor” for God’s own action because from Paul’s monotheistic perspective, God could not literally beget another divine entity: “His ‘Son’ is himself in his aspect as concerned with his creation and supremely with his creature man. So when we say God gave his only Son we mean that God gave himself” (Hanson 1982, pp. 140–41).

1:10. The ancient Hebrews invoked the name of Yahweh to invoke God’s power and to pronounce blessings, cursings, and oaths.⁴ Much like taking an oath, the purpose of invoking a name in this fashion is to rely upon the power and authority of the name to accomplish a work. Here, Paul invoked the name of Jesus instead of Yahweh in an appeal for unity in the church.

1:13–15. Paul wrote against factionalism in the Corinthian church. To emphasize unity, Paul appealed to the original, uniform practice of baptizing believers with the invocation of the name of Jesus (Hartman 1997, pp. 35, 60–62; Longenecker 1970, p. 44).⁵

1:24. Paul identified Christ as the source of divine power and wisdom like Yahweh in the OT.⁶

1:30–31. The OT describes righteousness, sanctification, and redemption as traits coming from Yahweh.⁷ Paul identified Jesus as the source of these attributes and admonished believers to glory only in Jesus. Here and in 2 Cor 10:17, he quoted Jer 9:24, which advocates boasting in Yahweh, applying an OT statement about Yahweh to Jesus without justification, commentary, or fear of controversy (Capes 1992, p. 134). The Septuagint no doubt facilitated this identification (Richardson 1994, p. 283). Instead of reading YHWH aloud in Hebrew, the Jewish people substituted the word *Adonai* (Lord), and when they translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, they substituted the word *Kyrios* (Lord) (Cullmann 1963, pp. 200–1).

2:8. This verse gives Jesus the divine title of “Lord of glory”, which is equivalent to Yahweh’s titles of “King of glory” and “God of glory” (Ps 24:8–10; 29:3).

2:10–16. This passage compares a human and his or her spirit to God and God’s Spirit. The spirit is the person’s inner life in disclosure and interaction with others. The spirit and the person are not merely equated, nor are they separated into two persons. Similarly, there is a conceptual distinction between God and God’s Spirit. God is transcendent, above and beyond God’s creation, while the Spirit is God as immanent, interacting with God’s creation. For Paul, “the Spirit is not a third entity, a power or influence or even a personal being”, but it “is God: the inner personal being of God” (Lampe 1977, p. 81). Verse 16 adapts Isa 40:13, equating the mind of Christ with the mind or spirit of Yahweh (Capes 1992, p. 139).

5:3–5. Paul used the name of Jesus as the NT equivalent of Yahweh to invoke divine power and authority and to execute divine judgment. The believers gather to worship in the name of the Lord Jesus and issue judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus (Hurtado 1999, p. 199).

6:11. The name of the Lord Jesus was a key element in the conversion of the Corinthians, functioning like the name of Yahweh in the Hebrew Scriptures. This verse probably refers to water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, as in 1:13–15 (Bousset 1970, pp. 130–31; Hartman 1997, p. 65; Longenecker 1970, p. 44).

6:14. This verse makes a distinction between God and Christ in the context of the resurrection. The title “God” communicates transcendence and omnipotence, while here, the divine title “Lord” identifies a human who died, rose again, and is a forerunner for other humans.

8:4–6. Paul appealed to the *Shema* (Deut 6:4) to establish that there is only one God. In Greek, the *Shema* uses both *theos* and *kyrios* as titles for Yahweh. Paul denied that pagan deities deserved to be called by these titles yet immediately gave the title of *kyrios* to Jesus, thereby attributing divine honor to him (Hurtado 1998, p. 130 n. 2). At the same time, Paul made a distinction between God and Christ. The Father is the transcendent God, while Jesus is a human who died, rose again, and became the exalted Lord. Somehow, they are identified as the one God of Israel. It is unlikely that Paul intended to describe Christ as a second deity, for then his detractors could have accused him of compromising the monotheistic text he cited. Instead, Paul presented Christ as the manifestation or revelation of the one God for the purpose of salvation. He used a dual reference to first underscore God's "creative work", and second, "his salvific work through Christ" (Richardson 1994, p. 297; see Dunn 2010, pp. 109–10; Talbert 2011, pp. 22–23). In Rom 11:36, Paul described God's threefold role in creation but placed Christ in the middle of that description, thereby attributing the divine creative work to Christ. According to James Dunn, it would be a misinterpretation to say that the man Jesus was present with God at creation, for then, we would have polytheism rather than monotheism, as the passage clearly intends. The passage actually uses personification to identify Jesus with divine Wisdom as "a way of expressing God's self-revelation", not a new ontological category or a new divine being (Dunn 2006, pp. 260–62). Later, in 1 Cor 10:26, which is still involved in the same discussion of eating food offered to idols, Paul quoted Ps 24:1. This OT verse identifies Yahweh as the creator and ruler of the world, and Paul applied it to Jesus. Contextually, then, in 1 Cor 8:4–6, we have a dual reference to the one God of Israel who is the creator but who has been revealed in a new way as the Lord Jesus Christ.

