CHAPTER 5

Jesus—Divinity Revealed in Humility

Norman H. Young

In 1889 a dispute arose within a local congregation as to "whether or not Christ, when on earth, could have sinned." One member placed the question before the early Adventist scholar, E. J. Waggoner, to settle the matter. Waggoner replied that he had "not the slightest hesitation in saying that he could not [sin]." For him the question really asked: "Can God sin?"[1] Waggoner's response brought forth several letters in reply affirming the opposite. Waggoner then conceded that theoretically the sinful humanity of Jesus could sin, but since He was God, and not simply possessed of divine power, He did not sin. Waggoner confessed he no more understood this than anyone else.[2]

How God who would not sin, and a human who could sin, cohere unitedly in the one person of Jesus of Nazareth is indeed an intellectual enigma. However, such philosophical issues should not cloud the testimony of those who could say: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard" (1 John 1:1-3). Who Jesus was is a question, then, that only Scripture can ultimately settle.

The conviction that Jesus was fully divine did not arise primarily

from His own direct claims to deity. There are many texts where Jesus speaks metaphorically of His person, for example, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35), "I am the gate" (John 10:9), "I am the good shepherd" (v. 14), but significantly not once does He say "I am God." To have done so in a Jewish context would have caused controversy and confusion, and in a pagan one, misunderstanding.[3] Christian belief that Jesus was one with God Himself is the result of a confluence of material about Jesus that swells into an irresistible avalanche of data.

The direct verbal affirmation of Jesus' divinity came chiefly from others as they tried to express the breadth of the impact He made upon them during His brief life. It was the uniqueness of His person, the authority of His teaching, the awesomeness of His deeds, and above all, the power of His resurrection that evoked from those who knew Him personally and intimately the language of divinity in proclaiming their devotion to Him.

This is the more remarkable since the early Christian ethos and background was rooted in a strict Jewish monotheism. In their worship, both Jews and Christians would accept death rather than compromise their devotion to God by sacrificing to Caesar or to the pagan deities. Yet, amazingly, Christians from the very beginning addressed Jesus as Lord (1 Cor. 8:5, 6), and this was immediate, not the result of some long process. It was this spontaneous devotion to Jesus as Lord and Messiah that was the major cause of the ultimate rift between Christians and their Jewish parent. But before we look at worship in the early church we need to attempt to discover Jesus' own self-understanding.

"The Word Was God" (John 1:1)

There is a reserve in the New Testament about referring directly to Jesus as God. Nevertheless, despite many efforts to deny that it ever does, some texts seem to do so quite unambiguously. After a thorough study of the texts, Murray J. Harris concluded that there are seven specific references that refer to Jesus as God: John 1:1, 18; 20:28; Romans 9:5; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8; 2 Peter 1:1. His conclusion is instructive: "The use of *theos* ["God"] as a christological title shows not that Jesus is God-in-action or God-in-revelation but rather that he is God-by-nature. Not only are the deeds and words of Jesus the deeds and words of God. The nature of Jesus is the nature of God; what God is, Jesus is. By nature, as well as by action, Jesus is God."[4]

However, Jesus' preferred designation for Himself was Son of Man.[5] This title has been widely researched with divergent results. Some see it as a circumlocution for the pronoun "I." Others, drawing on the phrase's frequent usage in Ezekiel, construe it as a Hebraic way of saying "the human being." A more likely background for Jesus' usage is Daniel 7:13. First-century A.D. Jewish apocalyptic writings drew on Daniel 7:9-13 to describe the coming Messiah as a pre-existent, supernatural, heavenly judge. There is no reason against Jesus making just such an application of the Danielic Son of Man figure to Himself.

Accordingly, the popular Christian view that the title Son of Man refers to Jesus' humanity would appear to be misplaced. Jesus hardly needed to convince His contemporaries of His humanity. The Danielic figure is surely supernatural. The association of the Son of Man with the Messiah makes sense then of Peter's reply to Jesus' query, and Jesus' reply to the high priest's interrogation:

Jesus: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

Disciples: "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

Jesus: "But what about you? Who do you say I am?"

Peter: "You are the Christ [Messiah], the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:13-16).

In the case of the high priest's interrogation, Peter's answer becomes the question, and Jesus' answer is now what was formerly His question to Peter. Thus Messiah and Son of Man are being used interchangeably.

High Priest: "Are you the Christ [Messiah], the Son of the Blessed One?"

Jesus: "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:61, 62).

