

The Uniqueness of Christ¹

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To deal adequately with probably the most important, and certainly the most controversial, area of New Testament studies, namely Christology, in a single article is clearly impossible. I cannot hope to give a satisfactory discussion of even the most important divisions of the subject, still less to provide the detailed exegetical work which must underlie such discussion. All I can attempt is to offer some very general comments on the nature of the New Testament evidence and on the proper approach to it, together with some indications of areas which are likely to be of special importance for evangelical theology.

Such a paper cannot be in itself a contribution to today's Christological debate. It aims only to uncover some of the raw materials which must be used in that debate. The New Testament provides no explicit answers to questions about the union of the two natures in the one person of Christ, nor about the precise changes of condition involved in the incarnation. But it does offer the data out of which the answers must be constructed if they are to bear any relation to the historical reality which posed these questions in the first place. In the New Testament, and only there, can we hope to see where the whole dogmatic process began, in the life and teaching of the man whom his followers came to worship as God, and in the earliest constructions placed upon that life and teaching by those who were closest to him, and whose experience of him led them to the confession of the faith which today's debate is exploring. Quite apart from dogmatic views of the authority of the Bible, the evidence of the New Testament cannot be ignored, for this is where it all began, and without it there would be no Christology to debate!

The title of this paper refers to the 'uniqueness' of Christ, rather than only to his 'divinity'. The humanity of Jesus, so often merely assumed, must also be brought into the discussion before we can approach the crucial questions of Christological debate today. In evangelical discussion it is particularly important to include this aspect, because at least in popular piety there is a strong tendency to a form of unacknowledged docetism; a Jesus about whom the 'real' truth is that he is God, and whose humanity is a convenient temporary vehicle, but not to be taken very seriously when it comes to

discussing the possible limitations on his knowledge or his power, or the degree of his conditioning by the cultural milieu of first-century Palestine.

In most areas of theology, human rationality prefers an 'either/or' to a 'both/and', and Christology is no exception. It is undeniably more comfortable to focus on only one side of a tension which strains human logic, and perhaps it is inevitable that human language must so proceed if it is to say anything intelligible. The danger comes when the statement of one side of the tension is taken to exclude the other; as when popular piety cannot attribute real human emotions and choices to its divine Jesus, or when the contemporary theologian finds it impossible to put any real meaning into talk of the divinity of his truly human Jesus. But if theology is really *theology* (God-study) it is not *prima facie* likely that it will be restricted to the bounds of normal human experience, or of the logic which is the codification of that experience. If it is true that, in Christ, God became man without ceasing to be God, there is little point in trying to explain the consequences in terms of a logical 'either/or'. This paper tries, therefore, to keep in mind the possibility of a 'both/and'.

1 The humanity of Jesus

There is no need to spend time in demonstrating from the New Testament that in general terms Jesus lived a truly human life. No one seriously disputes, or is unaware, that he was born in the normal way (irrespective of the means of his *conception*), grew through childhood to maturity, was hungry and thirsty, ate, drank, became tired and slept, worked, joked, laughed, wept, and eventually died a real and horrible death in real agony of soul and body. Some Christians are less happy in acknowledging Jesus' human emotions; but again the New Testament is clear in attributing to him joy, sorrow, compassion, love, surprise, indignation, anger; and these emotions are evoked in the course of normal human relationships and encounters.

In addition to the emotional disturbance caused by human relationships (e.g. John 11:3, 5, 33, 35f., 38), the gospels show us that Jesus' special mission brought him into severe emotional stress. It is impossible to miss this note in sayings like John 12:27, and in the synoptic accounts of the prayer in Gethsemane, and it would be hard to see the cry of dereliction on the cross as a dispassionate theological statement. The New Testament does not present a Jesus who strode untroubled towards his destined end, but one who, fully aware that his mission must be one of suffering, nonetheless experienced real and agonizing conflict and temptation in accepting it; one who, in the words of Hebrews, 'learned obedience through what he suffered' (Heb. 5:7-9).

The fact of Jesus' temptation, also stressed by Hebrews (2:18; 4:15), poses a similar problem. The 'temptations' recorded in the

gospels are not so much inducements to break the moral law of God, but rather explorations of the strength of the relationship between Father and Son ('If you are the son of God...')—questions which were to culminate in the real possibility of a rift between God's will and Jesus' obedience in Gethsemane. It was the price of incarnation.

This is an area in which some Christians find the language of the New Testament hard to accept. The 'either/or' approach requires that a divine Jesus should not be the victim of the frailties and uncertainties which afflict the rest of us in our fumbling and often unwilling following of the will of God. It cannot accept such a real disjunction between the Father's will and the Son's obedience. But this is the language the New Testament uses, and it is proper for us as evangelicals to take it seriously, even if it does force us towards an unwelcome 'both/and'.