9:14. Paul quoted the Lord Jesus and equated the Lord's authority with that of God in Deut 25:4 and 1 Cor 9:9.

10:4. In Exod 17 and Num 20, God brought water from a rock to quench Israel's thirst. Paul drew a typological comparison to Christ as the means by which God quenches spiritual thirst today. Christ is "the Rock", a title for Yahweh (Deut 32:4, 15, 18).

10:9. In Num 21, the Israelites tested Yahweh, but Paul interpreted it as a test of Christ.

10:20–22. To teach Christians not to partake of food offered to idols, Paul applied OT texts about Yahweh to Jesus. Those who sacrificed to idols provoked Yahweh to jealousy (Deut 32:16–17, 21). Jesus assumes God's identity as the jealous Lord. Those who offered polluted food on the altar despised the table of Yahweh (Mal 1:7). The Lord Jesus presides over the Lord's Supper, the distinctive ritual meal of the early Christians, explicitly like God in the Hebrew Scriptures and like the pagan gods of other religions (Hurtado 1999, p. 50). The equivalent of OT sacrificial worship is given to Christ. Moreover, Paul equated Jesus with God in opposition to false gods.

10:26. Paul quoted Ps 24:1, a statement about Yahweh's ownership of the earth, and applied it to the Lord Jesus (Kramer 1966, p. 156; Capes 1992, p. 143). Jesus assumes Yahweh's role as the creator and ruler of the world.

12:2–3. The fundamental, distinguishing confession of Christians is "Jesus is Lord", corresponding to the confession of Yahweh in the Hebrew Scriptures.⁸ Those who deny the deity of Jesus are outside the Christian faith.

15:20–28. As a human, Christ is the divinely anointed king who was born as a son, died, was raised from the dead, and received authority to defeat all enemies of humanity. After completing this task, his final act as a son will be to deliver the kingdom to God and subject himself to God. While this description could imply a subordinate second person, such an interpretation would not fit the rest of the letter, which leads some scholars to explain the passage in terms of an "apocalyptic Christology". The focus is on "Christ as the messianic agent of God" and "God's agent for all of humanity and for the entire cosmos" (Lewis 1999, pp. 209–10; see Hurtado 1998, p. 96; Hay 1973, p. 61; Nicholson 2010, pp. 101, 103). It describes the end of Christ's rule as a human mediator but does not speak concerning his divine identity (Giles 2006, pp. 114, 199). Paul later described the one God as bringing believers into God's own presence (2 Cor 4:14). Thus, the God who is revealed

in Christ and who acts in Christ is ultimately “all in all”. Similarly, Phil 3:21 says Christ subjects all things to himself. In short, this passage describes the activity of the one God in Christ. It associates the title of Son with a temporal role for a specific purpose, which fits well with Paul’s other uses of this title. (See the discussion of 1 Cor 1:9.) The eternal God manifested himself in and as the human Son to give humans ultimate victory over sin, demonic powers, and death itself. Because of this work, in the end, God, the Father, reigns over the entire universe throughout eternity.

15:45. Christ is the divine Spirit who gives life, a work the OT ascribes exclusively to God (Gen 2:7; Ezek 37:14). “Paul identifies the exalted Jesus with the Spirit.... In the believer’s experience there is *no* distinction between Christ and Spirit” (Dunn 1998a, p. 165). “Jesus himself as the archetypal Adam ‘has become life-giving Spirit’. Jesus “is the incarnation of the very Spirit of God” (Barclay 1975, p. 157).