The allusion here to Daniel 7:13 would be evident to any first-

century reader. We should remind ourselves of the total language of Daniel 7:13, 14. The Son of Man comes to the very presence of God (the Ancient of Days) with the clouds of heaven (a sign of a divine appearance, cf. 1 Thess. 4:17). All power, glory, authority, and sovereignty is given to Him. All the peoples of the earth worship Him and His kingdom lasts forever. But how could such an exalted figure be used to describe Jesus' humiliation, suffering and death (Luke 9:58; Mark 8:31; 9:12, 31)? It would seem that for Jesus the way to His ultimate role as universal ruler was through humility, rejection, and death.

Jesus' authority then lay with God and not with humans. Humans would condemn Him, but God would vindicate Him. In using the title Son of Man for Himself, Jesus is claiming that the eternal kingdom of God was present with Him. The eschatological reign of God had begun, "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor," demons are cast out by the power of God, the kingdom of God has come (Luke 7:22; 11:20). It may not be too much to say that the title Son of Man was a veiled claim to divinity.

We noted above that the terms "Messiah" and "Son of Man" were used in the exchanges with Peter and the high priest somewhat synonymously. Did Jesus then conceive of Himself as the Messiah of God? There is no doubt that the early church immediately accepted Him as the Messiah, so much so that the Greek form, "Christ," became virtually His name. The Messiah was a hoped-for anointed, royal Saviour of the Davidic line. Both the Hebrew "Messiah" and the Greek equivalent "Christ" refer to the use of anointing oil as part of the coronation or investiture ritual. Therefore, Jesus' application of the anointing language of Isa. 61:1 to Himself (Luke 4:18) indicates He understood His mission in terms of the divinely Anointed One.

Jesus' enemies certainly understood Him to have applied such a royal title to Himself for they condemned and executed Him for claiming to be "king of the Jews" (Mark 15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26; John 19:19, 21). Jesus does not dispute the designation, and the episode has good historical credibility since it is highly unlikely that later

Christians would have retrospectively applied such a politically sensitive term to Jesus. Though Jesus refused the many efforts to make Him king (Matt. 21:1-9; John 6:15), He nevertheless, by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, symbolically accepted the royal claim. It is highly improbable that the early church would have embraced the title Messiah if Jesus had rejected it (for His tacit acceptance see Mark 8:29-33; 14:61, 62; John 4:25, 26; 19:33-37). Jesus' seeming reluctance to embrace the messianic title enthusiastically was no doubt due to how He understood His mission. Clearly He did not intend to establish His rule in an earthly messianic kingdom after annihilating the foreign powers. From Jesus' point of view, "Messiah" had some shortcomings as a description of His person and role. A richer category was needed to announce Jesus' relationship to the Father. Is "Son of God," along with "Son of Man," that better term?

Just as popular opinion misconstrued the meaning of Son of Man, the same is probably true of the title Son of God. The common view refers the title Son of God directly to Jesus' divinity, but the phrase itself does not demand this. To be a son of God places one in a favored or privileged relationship with God, but it does not of itself imply divinity. Contextually, however, the New Testament uses the language of "Son," "only Son" or "Son of God" to convey ideas of Jesus' divinity. John, for example, climaxes his Gospel with the confession of Thomas: "My Lord and my God!" and then he immediately states his purpose in writing: "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:28, 31). Clearly John understood "Son of God" to designate a unique and profound relationship between the Father and the Son. There are also indications of this in the Synoptic Gospels.

Jesus' use of the intimate Aramaic child's term *Abba*, "Father," (Mark 14:36) indicates that Jesus was conscious of a special filial relationship that gave Him the authority to redefine God's relationship with His followers. The declaration in Matthew 11:27 and Luke 10:22 that only the Son can reveal the Father also points to an exclusive relationship to God. The parable of the vineyard where the final messenger is the son whom the tenants slay contrasts Jesus

with His Old Testament predecessors as God's final agent (Matt. 21:33-46). Thus, though Jesus never indisputably uses the title Son of God of Himself, there are indications that the free use of the term by the Gospel writers (sixteen times in the Synoptics, nine times in John), Acts (one occurrence), the Epistles (four times in Paul, four times in Hebrews, seven times in 1 John), and even Revelation (one occurrence) has its origins in Jesus' own self-understanding reflected in His calling God "my Father" (Matt. 26:39; 10:32; Luke 2:49) and Himself "the Son" (Matt. 28:19; Mark 13:32).