The problem becomes more acute in the area of Jesus' knowledge. It is undeniable, of course, that the gospels present Jesus as endowed with, and at least on occasions using, a supernatural awareness of people and of circumstances, including a knowledge of future events; there is no need to provide documentation of this well-known feature. But it is equally true that there were things of which the Jesus of the gospels was ignorant. The one explicit statement of his ignorance relates to the 'day and hour' of the *parousia* (Mark 13:32). That is a basic datum which, however inconvenient, must be taken into account in any biblical Christology. Sometimes Jesus asked factual questions of the sort which would apparently have been pointless if he already knew the answer (e.g. Mark 5:30-33; 6:38; 9:21). These were apparently things which he had to learn, and learning seems to be an essential part of human existence. It is not easy to envisage the baby Jesus as equipped with all factual knowledge, and indeed Luke tells us explicitly that Jesus 'increased in wisdom' (Luke 2:52, and cf. vv. 46ff. for his learning). So the New Testament compels the dogmatician to take into his scheme a Jesus who had to ask questions and learn facts, and who on at least one major matter professed himself ignorant.

In language, culture, and historical circumstance, Jesus was a Palestinian Jew of the first century. His life-style, though in some ways unique, was that of an itinerant teacher not unlike some of the 'charismatic rabbis' of that period.² This fact is no problem for Christian belief in the incarnation: indeed it is essential to it. But it brings with it the question of whether Jesus' cultural distance from today's world means that some aspects of his life and teaching are at best irrelevant and at worst misleading for contemporary Christians. Thus it is often stated that Jesus shared the assumptions of his time on such diverse matters as the authorship of Old Testament books or the existence and activity of demons—assumptions which are at variance with those current in western culture today. Here the confession of

Jesus' limited knowledge is carried over to the assertion that either he was in error, or he deliberately accommodated himself to the erroneous ideas of his contemporaries. It is, then, crucial for those engaged in Christological debate to decide how far the cultural conditioning, necessarily involved in a real incarnation, itself necessarily implies not only ignorance but actual error. To this we shall return in our final section.

The biblical portrait of Jesus is of a real man, with real emotions and human reactions, who had to learn obedience to the will of God and did not find it easy, whose knowledge was limited, and who lived and spoke as a first-century Palestinian Jew. All this belongs to the essential raw materials of a Christology which claims to be based on the evidence of the New Testament.

And that is where an either/or Christology so often stops. Given such evidence of the real manhood and human limitations of Jesus, what need is there to enquire into his alleged divinity? It is plainly excluded, and must be attributed to pious mythology rather than to any objective evidence about the real Jesus. But the New Testament, which insists so firmly on his real humanity, will not allow such an either/or. The Jesus of the gospels, truly human as he was, was certainly not ordinary, and there are features in the portrait which suggest strongly that to speak of him as God—however long it may have taken—was, in C. F. D. Moule's terminology, not an 'evolution' under the influence of mythological ideas in other circles, but a 'development' of something which was inherent in the New Testament witness from the beginning.³ To the evidence for this thesis we now turn.

2 The divinity of Jesus

a) Explicit statements of Jesus' divinity

Christians who have long been familiar with orthodox Christology are sometimes surprised to discover on how few occasions the New Testament explicitly calls Jesus 'God'. There are, of course, the classic Christological passages (such as Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20 [cf. 2:9]; Heb. 1:2-4) which speak of his relationship to God in terms which allow no other interpretation, but even these passages avoid the bald statement that he *is* God. The only such deliberately Christological passage which takes this step is John 1:1-18 (see verses 1 and 18, assuming the reading *theos* in the latter⁴), which, with the climactic confession of Thomas in John 20:28, forms the framework for the book that, more than any other in the New Testament, explores the relationship of Jesus with the Father which makes such explicit statements ultimately inevitable.

Apart from these statements in John, explicit attributions of divinity to Jesus are confined to a few incidental phrases, mostly in

the later writings of the New Testament, and none of them (except perhaps Heb. 1:8) in the context of Christological discussion. We cannot discuss them in detail,⁵ but the more probable cases are as follows: Acts 20:28, 'the church of God which he purchased with his own blood'; Romans 9:5, 'Christ... who is over all God blessed for ever'; 2 Thessalonians 1:12, 'the grace of our God and Lord Jesus Christ'; Titus 2:13, 'our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ'; Hebrews 1:8, 'To the Son (he says), "Your throne, O God, is for ever"'; 2 Peter 1:1, 'our God and Saviour Jesus Christ'; 1 John 5:20, 'his son Jesus Christ. This is the true God'.

I refer to these as 'the more probable cases',⁶ because it is remarkable that in none of them is there complete agreement that Jesus is in fact referred to as God. In almost every case, the Greek syntax can be construed in a sense which avoids this attribution. Even in 1 John 5:20, where the syntax is clear, there are several different antecedents suggested for the pronoun *houtos*. And in most of them there are significant textual variants which testify to early uncertainty over such unfamiliar expressions.

These uncertainties of syntax and text are a graphic illustration of the fact which is already clear from the small number of such references, namely, that it did not come easily to most of the New Testament writers to speak of Jesus explicitly as God. Such language was apparently almost too daring, and still caused some embarrassment to the early copyists of the New Testament documents (cf. also the variants in the text of John 1:18).

This fact is sometimes used as an argument against the divinity of Christ as a New Testament theme. It occurs so seldom, and with such uncertainty, we are told, that clearly these passages are out of tune with the rest of the New Testament, and represent an alien mythological idea imposed on the simple portrait of Jesus, the man of God.

b) Implicit evidence for the worship of Jesus

i) Introduction There is another explanation which accords more closely with the facts of what we actually find in the New Testament, and this is that these explicit attributions of divinity to Christ are the culmination, delayed but inevitable, of an understanding of the person of Jesus which is there developing throughout the New Testament. It is, by and large, only in the later writings that it comes explicitly to the surface, but the idea was there with increasing force from the beginning. It is this explanation which I want to explore now.