16:21–24. In his closing, Paul pronounced judgment on those who do not love Jesus, called on Jesus to return, commended his readers to the grace of Jesus, and gave them his love in Jesus. He used an untranslated Aramaic expression, *Marana tha*, which is a prayer or an invocation formula meaning, “O Lord, come!” For him to have included it in a Greek letter to gentiles, it must have been a standard worship phrase long before, so that the worship of Christ was characteristic of Aramaic-speaking Christians. Thus, devotion to Jesus and a high view of Jesus emerged very early (Hurtado 2005, pp. 36–37). *Marana tha* is a prayer rather than a confession (Longenecker 1970, pp. 121–22; Dunn 2010, p. 36). The confession that Jesus is the Lord was derived from the practice of prayer, not vice versa, with both originating in ancient Palestinian Christianity (Cullmann 1963, p. 215). God’s people were recipients of God’s grace or favor in the OT (e.g., Gen 6:8; Exod 33:13–17; Prov 3:34), as also reflected in the greeting. Yet here, Paul simply referred to grace from Jesus.

3. Significant Language in 2 Corinthians

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians primarily to explain his ministry and defend his apostolic authority (Gundry 1994, p. 370). This letter gives us a unique opportunity to observe an early Christian response to Paul’s teaching. If any concepts in 1 Corinthians were confusing or controversial, Paul’s opponents in Corinth would have objected. Then, we would see some correction, clarification, explanation, or justification here. Since we do not, Paul evidently articulated the accepted Christian understanding of Jesus (Hurtado 2005, p. 171).

1:3. God is not only the Father of Jesus but also the God of Jesus (Harris 2005, p. 142). (There is only one article for “God and Father”.) When distinguishing between the Father and Jesus, Paul thought of Jesus outside or beyond the identity of God. Jesus was a genuine human being who served God and yet in whom God dwelt; thus, he could be identified with God as the manifestation of God. The distancing language says something new about God’s identity. The Hebrew Scriptures identified God through covenant relationships: the God of Abraham, and the God of Israel. Now, God is revealed by God’s actions in and through Christ.

3:16. Jesus is the new-covenant, eschatological revelation of Yahweh. Just as Moses encountered Yahweh in Exod 34, believers encounter God in Christ when they “turn to the Lord”, which is a technical term for conversion to Jesus (Furnish 184, p. 211, citing Bultmann). (In Acts 9:34–35 and 11:20–21, it means to become a disciple of Jesus.) Based on Exod 34, the “Lord” of this passage is Yahweh, but since the context of 2 Cor 3 is Christological, the “Lord” must be Yahweh as revealed in Jesus Christ. To put it another way, the “Lord” is Jesus Christ, specifically Jesus as the revelation of Yahweh.

3:17. “The Lord is the Spirit”. Most commentators say Paul identified Jesus directly with the Holy Spirit (Dunn 1998a, p. 115; Gunkel 1979, p. 113; Bousset 1970, p. 160; Bultmann 1951, 1:124; Barth 2004, 4.2:129; Fitzmyer 1981, p. 638; Lampe 1977, pp. 62, 92, 117). The point is not to obliterate all distinction between Christ and the Spirit. Jesus was a historical person who was born, died, rose again, and dwells in heaven. In the OT and Second Temple Judaism, the Spirit is God’s presence, activity, power, and inner nature (Richardson 1994, p. 154). In 1 Cor 2:10–16, the Spirit is the inner life of God disclosed, God as

immanent, God interacting with God's creation. The Spirit is not a personality distinct from the one God, but the presence and active power of the eternal God. The point is that believers now encounter the resurrected and ascended Jesus through the Spirit—in and as the divine Spirit (Dunn 1975, p. 325; Dunn 1989, p. 146; Smedes 1983, pp. 41, 48, 52; Greenwood 1972, p. 471; Hanson 1982, p. 20). The Spirit of Christ is Christ as he is present and active among his people. Turning to the Lord Jesus, who is also the Spirit, brings the new covenant (vv. 3, 6, 8). The way that believers turn to the Lord under the new covenant is by receiving the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 12:13) (Barnett 1997, p. 200; Hooker 2003, p. 50).