When the titles "Son of Man," "Messiah," and "Son of God" are read in the context of the broader teaching of the Gospel accounts, their implication becomes even more obvious. One's response to Jesus' person, not simply His words, is crucial for one's ultimate destiny (Matt. 7:21-23; Luke 12:8, 9); and this call takes precedence over family ties (Luke 14:26), even over one's duty to care for one's father's burial (Luke 9:59, 60). Jesus claimed the authority to assign roles in the future life (Matt. 19:28). He attributes to His own words the same eternal validity attached to the word of God (Mark 13:31; Isa. 40:8). Rejecting Him is tantamount to rejecting God (Matt. 10:40; Luke 10:16). Repeatedly Jesus applies to Himself images that had their background in applications to God in the Old Testament. For example, the rejected stone (Luke 20:18; Isa. 8:14, 15), the children's praise (Matt. 21:16; Ps. 8:2), and judging the nations (Matt. 25:32; Joel 3:1-12). His superiority over the Levitical priesthood is demonstrated by His offer of immediate forgiveness outside the processes of the temple. Even His contemporaries recognized this as a divine prerogative (Matt. 9:6; Mark 2:5-9; Luke 7:48-50).

His words, of course, are equally critical; to reject them would be catastrophic, like building on sand (Matt. 7:26). Jesus did not speak as a prophet on God's behalf ("The word of the Lord came unto me saying"), He spoke on His own authority, "But I say unto you" (Matt. 5:21, 22, 27, 28, etc.). He gave conclusive rulings on purity laws (Mark 7:18-23), the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-3:6), and divorce (Mark 10:2-12). Such a claim to have the definitive interpretation of the law, makes Him greater than Moses, the lawgiver (John 1:17), hence His pronouncement that the Law and the

Prophets climaxed with John the Baptist (Matt. 11:13). Such claims affirm an independence and authority unexampled among any other figure in the salvation history of Israel—greater than Abraham, Aaron, David, the prophets, and even Moses. His relationship with the Father was so profoundly intimate that it required a new understanding of monotheism to express it.

"The Word Became Flesh" (John 1:14)

The early church historian Eusebius informs us that messianic fears led first Emperor Vespasian (A.D. 69-79) and then his son Domitian (A.D. 81-96) to attempt to eliminate surviving members of the house of David. Because of their Davidic connection, the grandsons of Jude (Jesus' brother) were brought to Rome to stand before Domitian.[6] When the Emperor saw their calloused hands and peasant appearance he sent them home to their meager lands (between twelve and twenty-four acres), for he considered it unlikely that such impoverished individuals posed any threat to the mighty Roman Empire. There is no reason to believe that Jesus' worldly estate was any higher than that of His grandnephews.

Jesus' family background was thus extremely humble. They were peasant farmers with a carpentry shop to supplement their income. His clear concern for the poor (Luke 7:22) grew out of a personal awareness of poverty. There was, then, nothing make believe about Jesus' sharing in the human condition. As Hebrews says, "Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. . . . Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity. . . . For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way." (2:11, 14, 17). Hebrews proves His kinship with humanity by placing three Old Testament texts on the lips of Jesus. First, the author quotes Psalm 22:22 (Heb. 2:12). The "I" in "I will declare" and "I will sing" is Jesus. The recipients of Jesus' actions are "brothers," and the location is "in the presence of the congregation." Clearly the writer's point is Jesus' familial unity with the believers. Second, the writer quotes from Isaiah 8:17, and again Jesus is the assumed speaker (Heb. 2:13). Just as Jesus responded to abuse by putting His trust in God, the persecuted

readers are here urged to do the same (cf. 1 Pet. 2:21-23). Jesus' oneness with believers included sharing in their suffering (v. 9,10). Third, Hebrews places Isaiah 8:18 in the mouth of Jesus. "The children God has given me" are believers whose close association with Jesus is emphasized. "So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers [siblings]" (Heb. 2:11).

That Jesus was one with the human family is the strong testimony of the New Testament, but what was the extent of that oneness? And what was its purpose? In what sense was Jesus born of the Virgin Mary "for our salvation"?[7] While these questions are all potential starting points for theological deviation, they are also crucial to our understanding of the person of Jesus.

Though one with humans, Jesus was not just another mortal. There was something disturbingly different and unique about His life as a man. Constantly His miraculous deeds and His powerful sayings confounded His audience (see Mark 1:22, 27; 2:12; 4:41; 5:20; 6:2, 51; 7:17; 9:15; 10:32, etc.). Two aspects of Jesus' humanity separated Him from His siblings: the circumstances of His birth and the sinlessness of His life.

Assertions about His sinlessness dramatically separate His human experience from that of the rest of humankind. Sinlessness was not a state He attained, but rather retained. From the beginning He was in a wholesome relationship with the Father. He did not repent, He was not reconciled to God. The rest of us do not have an angel announce our forthcoming birth and describe us as "the holy one. . . the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). What the Gospels reveal, the Epistle to the Hebrews declares, namely, that Jesus "is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens" (Heb. 7:26).