First, a very obvious but very important point must be stated. *The earliest Christians were Jews*, and it was within a Jewish milieu that the formative thinking of the Christian church took place. Perhaps only those who have lived in a non-Christian monotheistic culture

(e.g. Islamic) can fully appreciate the significance of this fact. The Jew was brought up from childhood in the uncompromising insistence that there is only one God, and that to offer divine worship to any being other than Yahweh is unthinkably offensive, the most fundamental of all sins. It was in this insistence that Judaism found its distinctiveness and its coherence. Its dogmatic monotheism was its greatest glory. So for a Jew to speak of a man as God, or to attribute divine powers and offer worship to him, was as impossible as for a Muslim today to hear with equanimity that Jesus is the Son of God.

It is surely no wonder, then, that the explicit attribution of divinity to Jesus came slowly and reluctantly; the wonder is that it came at all within this milieu. Nor is it surprising that we find a few passages in the New Testament drawing a distinction between Jesus and God which Christian orthodoxy sometimes finds uncomfortable, such as Mark 10:18; John 17:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; 1 Tim. 2:5. What is remarkable is that these passages are few, and, as we shall see, do not reflect an overall tendency in early Christian thought; it is the general absence of such explicit distinctions which is more typical of the New Testament.

It was *Jews*, then—despite all their race's ingrained hostility to such language—who first started speaking and thinking of Jesus in divine terms, however hard they may have found it to say this in so many words. Such a radical change of outlook did not happen by accident, nor as a result of wishful thinking. It must have been caused by an overwhelming weight of facts and experience, before which even the most hallowed conventions of religious language must ultimately give way. It is in the evidence for this underlying compulsion, rather than in the eventual explicit God-language, that the New Testament's most impressive witness to the divinity of Jesus is found.

The evidence is varied in character. It includes the attribution to Jesus of divine functions and attributes, the use of titles with divine implications, the use of Old Testament texts about God as if they apply to Jesus, the coupling of Jesus and the Father in a way which makes their names apparently interchangeable, prayer to Jesus, and ultimately formal worship of him. These and other traits occur in the New Testament in an untidy profusion which makes systematic presentation difficult. They testify not to a carefully formulated doctrine, logically applied to life and worship, but to the gradual development of a consciousness of the more-than-human significance of Jesus; a consciousness born more of spiritual experience than of logical deduction, but one which from the time when Jesus was visibly present among his disciples could never be denied, and grew inexorably until John could proclaim clearly 'The Word was God'.

In the brief compass that this paper allows I can only hint at the extent of this evidence, but I hope a crude summary, in the form of a

roughly chronological development, will indicate something of the cumulative force of this informal evidence, compared with which the formal 'Jesus-is-God' language is no more than the icing on the cake.

ii) *The ministry of Jesus* The essential basis for the New Testament writers' perception of the significance of Jesus must, of course, be what Jesus himself said and did.

Now it is obvious that Jesus did not go about Palestine proclaiming himself to be God, nor did his disciples during his lifetime offer him formal worship as God. In the situation of first-century Judaism this would be unthinkable, and the modern Christian exegete must be very cautious in reading divine worship into the normally polite address *kyrie* ('Lord')⁷ or the conventional respect or appeal implied in the verb *proskynein* (usually 'worship')⁸ when he finds them in the gospel narrative, however much deeper meaning these terms may have gained by the time the evangelists recorded the incidents. Jesus undoubtedly appeared to his contemporaries as a man among men.

But he did not appear, nor did he present himself, as an *ordinary* man. There can be no doubt that he spoke of himself as the Son of God and referred to God as 'Father' (note the quite new use of 'Abba' in prayer, Mark 14:36)⁹ in a way which implied a unique relationship between himself and the Father. Matthew 11:25-27 stands out in the synoptic gospels as the most far-reaching expression of this relationship;¹⁰ but before it is on that account dismissed as later Christian theologizing,¹¹ the question must be raised of what lesser meaning could plausibly be given to Jesus' use of Son-of-God language to refer to himself in a culture (Palestinian Judaism) which was not in the habit of referring to individuals as sons of God,¹² still less of allowing individuals so to refer to themselves. The scandal caused by his language, according to John's account (5:17f; 10:29-39, etc.), rings true to the inevitable implications of such language in that setting. Individual sayings may be disputed, but it would take a very radical criticism to eliminate altogether Jesus' claim to a special relationship between himself and his Father,¹³ and the implications of that claim must rank high among the evidence for his more-than-human status.