3:18. Again, this verse directly identifies the Lord and the Spirit. The phrase κυρίου πνεύματος could be rendered as “the Spirit of the Lord” (NKJV) or “the Lord, who is the Spirit” (NIV). Most modern scholars and translations follow the Greek word order and choose the latter (Barclay 1975, pp. 191–92; Barnett 1997, p. 110; Furnish 1995, p. 202; Harris 2005, p. 317; Martin 1986, p. 57; see ESV, NLT, NASB, NRSV). The Lord of the old covenant, who came in the flesh as Jesus, is also the Spirit at work under the new covenant (Richardson 1994, p. 157; Dunn 1989, p. 144). Jesus bears the glory of Yahweh, lives in believers through his Spirit, and transforms believers into his image through the holiness of his Spirit (Hurtado 2003, p. 113; Dunn 1998b, p. 125; Richardson 1994, p. 172).

4:4–6. Jesus is the “image of God” (εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ) and the “glory of God” (δόξα τοῦ θεοῦ). These terms identify Jesus as the manifestation of the invisible God, namely God in human form, the visible revelation of God (Thrall 1994, 1:319; Dunn 1989, p. 115). (These phrases are probably equivalent to “in the form of God” (ἐν μορφῇ) in Phil 2:6.) Paul drew from the theophanies of the Hebrew Scriptures, such as the depiction of God in Ezek 1. He also employed the language of first-century Hellenistic Judaism, such as the use of “image” to describe the Logos and theophanies in Philo and to describe Wisdom in Wis. 7:24–26. The difference is that Paul presented Jesus as the supreme fulfilment of this concept (Grenz 2004, p. 618). Jesus becomes the one who manifests the character and identity of God. “The glorified Christ is the ultimate and eschatological revelation of God. There is nothing more that can or will be seen of God” (Barnett 1997, p. 219). In the OT, Second Temple Judaism, and early rabbinic tradition, God is an invisible spirit; no one can see God's essence, and when humans in Scripture saw God, they must have seen some image, such as a human form (Hanson 1982, pp. 3–6). (See John 1:18; 14:8–9 [implied]; 1 Tim 6:16.) The Dead Sea Scrolls describe God's face or God's teacher as shining upon God's people (1QH XII, 5–6, 27–28; 1QS II, 2–4; 1QSb=1Q28b IV, 25–28). Paul used similar language with a new fulfilment: God's glory is revealed through Christ, who is God's image or God's face (Martin 1986, p. 81). There is also a parallel in the Hellenistic ruler cults, in which the god-ruler was the “image of God”, meaning the visible manifestation of the invisible deity (H. Kleinknecht, “εἰκὼν”, *TDNT* 2:388–90; Bousset 1970, p. 206). Christ is “the visibility of God” or “the apprehensibility of God” (Hanson 1982, pp. 22–23). Christ reveals God in the greatest way possible in the visible realm (Hanson 1982, p. 89; Harris 2005, p. 331; Kim 1981, pp. 199, 219, 226; Martin 1986, p. 79). Christ is “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15) the way humans can see God. “The image of God” encompasses two related thoughts: a reflection of God (humanity), as in Gen 1:26–27, and God's self-revelation (deity), as in Col 1:15–19. Here, Paul used both concepts: Christ is the ideal human (2 Cor 3:18) and the self-revelation of God (2 Cor 4:6). Paul's predominant thought was that God's Spirit indwelt Jesus and was manifested in Jesus; thus, Jesus is God in human form and is to be worshiped as God (Martin 1986, p. 71).

Just as God spoke light into existence at creation, God speaks light into the hearts of believers to reveal God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:6). The God who manifested the divine glory at creation has now manifested the fullness of divine glory in Jesus Christ (Keener 2005, p. 174). Since Jesus is God's image, he is the revelation of God's glory to humans (Barnett 1997, p. 206; Hurtado 1999, p. 212). Glory is nothing less than the manifestation of God's presence (Thrall 1994, 1:246; Newman 1992, p. 163), so “God himself is present in Christ” (Barrett 1973, p. 132, quoting Jacob Jervell). The glory

of Christ (v. 4) is the glory of God's own self as revealed in or on the face of Christ (v. 6); the description thus identifies Christ with God.