Unlike other priests, Jesus did not sacrifice first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people. He offered Himself exclusively for the sins of others (Heb. 2:17; 10:10). There is no thought of Him offering anything for Himself; rather He offered Himself (9:14). As Paul declares unequivocally, God treated Jesus who knew no sin as though He had known sin. Paul thus relates Jesus' sinlessness to His crucifixion. "Knew no sin" means not simply that He committed no overt act of sin, but that he had no inner experience of sin.

His purity was of the heart and not simply in outward conformity to the law. He had a unique and pure inner quality (1 John 3:5). Were it otherwise, He would fall under the condemnation of His own teachings about sin having its origins in the heart (Matt. 15:19).

Jesus was able to ask, "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?" (John 8:46; 1 Pet. 2:22) and expect no one to come forward. When He challenged a crowd by suggesting only one who was himself without sin could cast the first stone, no one threw a missile at the woman. He alone could have, but He did not. Like Peter, we all feel condemned before the sinless One. "When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!' " (Luke 5:8). If there were not something essentially different about Jesus, neither Peter nor we would experience such discomfort in His presence. Even His judges and opponents recognized Jesus' innocence, and Luke intends his readers to understand His innocence at a level beyond the merely legal (Luke 23: 4, 14, 22, 41, 47, 48).

Mark refers to Jesus as the son of Mary (Mark 6:3), which is an unusual identification given the patrilineal bias of first-century Jewish culture. Indeed, Joseph does not feature at all in the Gospel narratives after the accounts of the birth of Jesus. Such details indicate that Jesus' origins were outside the normal. Both friend and foe recognized this; the former seeing a miraculous divine birth and the latter perceiving adultery. The nature of Jesus' birth was unusual from every angle, not least, of course, the conviction of Matthew and Luke that His mother had had no prior sexual intercourse with a man (Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:34, 35). Bockmuehl points out how Jesus' virginal conception relates to the theme of God's glory revealed in the humble circumstances of an unexpected pregnancy and single motherhood. In this, he concludes, "was seen both the utter humanity and the complete otherness of Jesus."[8] This is the paradox of the incarnation, and it cannot be resolved without distortion. To remain upright, Christian belief must hold the guy ropes of His "utter humanity" and "complete otherness" in tension.

A key passage in Paul where this tension is powerfully present is Romans 8:3. J. Zurcher rightly notes that this passage is the major

text used to support the claim that Jesus triumphed over sin despite His accepting a human state that involved all the pull of a fallen condition.[9] Jesus' sinlessness then becomes a model for His followers to attain to. This triumph of Jesus, and consequently of His followers, is seen as the essence of the gospel. There can be no denying the serious emphasis in the New Testament on ethical living as the believer's indispensable response to the gift of salvation. It is equally true that this ethical demand is centered in the gospel events of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The role of the Holy Spirit in the behavioral renewal of the believer is also stressed in the New Testament.

What can be denied, however, is that Jesus' sinlessness is presented in the New Testament as an attainable state for Christians in this life, either in the last days or in any other day. The ethical demands of the New Testament are to be embraced seriously by Christians, but so too is the continuing mercy of the gospel. The reference to Jesus' death as a "sin offering" in Romans 8:3 makes it clear that the redemptive act proper occurred on the cross. As D. Moo notes, "the sacrificial allusions later in this verse [v. 3] show that, without eliminating allusion to the incarnation, Paul's application of the language [of God sending his Son] is broader, with a particular focus on the redemptive death of the Son."[10] Indeed, that the cross is the redemptive act proper and not the sinlessness of Jesus is the emphasis of the New Testament in general.[11]

The NIV translates the Greek word *sarx* in Romans. 8:3 as "sinful nature" or "sinful man." This is not helpful. "Flesh" does not necessarily involve any ideas of "sinful nature". When used by itself, it generally means no more than a human being. The qualifying genitive in v. 3b, however, certainly gives "flesh" a negative reference, that is, "flesh of sin."[12] How far should this daring language be extended?