Other aspects of Jesus' language reinforce this evidence. His claim to perform the divine function of forgiving sins was deliberately pursued in the face of the suggestion of blasphemy (Mark 2:1-12). He presented himself as the ultimate arbiter of men's destiny in Matthew 7:21-23, and, in the remarkable judgement scene of Matthew 25:31ff., he not only placed himself in the divine role of judge, but also described himself as the king, using language to describe his eschatological appearance which clearly echoes the theophanic language of e.g. Daniel 7:9f; Joel 3:1-12 (Heb. 4:1-12); and Zechariah 14:5.¹⁴

This last passage is an outstanding example of a remarkable trait in

Jesus' teaching: the use of Old Testament language about God as if it applied to himself. I have tried to set this out in more detail elsewhere¹⁵ but some examples would be the use of Psalm 8 (the praise of God) in Matthew 21:16 (the praise of Jesus by the children); the mission to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10), drawn apparently from the divine shepherd of Ezekiel 34:16, 22; the stone of stumbling (Isa. 8:14f) in Luke 20:18a; and the repeated application to John the Baptist of the prophecies of Malachi 3:1; 4:5f (Heb. 3:23f.), where the messenger/Elijah is the forerunner of *God's* coming to judgement. No less remarkable is the assertion of the indestructibility of Jesus' words (Mark 13:31) when compared with what is said of God's word in Isaiah 40:8. It is interesting, too, to notice how often the parables of Jesus apply apparently to Jesus himself a figure used prominently for God in the Old Testament: such as shepherd, sower, bridegroom, lord, and king.¹⁶

Such tendencies of language (and more could and should be added if time allowed) are the more impressive because they are so unobtrusive. They are evidence, not of a crusade by Jesus to establish his claim to a special status, but of an assumption of a special relationship with God which does not need to be defended. It is a staggering assumption in the setting of first-century Judaism, and yet it pervades much of the teaching and activity of Jesus. A critical approach to Jesus' sayings would need to be designed with the specific intention of excluding all such claims if it was to succeed in dismissing all such language from the authentic teaching of Jesus, and even then it would not have an easy task!

I have concentrated on Jesus' *sayings*, because the evidence of verbal claims, explicit or assumed, is less ambiguous. I am cautious of an apologetic which finds in Jesus' *acts*, and particularly in his miracles, clear evidence of his divinity. A miracle is not in itself proof of the divinity of the one who performs it, for in that case, many of the disciples of Jesus in the New Testament and since must also be divine. Nor should we forget the very considerable numbers of miracles—many of them of quite similar character—attributed to other great and godly men of the period, whether pagan or Jewish. The presence of supernatural power, even if granted to be divine, is not proof of the divinity of the person through whom it operates. Even the supreme miracle of the resurrection is presented in the New Testament as the evidence of God's power and of his acceptance of Jesus, rather than as Jesus' act of divine power. Jesus' miracles are certainly intended to be read as signs of his messianic authority, even of his 'glory' (John 2:11), but they are not presented in the New Testament as evidence for his divinity. They are the responses of Jesus' *exousia* to the needs of those around him. Of course they are consonant with his personal divinity, and the character and concentration of miracles in Jesus' ministry can fairly claim to be unique.

But a faith based on the evidence of miracles is not encouraged in the New Testament (e.g. John 2:23-25; 4:48; 6:26-29; 20:29).¹⁷

The evidence of the sayings, then, is a safer starting-point. But when the extraordinary *exousia* assumed in the sayings, and recognized in his teachings by his hearers (e.g. Matt. 7:28f), is seen to be supported by the *exousia* of his deeds, then it is hardly surprising to find his disciples forced to ask: 'Who is this?'. If, during his ministry, they did not reach the point of making open confession of his divinity—and this, as we have seen, is hardly surprising—the foundations were laid in their experience for an awareness of his more-than-human character, which was to break out with remarkable speed into the worship of Jesus not very long after his death and resurrection.

iii) *Acts* The very selective account of the earliest Christian church given in Acts does not of course engage in direct discussion of the divinity of Jesus. But Luke's presentation of the first Christian preaching shows the direction in which their understanding of Jesus was developing. He is already seen as the saviour (4:12), the author of life (3:15; 5:31), the giver of the Spirit (2:33), the giver of repentance and forgiveness (5:31), and the coming judge (10:42; 17:31).

But the title in which, above all, this earliest Christology is focused is *Kyrios* ('Lord'). The address to Jesus as *kyrie* during his ministry need have been no more than politeness, but the resurrection has now marked him out as in a unique sense *Kyrios* (2:36). It is well known, of course, that *ho Kyrios* is the regular LXX version for the divine name, and that therefore its implications, when applied as a title to an individual in a Jewish milieu, are hardly less startling than those of *theos* itself. In the very speech in which the declaration of 2:36 is made, the title is used four times in LXX quotations with reference to God. It was not long before New Testament Christians were using the title so indiscriminately—sometimes of Jesus and sometimes of God the Father—that often it is impossible to tell which is intended; it almost seems that, like many Christians in their use of 'the Lord' today, they did not see any practical difference. This process had not, of course, gone so far in the early preaching in Acts, but it is not hard to see the process beginning in the uses of *Kyrios* from Acts 2 onwards.