When Paul had his vision on the Damascus road, he immediately understood it to be the image of God, but then he realized it was the glorified Christ radiating the very glory of God.⁹ According to his monotheistic faith, God could not share divine glory with anyone else (Isa 42:8). He concluded that the one God had revealed God's self in a new way as the fulfilment of prophecy for the last days. Paul's vision of the exalted, heavenly Jesus caused him to identify Jesus as the image and glory of God, the visible manifestation of Yahweh (Hurtado 1998, p. 118; Thrall 1994, 1:318). For this reason, he felt justified in applying to Jesus texts that clearly refer to Yahweh (Carson 2004, p. 399). Jesus was not merely a representative or a representation of God, but the fullness of God revealed in human flesh, as Paul expressed later in Col 1:19; 2:9 (Newman 1992, p. 183). Paul then applied the revelation of God's glory in Christ to the personal spiritual experience of Christians (Thrall 1994, 1:319; Martin 1986, pp. 224–25). Christ was the supreme image of God during his earthly life, and he is still the supreme image of God when he is known by faith (Hanson 1982, p. 89). Just as God revealed the divine glory to Paul in the face of Jesus Christ by a literal vision, now God reveals the divine glory to believers through an inward experience of Jesus (2 Cor 3:18; 4:6). The very God of creation is now active in salvation. In short, Paul's conversion experience caused him to redefine Yahweh in terms of Christ (Nicholson 2010, p. 60).

5:10. The Hebrew Scriptures identify Yahweh as the supreme judge,¹⁰ but here, Jesus is the judge of humans.

5:15–17. Here, Christ exhibits both human and divine functions. In v. 15, Christ died for humans. In v. 17, believers become a new creation in Christ, so Christ assumes the OT role of Yahweh as the creator (Isa 40:28; 43:15).

5:19. The opening words, ὡς ὅτι ("that is"), indicate that Paul quoted a traditional doctrinal confession (Furnish 1995, p. 334; Thrall 1994, 1:433). Based on the Greek grammar and context, the preferable translation of the main clause is as follows: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself" (Harris 2005, p. 441, which offers five detailed grammatical reasons). "It was only because God in all his fullness had chosen to dwell in Christ, only because there dwelt embodied in Christ the total plenitude of Deity (Col 2:9), that reconciliation was accomplished" (Harris, *NIDNTT* 3:1193). Because God was in Christ (2 Cor 5:19), the death of Christ for all (v. 14) is in fact God's act of reconciliation for the world (v. 18) (Barrett 1973, p. 177). The basic ideas of incarnation are present: the human identity of Christ (v. 15), the divine identity of Christ (v. 17), and the integration of these two concepts with the reconciling work of God in Christ (vv. 18–19).

8:9. To appeal for an offering, Paul stated the accepted Christian view of "our Lord Jesus Christ": he was rich but became poor for our sake. Paul probably quoted traditional, liturgical, or credal words, as indicated by the full name (Hanson 1982, p. 264; Martin 1986, p. 263; Furnish 1995, p. 417). This passage is typically seen as incarnational (Furnish 1995, p. 417; Hanson 1982, p. 263; Dunn 1998b, p. 291; Barnett 1997, pp. 407–8; Barrett 1973, p. 223; Harris 2005, p. 579). It assumes Christ's pre-existence, but not as a second divine being (Dunn 1998b, p. 291). Christ's sacrificial giving, not an ontological pre-existence, is the basis of the appeal.

12:8. Jewish monotheism required Paul to address prayer to Yahweh alone, but here, he prayed directly to the Lord Jesus. In the context of vindicating his apostolic authority, Paul exhibited confidence that none of the factions in Corinth would find his prayer innovative or objectionable.

12:9. Paul reported that Christ answered his prayer and gave him power. He quoted a prophetic utterance from Christ, much as the Hebrew prophets recited words from Yahweh. Here, Christ acts as a divine figure to give revelation, direction, grace, and strength to believers.

13:4. Paul described Christ in a dual way, much like 8:9: both weak and strong, both poor and rich, and capable of dying because of human weakness but living because of

God's power. This duality of weakness and power reveals the character of the one God manifested in Christ: God identified with weakness in the crucifixion, which demonstrates divine grace, while the resurrection demonstrates God's power (Barrett 1973, pp. 335–36).