As we have seen, the New Testament is emphatic that Jesus was innocent of any act of sin. So clearly "flesh of sin" does not extend that far. But should we go as far as C. K. Barrett and deduce that Jesus "took precisely the same fallen nature that we ourselves have, and that he remained sinless because he constantly overcame a proclivity to sin,"[13] or should we withdraw to J. R. Edwards' safe position and say that Jesus successfully resisted sin because "the Son entered humanity with a nature like Adam's before the Fall"?[14]

If Barrett goes too far, Edwards does not seem to go far enough given Paul's graphic language. At the very least the text tells us that Jesus identified with humanity in a meaningful way, and yet remained innocent of any sin. In going beyond this we are saying more than Scripture says. Jesus participated in our sin in that He entered a world alienated from God, He felt the powerful pull to abandon His oneness with the Father, and finally on the cross He completely experienced that alienation. He was not immune to such a test. He was mortal and possessed the fears that are associated with our mortality (Heb. 5:7). T. Weinandy, who argues that Jesus entered humanity in its fallen condition, describes Jesus' "sinful flesh" as experiencing "many of the effects of sin which permeate the world and plague human beings—hunger and thirst, sickness and sorrow, temptation and harassment by Satan, being hated and despised, fear and loneliness, even death and separation from God."[15]

It is not useful to say more than this. On the other hand to say less than this tends towards Docetism.[16] Notwithstanding this latter danger, to suggest that Jesus' nature, like ours, was perverted and insensitive to sin would put the fact of His sinlessness in jeopardy. Even Weinandy, despite his arguing that Jesus "assumed our sinful flesh," is obliged to exclude His having any "inner propensity to sin (concupiscence)."[17] If Jesus never sinned, not even as a child, we must ask why not? The fact that He never sinned is inexplicable unless we accept that at some point His being was different from ours. It is time to return to Romans 8:3.

The addition of "likeness" (*homoioma*) to the phrase "of flesh of sin" should be seen as a boundary. It is not added to compromise the reality of Jesus' human existence, nor His participation in a world vitiated and dominated by sin. Nor should it be construed to mean "mere appearance" as opposed to "very form." The latter seems to be Paul's meaning whenever he uses *homoioma* (see Rom. 1:23; 5:14; 6:5; Phil. 2:7). However, "likeness" does constitute a limit, so that whatever Jesus' condescension into the realm of human sin, we must not conceive of Him as altogether like the rest

of humanity. Paul (with us) is traversing a fine line in maintaining Jesus' identity with us and His distinction from us. To lurch too far one way or the other is to distort the nature of Jesus' humanity.

The same is true of texts such as Hebrews 2:14-17 and 4:15. The recipients of the Epistle to the Hebrews had suffered much for their Christian faith (Heb. 10:32-34; 12:4; 13:3), and the writer encourages them to persevere in suffering in the knowledge that Jesus had also experienced suffering. Jesus too, the writer reminds his readers, knew what it was like to want to pull back (5:7-10), but He pressed on committing His ways to God. The readers are urged to follow Jesus' example and continue their Christian pilgrimage enduring the scandal of the cross (12:1, 2; 13:12-14).

The author draws on the realities of the incarnation for a pastoral purpose. Despite His exalted status (1:1-14), Jesus became a man and endured severe deprivation in order to deliver those who trusted in Him. The intent is to encourage the readers to persevere even at the peril of their lives. He was the Son of God, He was entirely human, and He did suffer for our benefit. It is not wise to venture beyond these facts.

To be like His siblings in every way (*kata panta*, Heb. 2:17) takes us no further than Jesus' sharing in like manner (*paraplesios*) in the same things (*ton auton*) as His siblings (v. 14). The "same things" are flesh and blood, that is, humanity. Jesus shared with His siblings in human life, including its suffering. Having known suffering, He is able to sympathize with those first-century Christians in particular and all Christians in general who suffer for their faith. It would be tragic to submerge this profound message in futile arguments about the niceties of the incarnation. One thing is clear: Jesus is an example for Christians to follow in His faithfulness to God in testing circumstances. On the other hand, Hebrews says nothing about Jesus providing a model of how to live without sin despite inheriting a fallen condition.

In Hebrews 4:15 the writer is again concerned to give his struggling readers confidence. They are in danger of drifting away (2:1), of failing to enter (4:1), of falling away (6:6), of spurning the Son of God (10:29), of shrinking back (10:32), of growing weary and faint-hearted (12:3), of refusing the voice of God (12:25), and of

being led astray (13:9). It is a powerful encouragement for such readers to be reminded that Jesus too had felt the force of being tempted (or better "tested") to turn from the course God had set before Him. But Jesus remained faithful; He did not abandon His calling ("without sin"). "So," the writer exhorts his readers, "let us hold firmly [like Jesus did] to the faith we profess" (2:14).