Already, in the early chapters of Acts, we see Stephen at his martyrdom praying to Jesus, and hear Ananias describing Christians as those 'who call upon thy name' (9:14), this phrase occurring in a prayer to *ho Kyrios*, who is shown by this clause and by verse 17 to be Jesus. Thus within a very short time of his death and resurrection, Christians were praying to Jesus and could be identified as those who call on his name.

iv) *Paul* Prayer to Jesus, which we have seen already developing in the earliest period of the church's life, has become so normal by

the time of Paul's letters that he can define Christians as 'those who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Cor 1:2, a regular Old Testament formula for prayer to God), and we find him using an Aramaic formula of prayer to Jesus—*Maranatha*, 'Our Lord, come' (1 Cor. 16:22). For a formula of the Aramaic-speaking church to be so widely known that it could be used without explanation in a letter to Corinth, it must have been already a venerable tradition; so that prayer to Jesus was clearly an accepted pattern long before Paul wrote, and the Christological implications of this are obvious. As Moule drily comments, 'One does not call upon a mere Rabbi, after his death, to come.'¹⁸

It is therefore natural that the worshipping congregations are the churches of *Christ* (Rom. 16:16), and he is the head of the church (Eph. 1:22f; 5:23). Baptism is *into Christ*, and the main act of worship is *the Lord's* supper.

Jesus has become, then, the focus of the faith and obedience of Christians, and they now find their unity and their whole religious experience 'in Christ'. The famous and much-discussed phrase, which occurs some eighty times in the Pauline letters, testifies in at least some of its uses to a sense of identification with, and indeed incorporation into, Christ which is reflected in many other ways in Paul's language about 'dying with' Christ, Christ 'living in' me, the church as Christ's body, and so on. This sort of language is not easy to analyse, but it indicates a view of the risen Christ as more than a mere individual; as not only the object of faith and worship, but the one who incorporates in himself those who belong to him, and from whom they derive their spiritual life. Such language indicates a superhuman person, and when used by a Jew it is hard to see how it could be applied to anyone other than God.

So it is not surprising to find in Paul's letters the frequent coupling together of the names of God and of Jesus Christ as the source of spiritual blessing. Thus all but two of the Pauline letters begin with the greeting, 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ', and such prayers as 1 Thessalonians 3:11 and 2 Thessalonians 2:16 expect God and Christ together to meet the Christians' needs.

Divine functions are attributed sometimes to God, sometimes to Christ; this is true for instance of revelation, forgiveness, judgement and vengeance. It appears as if it really did not matter to Paul which name he used. Thus we read in his letters of both 'the gospel of God' and 'the gospel of Christ', 'the church of God' and 'the church of Christ', 'the kingdom of God', 'the kingdom of his Son' and 'the kingdom of Christ and of God', and even 'the Spirit of God' and 'the Spirit of Christ'. God and Christ have become almost interchangeable in Paul's mind as the focus of Christian faith and the source of spiritual blessing.

To us, with many centuries of familiarity with Christian terminology, this may not seem so remarkable. But here was a Pharisaic Jew, only some twenty-five years after the death of Jesus as a blasphemer, habitually placing him on a level with God as if there were no difference! What a wealth of development in thought and experience must lie behind such a radical conversion of language!

Perhaps even more amazing is Paul's view of Christ as the agent in creation. Creation is in the Old Testament an exclusively divine activity; the subject of the verb *bara'* is always God. Yet Paul can speak in Colossians 1:16f. of Christ as the one 'through whom' everything has come to be (cf. 1 Cor. 8:6), in words which are closely similar to what he says of God in Romans 11:36. He may well have been influenced here by Jewish ideas of Wisdom as God's agent in creation, but the striking fact remains that he is attributing to the recently crucified carpenter of Nazareth a role in the original creation of the world.

v) *Later New Testament writings* We have looked only at the evidence for the earlier stage of the development of the church in the first century, but already we have seen the growth of an attitude of worship towards Jesus which made it inevitable that more and more explicit divine language should be applied to him. Such language must necessitate careful reflection on who Jesus was, leading even within Paul's letters to the classic Christological statements of Philippians 2:6-11 and Colossians 1:15-20; 2:9. A study of the remaining New Testament writings would reveal the further development of this process into the formal presentations of the divinity of Christ in John 1:1-18 and Hebrews 1:1-3. We would see, too, the increasing concentration on the idea of Christ's pre-existence, raised by Paul's statement of his role in creation. And we would see the growth of the trinitarian language which emerges in so many incidental ways in the New Testament, achieving formal presentation in the baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19, but underlying the forms of expression chosen in a wide variety of contexts. It is in the context of this sort of thinking that the explicit attributions of divinity to Jesus which we discussed earlier could find a place, and from that point there was a natural development to the uninhibited use of divine language about Jesus by Ignatius and the other writers of the post-apostolic church.

We cannot survey all the material in this article, but the point I want to make is that this high Christology was not something imposed by Christian devotion on an originally purely human Jesus, but rather was the inevitable development of a response to Jesus which had been there from the beginning; the recognition that in him they had met with God. It was this recognition, expressed from the earliest post-resurrection period in prayer and worship offered to Jesus, which necessitated the development of more formal Christological,

and, in due course, trinitarian language; for you cannot worship a man who himself worshipped God, without asking what this means for your monotheistic theology. It is this worship of Jesus, with the experience of his religious significance on which it is based, which is the root of New Testament Christology, and which reaches its triumphant climax in the book of Revelation in the vision of all heaven joining to worship the Lamb who was slain, and all creation offering homage jointly 'to him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb' (5:13), a couple who are intriguingly referred to in Revelation 22:3f. by singular pronouns!

c) Is New Testament Christology functional?