13:13/14. Divine grace comes directly from Jesus, and the petition is made directly to him. While this phrase makes a threefold reference to deity in contrast to Paul's more typical singular or dual references, we should not read a developed trinitarianism back into this verse (Furnish 1995, p. 587; Hurtado 2010, pp. 45–47). Paul did not use the traditional trinitarian designations and order of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit but varied his language to highlight certain attributes and works of God. Karl Barth identified the focal point as the saving work of Jesus (Barth 2004, 4.2:766). Speaking of and to Jesus in this context is a strong indication of deity, "for it would be blasphemous for a monotheistic Jew to associate a mere mortal with God in a formal, religious salutation or benediction" (Harris 2005, p. 938; see Barrett 1973, p. 345). Indeed, we have here a genuine prayer to Christ, as we see from a comparison with similar statements in 1 Thess 3:11–13 and 2 Thess 2:15–17, which use singular verbs for God the Father and Jesus Christ (Hurtado 1998, p. 105; 1999, p. 105).

4. Conclusions

Paul spoke of Jesus in various ways: fundamentally as a human who died and rose again; sometimes as Yahweh, the one God of Israel; and somehow in distinction from God. He expressed this distinction by two sets of titles: God and Father versus Lord, Christ, and (occasionally) Son. Even so, he often spoke of Jesus Christ in terms otherwise reserved for deity. While affirming Christ to be a true human being, he thought of him as resurrected, glorified, dwelling in heaven, and manifesting all the characteristics and attributes of God. At the same time, he dwells spiritually in believers and gives them power for salvation, daily life, and ministry.

Paul identified Jesus as the Lord, using the title as the OT uses it of Yahweh, the one true God. In asserting the exclusive lordship of Jesus, Paul applied OT texts about Yahweh to the Lord Jesus, but in doing so, he did not perceive a violation of monotheism (Dunn 1998a, p. 16). Indeed, he and other early Christians made a direct connection between the OT worship of Yahweh and their own worship of Jesus (Hurtado 1999, pp. 198–99). They appropriated OT language about God to describe Jesus because only in this way could they communicate the full reality of their experience with Jesus. In doing so, they expressed that "to see Jesus in action ... is to see God in action" (Evans 2008, pp. 151–55) The Corinthian correspondence attributes deity to Jesus in various socio-rhetorical contexts as follows:

- Salutations: Identifying Jesus as a source of divine grace and peace (1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2);
- The invocation of Jesus as the Lord (1 Cor 1:2), paralleling the invocation of Yahweh and sacrificial worship to Yahweh in the Hebrew Scriptures (see also 1 Cor 10:21);
- Confession of Jesus as the Lord (1 Cor 8:6; 12:3; 2 Cor 4:5), paralleling the Jewish identification of Yahweh as the Lord (Adonai/Kyrios);
- A description of the eschatological judgment day of Yahweh as the day of the Lord Jesus (1 Cor 1:8; 2 Cor 1:14);
- Direct, personal prayer to Jesus (1 Cor 16:22; 2 Cor 12:8);
- Authoritative, prophetic utterance from the heavenly Jesus (2 Cor 12:9);
- Benedictions: Invoking Jesus as impartor of divine grace (1 Cor 16:23; 2 Cor 13:13/14);
- Some of Paul's deification rhetoric comes from pre-Pauline liturgy and thus reflects both early and widespread belief: 1 Cor 8:6; 16:22; 2 Cor 5:19; and 8:9 (as well as Phil 2:9–11; Col 1:15–20). In the foregoing usage, we see the "intensity of devotion to Jesus" (Evans 2008, p. 208). "Jewish monotheism is now to be expressed and confessed christologically" (Richardson 1994, pp. 255, 273, 285, and 288).