The author comforts his reader with the assurance that in their Christian struggle, Jesus, their High Priest, sympathizes with the understanding gained from His own suffering. The fidelity of Jesus under stress is the limit of the author's concern to present Him as a leader worthy of emulation. We do not find Hebrews portraying Jesus' incarnational life as the exemplar for the gaining of total victory over sin. The author consistently relates Jesus' oneness with His siblings to His death, not to His being a sinless ideal for us to reproduce.

The writer's own final clauses (in bold) demonstrate where his emphasis lies. "He suffered death, **so that** by the grace of God **he might taste** death for everyone" (2:9), "**so that** by his death **he might destroy** him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil" (2:14), "**in order that he might become** a merciful and faithful high priest" (2:17a), "**that he might make** atonement for the sins of the people" (2:17b), "Christ was sacrificed...**to take away** the sins of many people" (9:28), "Jesus also suffered outside the city gate **to make** the people holy through his own blood" (13:12).

Hebrews 4:15 is another example of a pastoral concern to encourage those suffering for their faith to persevere and follow the path of submission that Jesus trod. To read more from the phrase "tempted [tested] in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" is to entirely ignore the larger context of the Epistle. The recipients of the letter lost social status and wealth when they became Christians. Their test is to accept the social derision and ostracism of their unbelieving neighbors rather than winning back their approval by abandoning Christ.[18]

In speaking of Jesus' humanity, we often forget the specifics of His human life. Jesus was a first-century Jew living in Roman-occupied Palestine. He was born like all of us from a mother's

womb, He was nurtured at her breast, brought up under the piety of the Torah (biblical Law), and lived out His life, by and large, as an observant Jew (Luke 2:7; 11:27; Gal. 4:4). Jesus ate, slept, got tired, wept, showed emotion, prayed, confessed ignorance, and matured like any other mortal. In common with the rest of humanity, He had a family and a hometown, as His contemporaries often derisively reminded Him. They knew His family connections and His family's address: "Isn't this Joseph's son?" (Luke 4:22). "'But we know where this man is from; when the Christ comes, no one will know where he is from'" (John 7:27; cf. Matt. 13:54, 55; Mark 6:3; John 6:42). Yet granting all this, He was not just another man, for through Him God was present in the world in a way never before or since experienced—He was God as a man.

"They Worshiped Him" (Luke 24:52)[19]

For any being other than God to accept worship or set themselves up as an object of worship was for Jews an abomination. This was the blasphemy of the little horn of Daniel (Dan. 8:11; 11:36, 37) and the lawless one that Paul predicted would arise (2 Thess. 2:4). It is in worship, that is, in credal statements (Rom. 1:3, 4; 10:9, 10), in church prayers (8:15; 1 Cor. 16:22; Gal. 4:6); in hymns (Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 1:15-20; 1 Tim. 3:16), that we find Christians spontaneously rethinking their understanding of the nature of God. And this initial outburst of theological energy, let us remind ourselves, occurred among converted monotheistic Jews.

Larry Hurtado sums up the historical phenomenon very well:

> Within the first two decades of Christianity, Jewish Christians gathered in Jesus' name for worship, prayed to him and sang hymns to him, regarded him as exalted to a position of heavenly rule above all angelic orders, appropriated to him titles and Old Testament passages originally referring to God, sought to bring fellow Jews as well as Gentiles to embrace him as the divinely appointed redeemer, and in general redefined their devotion to the God of their fathers so as to include the veneration of Jesus.[20]

The earliest Christian writings are not the Gospels as commonly and understandably supposed, but the letters of Paul. Paul became a Christian in the early to mid-30s A.D., and as he himself says, he was by no means the first convert (Rom. 16:5, 7). His earliest letters date around A.D. 51, and immediately we find the Son closely bracketed with the Father as of equal status (1 Thess. 1:1, 9, 10; 5:23, 28). Romans 1:1-4 is thought to preserve pre-Pauline confessional language. Here, according to Hurtado, the title "Son of God" "seems intended to convey the elevation of Jesus to a position of transcendent status and a uniquely close connection with God."[21]

The most sublime Christian theology is found in its hymns. This was true from the movement's very beginnings. The early church expressed its devotion in sacred songs (1 Cor. 14:26; Col. 3:16, 17; Eph. 5:18-20). And it is in the context of worship that the New Testament Christians directed their most profound praise to Christ. Texts that are thought to have their context in hymnic worship are John 1:1-18; Colossians 1:15-20; Philippians 2:5-11; Ephesians 5:14; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Hebrews 1:3. The hymns to Christ in the book of Revelation (5:9,10, 13, 14) probably also reflect actual Christian worship in the first century. The New Testament writers were avowedly monotheistic (1 Cor. 8.1-6; Rev. 14:6, 7), yet in their celebration of Christ they show "the binitarian shape of early Christian devotion."[22]