A sharp distinction is sometimes drawn between an 'ontological' and a 'functional' Christology: that is, on the one hand, a Christology which concentrates on the question 'Who is Jesus?' in terms of his eternal being and his relationship with the Father; and, on the other hand, a Christology which focuses on the *work* of Christ, and builds its understanding of who he is from the experience of what he has done. This distinction corresponds roughly to the current tendency to contrast Christologies which are constructed respectively 'from above' and 'from below'. Which of these Christologies do we find in the New Testament?

What we have seen of the development of the understanding of Jesus' more-than-human nature, through the church's experience of his teaching and of his saving work after the resurrection, points strongly to a functional origin for New Testament Christology. (I am talking in this section, of course, not of Jesus' own self-understanding but of the process by which his followers came to share it.) It was as men met with Jesus, and met with God in and through him, that they came to the realization of who he was. There was no ready-made trinitarian scheme from which they could deduce his divinity, nor any existing pattern which made incarnational language natural to them. On the contrary, we find evidence of some reluctance to reach, or at least to express openly, the ontological conclusions to which their experience gradually compelled them. Or, to put it another way, worship preceded Christological formulation, Christians found themselves led to think and speak of Jesus in divine terms, or at least in terms which implied divinity, and to pray to him and worship him, and *therefore*, as a result of this 'functional' approach, were obliged to think out and express in ever more 'ontological' terms what was his relationship with the Father.

The New Testament gives evidence, then, of a natural progression from functional to ontological thinking and language. Historically, Christology began with the dawning awareness that Jesus was more than just a man of God, and developed under the pressure to provide an explanation of the startling facts which they knew through their

experience to be true—until it reached the point of formal ontological Christology. In this, New Testament Christology is typical of the process by which man is led to the perception of God's revealed truth. It is seldom delivered to him fully formed, and indeed, if it were, he would be hard put to it to make any sense of it. But God comes to him in the familiar experiences of life, and by gradually transcending those experiences leads him to recognize truth which transcends the familiar and the secular. Indeed, that is surely what incarnation is about—God entering into real human life and experience—and this applies as much to the process by which this amazing truth is perceived as to the event itself.

I am not arguing, then, for a functional *as opposed to* an ontological Christology in the New Testament, but rather for a *progression* from the functional to the ontological. What began in experience and worship, led on very naturally and properly to doctrinal formulation. And the ontological formulation is there in the New Testament: in the classic Christological passages of Philippians 2, Colossians 1, Hebrews 1, and especially John 1, and in the eventual willingness openly to call Jesus 'God'. This is the proper, indeed the inevitable, outcome of the more functional thinking of the earlier period. It is not the evolution of a new form, but the result of a continuous and unavoidable development of truths which were present from the very beginning of Christian experience in the ministry of Jesus.

On the question whether New Testament Christology is functional or ontological, constructed 'from below' or 'from above', I maintain, then, that the answer must be to refuse the 'either/or' and insist here also on a 'both/and'. They are not opposites; rather each requires the other.

3 What does incarnation imply?

We have considered the nature of the New Testament evidence, firstly for the true humanity of Jesus, and secondly for his divinity, and we have seen that both are clearly taught there. Jesus was a man, and Jesus is God. To state the two truths side by side is to raise immediately the central problem of Christology: how can one person be both man and God; indeed what does it mean to say of a single individual that he is fully human and yet also divine? The New Testament poses the problem, and the Christological controversies of the following centuries set about answering it, until the Council of Chalcedon gave the definitive statement.

But it is a remarkable fact, and it is at least one of the reasons why Christians today debate how useful the Chalcedonian definition really was, that in fact Chalcedon did not produce an *answer*, but rather a refined statement of the problem. It did rule out several unacceptable answers, and in so doing performed a necessary and valuable service;

but after all the careful qualifications of the Chalcedonian definition, we are still left with the paradox of one person who was both God and man. Even Chalcedon does not tell us *how* this could be.

Does the New Testament then offer any help in the search for an answer to this question? It affirms clearly, as we have seen, both the humanity and the divinity of Jesus. But it also goes further and speaks of the union of the two in terms of *God becoming man*: most unmistakably in John 1:14; but also in such passages as John 17:5; Romans 8:3; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Galatians 4:4; and Hebrews 2:9-18; 10:5ff., which speak of the Son of God being sent into human life, or of a 'descent' from heaven to earth, from divine glory to humble humanity. But the passage which seems to come closest to spelling out what this means is Philippians 2:6-11, which traces Jesus' progress from 'the form of God' and 'equality with God', through birth in human, servant form, back to exaltation and glory. This pattern of descent and ascent, of previous glory leading to temporary humiliation and thus back to glory, is reflected in many ways in the thought of different New Testament writers.

But there is one phrase in Philippians 2:7 which has seemed to many to offer a fuller explanation of what was involved: *heauton ekenōsen*, 'he emptied himself'. Coming after the mention of Jesus' previous existence 'in the form of God', yet not grasping at or hanging on to 'equality with God', and before the mention of his human birth, this phrase holds out the hope of some insight into *how* the transition could be effected. It has thus become the focus of the various Christological viewpoints which are called 'kenotic', which see the key to Christology in the voluntary surrender by God the Son, for the period of his incarnation, of those attributes of divinity which are felt to be incompatible with truly human existence.