Paul did not simply equate Christ with God. He sometimes used dual references to distinguish Christ from God. Some suppose that Paul was inconsistent, compromised his earlier monotheism, or introduced a form of binitarianism. In some instances, however,

Paul clearly described God as acting through Christ. Moreover, when making a distinction between God and Christ, Paul spoke of Christ as a man outside the identity of God, and not as a second entity within God. (See the discussions of 1 Cor 6:14; 15:20–28; and 2 Cor 1:3.) The focus is on Christ as a true human rather than a second divine person in a binitarian model. Thus, Paul's main point is that under the new covenant, God acts in and through Christ as God's manifestation in human identity. Because of God's new manner of operation, God-language is needed to explain Christ and vice versa; moreover, God-language and Lord-language do not typically appear together, but alternately (Richardson 1994, pp. 268 and 281). The reason is that the title of Lord now refers primarily to Jesus Christ as the revelation of God. God-language refers primarily to God in transcendence, while Lord-language and Christ-language focus on the tangible human Christ.

Paul spoke of Jesus as participating in divine titles, attributes, and activities; thus, he did not think of Jesus merely as an exalted human or even an angelic being. For example, there is no indication he would have been comfortable speaking of Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Michael, or Gabriel in the terms he used of Jesus. Similarly, Paul's language does not easily lend itself to an Arian interpretation, for he saw Christ as the source of divine grace and the direct object of prayer. His portrait is not one of a second, subordinate being (whether divine or human) but of the one God acting in, through, and as Jesus Christ (Nicholson 2010, pp. 37–38, and 246). In later trinitarian explanations, God, Jesus, and the Spirit are three distinct, coequal persons. Paul did not enunciate an explicit concept of coequal persons or divine centers of consciousness, however. Such ideas would have been a significant modification of traditional Jewish monotheism and would have required an extensive explanation and defense. Instead, Paul saw Jesus as Yahweh in self-revelation and Yahweh in action (Greenwood 1972, p. 470).

Paul thought of Jesus as unique—as much more than an exalted human, prophet, patriarch, or angel. He did not describe the Godhead as a plurality of persons or an abstraction containing multiple persons. Rather, God is one and God is personal as in the OT. Jesus is the personal God manifested, expressed, revealed, or extended into human flesh. In this way, Jesus is equated to the one God, and yet as a human, there is a sense in which he is distinct from God. The distinction is not one of separate divine personhood, which was foreign to Jewish monotheism. Rather, the distinction is between God as ruling from heaven and God as revealed in and working through Jesus. Based on 2 Cor 5:19 and 8:9, we can say the distinction is between God transcendent and God incarnate. This terminology raises the question of precisely how the transcendent God can simultaneously be the incarnate God. The question is meaningful in the first-century rhetorical world because the same kind of language and thought appear in Greek myths and novels with reference to gods who appear as humans and humans who are recognized as the incarnated deity (Flinterman 1996, pp. 89–90). The Bible itself contains examples of such thought. (See Dan 11:36–37 [Antiochus Epiphanes]; John 10:33; Acts 14:11–15; 28:3–6; Rev 19:10.)

How should we understand Paul's various statements about Jesus? There are at least five options, possibly with some overlap, as follows:

1. *Paul's description of Jesus was not always consistent and perhaps was even contradictory.* While this hypothesis could account for some of the evidence, it is not sufficient to explain everything. Even when a writer seems self-contradictory, we still look for a central, coherent core of thought. If Paul's letters had been confusing or contradictory to pre-existing Jewish Christian beliefs, his opponents would have attacked him on this point, and he would have corrected, defended, or explained his Christological statements.

2. *Jesus was a human being only.* If there were only a few divine allusions, this solution might be plausible, but Paul identified Jesus with God too many times and in too many ways.

3. *Jesus was a subordinate divine being.* There is some language of subordination. If Jesus were the divine equivalent of an angel or exalted patriarch, then Jewish monotheism could be preserved—at least from the perspective of some noncanonical Jewish texts, although not from the perspective of late first-century and early second-century rabbis.

However, this hypothesis does not account for passages in which Paul equated Jesus with Yahweh, offered worship to Jesus, and ascribed to Jesus unique divine functions such as creation, rulership, and salvation. Instead, the subordinationistic language protects the authentic humanity of Jesus and prevents a bifurcation of God, as we see later in Marcion and Valentinus (the Gnostics).

4. *Jesus was a divine being separate or distinct from God but equal to God (binitarianism or trinitarianism).* A separate divine being would violate Jewish monotheism, but the Corinthian correspondence gives no indication of either Paul's supporters or opponents interpreting his words in this way. If Jesus were somehow distinct yet "included" within the Godhead, this concept would still be a significant modification or contradiction of first-century Jewish monotheism. It is unlikely that first-century Jewish Christians such as Paul were prepared to think in the implied philosophical categories. For instance, this view requires a shift from the OT analogy of God as a personal actor to a more abstract notion of God as a substance within which multiple personal actors can be included, preserving the oneness of God only at the impersonal level of essence.