The Colossian Christ-hymn or poem (1:15-20) presents a torrent of exalted titles for Jesus: "image of the invisible God," "the firstborn," "head . . . of the church," "the beginning," and "all his fullness dwell[s] in him." The poem draws on the language of Proverbs 8 where "wisdom" is praised as God's agent in creation. The motifs of creation and redemption are conjoined (Col. 1: 16, 20). Both Jesus' pre-existence (vs. 16,17) and His humanness (v. 20) are affirmed. The hymn is, in Tom Wright's apt expression, an example of "*christological monotheism*."[23] That is to say, Jewish creational monotheism is restated, but Christ is now set within the bounds of that affirmation, "for in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Col. 2:9). He is prior to creation and exalted above it. The hymn's majestic language transcends anything ever said in Judaism about wisdom. The praise is directed to God in celebration of Jesus' lordship in creation and reconciliation.

For monotheistic Jews, prayer was directed exclusively to God, yet Jewish Christians were moved to address Jesus in prayer (Acts 7:59, 60; 2 Cor. 12:2-10). Paul's benedictions are prayers (1 Thess.

3:11-13) that implore Father and Son jointly (Rom. 16:20; Gal. 6:18; 1 Thess 5:28; 2 Cor. 13:14). Of special note is 1 Corinthians 16:22, where the Aramaic *maran* ("our Lord," for the Greek equivalent see Rev. 22:20) is preserved. The context of this prayer was likely the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:26), and it goes back into the worship practice of Aramaic speaking Christian Jews, thus it is very early indeed. In the context of worship, it is impossible to restrict "Lord" to a title of respect. To address Jesus as Lord in the context of worship assumes the most awesome divine status for the One so addressed.

As well as the hymns and prayers to Christ, we can add the references to calling on the name of Jesus (Acts 9:14, 21; 22:16; Rom. 10:13; 1 Cor. 1:2, 10). For calling on the name of God (Gen. 13:4; Ps. 105:1; Jer. 10:25) and confessing Jesus (Rom. 10:9; 1 John 4:2, 3, 15) again are acts of prayer-worship, often in the context of baptism. Christians confessed Jesus as Lord (Rom. 10:9), as Son of God (1:3, 4) and as Christ (Acts 9:22). This kind of religious devotion is normally reserved for God alone. Yet immediately, not after some prolonged linear process, Jewish Christians were worshiping Jesus in these terms alongside the Father.

The early Christians did not make Jesus a second God, nor confuse Him with the Father, yet their adoration of Jesus necessitated what Hurtado deems "a noteworthy mutation in the religious practice of Jewish monotheism."[24] And such a new religious experience required a new language or theology to express it. This does not mean the worship created the idea of Christ's deity. The worship was the spontaneous reaction to the person of Jesus, as when Jesus in the Gospels accepted worship (Matt. 14:33; 28:9, 17; John 20:28). It was the phenomenon of the whole of the Christ-event that elicited the worship, not the reverse.

Word meanings are formed by their social as well as literary contexts. Many of the key Christian titles for Jesus occur in the context of the early church's religious life. Jesus is bracketed with the Father in thanksgivings (Col. 1:3), benedictions (Rom. 16:25-27), letters end with praise to God and the Lord Jesus Christ in unison (2 Cor. 13:14), and songs and music in the heart are made to the Lord (Jesus) (Eph. 5:19). Christian worship celebrated Jesus and

makes sense only if He was, in the words of His brother, James, "the Lord of glory" (Jas. 2:1, KJV).

"I Am Gentle and Humble in Heart" (Matt. 11:29)

How should we conceive of God? As an awesome mountain? As a mighty storm? As a triumphant warrior? As a stern judge? As a strict father? As a slave hanging on a cross? The last mentioned may not have come readily to mind, but it is the powerful image used by Paul in what many think is a hymn to Jesus (Phil. 2:5-11). In this passage we have one of the most powerful presentations of Jesus' deity and incarnation. Attempts to exclude from these texts any reference to preexistence and to limit the language to Christ's earthly life are generally considered a failure.

The epistle dates from A.D. 62-63, and the hymn may incorporate earlier material, so again we find the exaltation of Christ very early in the Christian tradition. The opening words are sublime. Though (or perhaps "because") He was in the very form of God, He did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited for His own advantage (v. 6). To the contrary, He saw equality with God in the context of emptying Himself by taking the form of a slave at the human level (v. 7). As such He humbled himself by being an obedient slave, and His obedience was until death, even the cruel death of crucifixion.