Which attributes were surrendered is differently assessed from one kenotic theory to another, the variation depending not so much on the exegesis of Philippians 2:7 as on the interpreter's understanding of what it means to be human. Indeed, exegesis of Philippians 2:7 as such plays very little part in kenotic Christology, the text being used rather as a convenient peg on which to hang a theory derived from other considerations, than as itself the source of the doctrine. The verb *ekenōsen* here need refer to no more than the surrender of the glory and 'status' of heaven, for the context is an ethical exhortation not to cling to privilege and self-esteem.¹⁹ In fact, despite its etymology, *kenoun* in the New Testament (where all uses are by Paul) elsewhere always refer to the removal of validity or importance, not of any identifiable 'content'.²⁰ 'He made himself insignificant' would seem to be the Pauline sense of the phrase.

But if kenotic Christologies cannot claim to be derived from a convincing exegesis of the phrase in Philippians 2:7 from which they derive their name, they cannot on that account be dismissed from

consideration. For here at least is a serious attempt to explain how the apparently incompatible qualities of God and man can be predicated of one individual, i.e. to elucidate the paradox with which the New Testament presents us.

I believe that kenotic theories are likely to prove one of the most important areas for evangelicals to consider in today's Christological debates. Whether or not they openly espouse the term 'kenosis', a number of evangelicals are finding in this kind of belief a solution to some of the problems raised by modern scientific or critical views when compared with the teaching of Jesus. For if it can be accepted as New Testament doctrine that the Son 'emptied himself' of omniscience, among other divine attributes, the way is apparently open to believe that he shared the accepted ideas of his day which have now been shown to be wrong, and that therefore there is no need for the modern Christian to accept what he said on such culturally-conditioned issues as binding.

Many scholars today would have to confess to some unease, if not embarrassment, in treating as normative Jesus' apparent views on the authorship and interpretation of Old Testament books (e.g. David as the author of Psalm 110, or Jonah as a historical account of a real person), or his reported exegesis of Psalm 82 in John 10:34ff, or his uncritical acceptance of the reality of demon-possession, particularly in cases where the symptoms suggest identifiable medical complaints. If these problems can be solved at a stroke by the argument that on these issues Jesus shared the mistaken ideas of his time, having shed his divine omniscience as the price of incarnation, the appeal of such a course is quite understandable. Even more: if one shares the prevalent belief among non-evangelical scholars that Jesus was wrong about the date of his *parousia*, it is convenient to be able to set aside the Christological difficulty of a divine person who could make mistakes, by invoking a kenotic view. It is, I suspect, as much the attraction of such explanations, as the intrinsic force of kenotic theories in themselves, which accounts for the popularity of these theories. Were earlier evangelicals, then, wrong in their traditional insistence on the infallibility of Jesus' teaching, and in their consequent reinterpretation of passages which were generally regarded as containing error? A number of evangelicals seem to be moving towards such a view.

The implications of incarnation as they relate to the limitations of Jesus' knowledge, are not discussed as an issue in the New Testament. But we are provided with important data which must be taken into account in formulating a Christology which claims to be biblical. We have seen earlier that the New Testament presents Jesus during his earthly ministry as a real man of first-century Palestine, sharing the culture and conditions of his people, as one who grew in wisdom, and had to learn information, and who on one important issue pro-

fessed himself ignorant.

In the sense that he thus shared in the full human condition, the New Testament indicates that the Word really became flesh; he did 'empty himself' and share the limitations of humanity. Jesus was *real*, and there is no room for docetism. Kenosis in the Pauline sense of Jesus' abandonment of the glory of heaven and acceptance of the human condition in all its humiliation is a precious truth of the New Testament.

But to accept that Jesus was limited in knowledge and conditioned by his culture setting is not the same thing as to assert that he made mistakes and taught as truth the erroneous beliefs of his age. Admitted ignorance is not the same thing as purported knowledge which is false, any more than liability to temptation is the same thing as actual sin. Christians have always been able to accept that Jesus was really tempted but did not sin, as Hebrews explicitly states (4:15), and there seems no theoretical problem in similarly envisaging ignorance without error.

In fact the New Testament does not leave us to pious speculation here. Jesus said, for instance, 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away' (Mark 13:31). If that is not culpable megalomania, it is surely an assertion that what Jesus asserted was true and reliable. It is not a claim to omniscience, as the very next verse makes clear; but in what Jesus did say, and did claim to know, it presents him as infallible. It is hard to square such sayings with the belief that because of Jesus' cultural conditioning the modern Christian need not take his statements as normative.

So again I want to appeal for a 'both/and' Christology: one which takes with the utmost seriousness the reality of Jesus' human limitations, of his 'self-emptying' to become one of us; but which refuses to apply the 'either/or' principle and to claim that therefore he did not speak with divine truth. I see no logical incompatibility between the assertion that Jesus was a true first-century man whose knowledge was limited and progressive, and the assertion that as God he made no mistakes and taught no falsehood. And I find in the New Testament ample grounds for making both assertions strongly.