5. *Jesus was the epiphany, manifestation, or incarnation of the one God; Jesus is God in self-revelation.* This view is consistent with Jewish monotheism, uses categories of thought available in both Jewish and Hellenistic circles, and fits Paul's use of dual language to distinguish Jesus from God according to his human identity. The concept of incarnation was a significant innovation in the context of Jewish monotheism, but it was prevalent in Greco-Roman culture. Paul's dual language does not require two divine persons or two divine centers of consciousness.¹¹ Instead, it describes one transcendent God who became incarnate. The distinction between Father and Son indicates both divine consciousness and human consciousness, but not two centers of consciousness within God's being.¹²

Throughout the Corinthian correspondence, Paul spoke of Jesus in terms that monotheistic Jewish people did not use of a mere human. Indeed, he attributed to Jesus many titles and works that the OT associates exclusively with Yahweh. Taken as a whole, the effect is to identify Jesus as the God of Israel. Jesus Christ was born as a true human, died, and rose again, yet he was also the human embodiment or personification of the one God. When believers under the new covenant receive the Holy Spirit, they receive Jesus Christ in Spirit form and thereby encounter the God of Israel in glorious self-revelation.

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Notes

¹ Adapted from David K. Bernard, *The Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ: Deification of Jesus in Early Christian Discourse*, JPentTSup 45 (Blandford Forum, UK: Deo, 2016), the published version of the DTh thesis obtained from the University of South Africa. See, especially, pp. 114–83. Bible quotations are from NRSV unless otherwise noted.

² E.g., Gen 4:26; 12:8; 13:4; 26:25; 1 Kgs 18:24; 2 Kgs 5:11; Ps 105:1; 116:17; and Isa 12:4–6.

³ Rom 1:3, 4, 9; 5:10; 8:3, 29, 32; 1 Cor 1:9; 15:28; 2 Cor 1:19; Gal 1:16; 2:20; 4:4, 6; Eph 4:13; Col 1:13; and 1 Thess 1:10.

⁴ E.g., Gen 31:49–53; Deut 21:5; 1 Sam 17:45; 20:42; 2 Sam 6:18; 1 Kgs 22:16; and 2 Kgs 2:24.

⁵ Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5; 22:16; Rom 6:3–4; 1 Cor 6:11; Gal 3:27; and Col 2:12.

⁶ Dan 2:2–23. Power: Exod 9:16; 15:3, 16; Num 11:23; and Deut 4:32–39. Wisdom: Job 11:5–9; 28:12–28; Prov 3:19–20; Isa 28:29; 33:3–6; Jer 10:12; and 51:14–15.

⁷ Righteousness: Jer 9:24; 23:5–6; and 33:16. Sanctification: Exod 31:13; Lev 20:8; 21:8; 22:32; Ezek 20:12; and 37:28. Redemption: Exod 6:2–8; Ps 130:7; and Micah 4:10.

⁸ See 1 Kgs 8:33–36; 2 Chr 6:24–27; Rom 10:9, 13; and Phil 2:9–11.

⁹ According to Acts 9:17; 22:14; and 26:19, he had a vision (Kim 1981, p. 233). Kim compared Paul's experience to Isaiah's vision of Yahweh and call in Isa 6, which John 12:41 interprets as a vision of Christ. Thus, Paul saw "the enthroned Christ" as Yahweh (Kim 1981, p. 94).

- ¹⁰ Gen 18:25; 1 Sam 2:10, 25; Ps 7:8; 50:6; 75:7; and Isa 33:22.
- ¹¹ Trinitarians disagree about whether God has one center of consciousness or three. For instance, Barth viewed God as “one personality”, while Moltmann viewed God as “three centers of conscious activity” (Metzler 2003, pp. 273 and 277).
- ¹² From a trinitarian perspective, Thomas Morris presented the “two-minds view of Christ”: as God incarnate, Christ is one person with two distinct ranges of consciousness, divine and human (Morris 1986).

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