What then of Jesus' supposed mistake about the date of his *parousia*? This is a matter for exegetical discussion of the passages which are thought to predict a return within a stated period, and this discussion must be seriously pursued, recognizing the widespread tension between imminence and delay in Jewish as well as Christian eschatology.²¹ It is not self-evident that the Jesus who disclaimed knowledge of the date of his return in Mark 13:32 was willing to set dates elsewhere. At any rate there is no need to short-circuit the debate by invoking an interpretation of 'kenosis' which was far from Paul's mind when he wrote Philippians 2:7.

This paper has done no more than set out the broad outlines of an evangelical approach to the New Testament evidence for the uniqueness of Christ. As such it demands detailed exegetical support or modification at every point, without which it must appear a bold oversimplification of complex issues. But I believe it has been worth producing, if it enables us to stand back and take stock of the nature of the data on which our exegetical studies must be based, and thus to get our bearings for further study. Without such an exercise, we are in constant danger of becoming so engrossed with the investigation of one particular problem or pericope that we forget the massive cumulative effect of the New Testament evidence taken as a whole. We must never allow our doctrinal debates to make us lose touch with the historical reality experienced in so many different and yet richly complementary ways by the early Christians, which led them, against all the dictates of their culture and upbringing, to the conclusion that in the man Jesus 'the Word became flesh'. For that is what Christianity is all about.

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NOTES

- 1 Adapted from an address delivered at the 1980 conference of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians at Altenkirchen, West Germany, in August 1980. The overall theme of the conference was 'Who is Jesus?—the Modern Challenges for Christology'. This address was designed to explore the biblical basis for Christological discussion.
- 2 See G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (Collins, London 1973) ch. 3.
- 3 C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (CUP, Cambridge 1977). This distinction, spelled out on p. 2, is central to Moule's thesis, and uncovers a fundamental difference between modern approaches to NT Christology. The terms used may not be the most helpful, as they have different connotations for different people, but the point is crucial: did the NT writers superimpose an alien image of a divine Jesus on an originally purely human figure, or was their developed Christology merely the working out of the truth about Jesus which had been implicit from the beginning? Moule argues consistently for the latter.
- 4 This reading, supported by P66 and P75, is now accepted by most commentators and printed in the more recent Greek texts. English versions have been slower in recognizing it: it is noted in the margin of the RV, RSV, JB, and NEB, but has now been accepted into the text of the TEV and NIV.
- 5 See the useful presentations in A. W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (SPCK, London 1962) pp. 53-74; O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (ET2, SCM, London 1963) pp. 306-14; R. E. Brown, *Jesus: God and Man* (Chapman, London 1968) pp. 6-28.
- 6 'Less probable cases' would include Gal. 2:20; Col. 2:2; Jas. 1:1.
- 7 For the contemporary significance of *kyrie* see Moule, *op. cit.*, pp. 35ff.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 175f.
- 9 J. Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (ET, SCM, London 1967) pp. 11-65.

- 10 J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology I* (ET, SCM, London 1971) pp.59-61, has argued that Jesus is simply making an observation about the relations between any human father and his son. Linguistically this is possible, though it may be questioned whether it would be a true observation. But even if this were the right exegesis, it is hard to see what point such an observation could have in this context except to illustrate the exclusive mutual knowledge of Jesus and his Father, i.e. to express the same Christological point by a parable rather than by direct statement.
- 11 A full recent discussion of its authenticity is given by J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (SCM, London 1975) pp.27-34.
- 12 The evidence collected by M. Hengel, *The Son of God* (ET, SCM, London 1976) pp.41-56 for the use of this term in Jewish literature hardly adds up to a refutation of this statement. Some of the instances he cites are from writings not likely to reflect usage in mainstream Judaism in Palestine, and others fall short of demonstrating 'Son of God' as a title applied to a living individual. He cites nothing remotely similar to the gospels' account of Jesus' language about himself.
- 13 See R. J. Bauckham, 'The Sonship of the Historical Jesus in Christology', *SJT* 31, 1978, pp.245-60, for a good discussion of the authenticity of such language.
- 14 See my *Jesus and the Old Testament* (Tyndale Press, London 1971) 143f, pp.157-9.
- 15 *ibid.*, pp.150-9.
- 16 This point is brought out in an unpublished thesis by P. B. Payne, 'Metaphor as a Model for Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus with Special Reference to the Parable of the Sower', University of Cambridge 1975. See also the appendix to Payne's article 'The Authenticity of the Parables of Jesus' in *Gospel Perspectives*, vol.II, ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham, (JSOT Press, Sheffield 1981) pp.338-41.
- 17 See further my *The Man They Crucified* (IVP, London 1975) pp.76-9.
- 18 Moule, *op.cit.*, p.41.
- 19 It is, of course, widely believed that vv.6-11 of Phil. 2 are quoted by Paul from an existing Christian hymn. In that case, we cannot know the original context within which these words existed, but as they come to us they are incorporated in Paul's ethical exhortation, and this must be our guide as to how he understood them.
- 20 The other uses of *kenoun* are Rom. 4:14; 1 Cor. 1:17; 9:15; 2 Cor. 9:3; where the things 'emptied' are respectively faith, the cross, and Paul's boasting (twice).
- 21 See on this the important article by R. J. Bauckham, 'The Delay of the Parousia', *Tyndale Bulletin* 31, 1980, pp.3-36.