In some five lines Paul has provided one of the most profound pictures of God ever penned. The essential deity and preexistence of Jesus is plainly declared. Even more moving is how that deity is expressed—God as revealed in Jesus is not some despotic or self-serving deity, but a God of humility and self-effacement. And Paul's purpose in reminding the Philippians of the character of God as revealed in Jesus is for their attitude to one another to "be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (v. 5).

The opening verses of chapter two indicate that Paul's desire for the Philippian church is unity, where all things are done without arguing or rancor (2:14). He anxiously desires them to be of the same mind, "having the same love," and "being in full accord, of one mind" with one another (v. 2, KJV). He urges them to eschew

"selfish ambition or conceit" and instead "in humility regard others as better" than themselves (v. 3). The key is for each to consider not only their own interests, but also the interests of others (v. 4). In a word, they are to display the same attitude to one another that Jesus manifested in His incarnation and death (vs. 7, 8). Hence many of the very terms that Paul uses in his admonition to the Philippians reoccur in his hymn to Christ (vs. 6-11).

The tragedy of the devil is that his desire to be like God was potentially worthy, but foundered because he totally misconstrued the nature of God. Though he coveted the divine power, he perceived nothing of the humility of God. In human wisdom the cross is the stupidity of God, but the folly of God is wiser than human wisdom (1 Cor. 1:23-25). The wish to be like God is a good desire, but only if it includes the picture of the crucified Jesus. Furthermore, Philippians 2:2-4 reminds us that emulating the life of the One who is equal to God takes place in the interactions of everyday life. This is not to turn the gospel into some form of redemption by ethical behavior, but a reminder that humble service is an integral part of Jesus' saving mission. The call to serve one another after the example of His own role is a strong element in Jesus' own teaching (Mark 9:35; 10:43-45; Matt. 20:25, 26; Luke 22:24-27; Matt. 23:11; and especially the act of footwashing, John 13:5-17).

Does the exaltation of Jesus in Philippians 2:9-11 reverse the humiliation of verses 5-8? Was Jesus' condescension simply a temporary abdication of His throne? Not at all. God highly exalts the name of Jesus (v. 10), so that every creature confesses Him to be Lord (v. 11), because humility is the essence of divinity. This is reinforced by the fact that vs. 10, 11 are a quotation from Isa. 45:23, which originally referred to God. It is quite common in the New Testament to apply to Jesus texts that originally referred to the Father (Matt. 3:3; Isa. 40:3; Acts 2:21; Joel 2:32; Rom. 9:33; Isa. 28:16; Heb. 1:10; Ps. 102:25). God praises the servanthood of Jesus, since this is what God is like and what He values. This element again goes back deep into Jesus' own teaching where He asserts that those who humble themselves will be exalted (Matt. 18:4; 23:12; Luke 14:11; 18:14). The humiliation is the exaltation, just as the cross is His exaltation (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32, 34). The One who now sits on the throne is still a sacrificed Lamb (Rev. 5:6, 9, 12).

In Conclusion

Jaroslav Pelikan points out that the oldest surviving liturgical prayer was a prayer addressed to Christ: "Our Lord, come" (1 Cor. 16:22 written about A.D. 40 or earlier). The oldest surviving pagan report described Christians as gathering before sunrise and "singing a hymn to Christ as though to a god" (Governor Pliny's letter to Trajan, A.D. 112). The oldest surviving Christian sermon after the New Testament opened with the words: "We ought to think of Jesus Christ as of God" (2 Clement 1.1, 2, A.D. 120-140). The oldest surviving account of a Christian martyr contained the confession: "It will be impossible for us to forsake Christ. . . or to worship any other. For him being the Son of God we adore" (Polycarp A.D. 155).[25] Clearly the early church found it entirely appropriate to ascribe the title "God" to Jesus.[26] If we have read the New Testament texts correctly, this practice is grounded in the words of the apostles and of Jesus Himself.

Scholars occasionally see the divinity of Jesus in terms of function rather than His being. But this is a false contrast. In New Testament teaching about Jesus the two are inseparable. Yet it would be just as wrong to imagine that the New Testament was consumed with theological speculation about the relationship between the divine and human in Jesus. Statements about Jesus' person came indirectly in the context of worship and pastoral exhortation. This is because the New Testament is not a theological treatise but a collection of pastoral letters, salvation history, and Gospel biographies.

The New Testament makes assertions about Jesus' divinity, preexistence, and manhood in the context of such practical items as giving a generous offering (2 Cor. 8:9, 12); remaining a Christian despite social abuse (Heb. 2:14-16; 4:15); cultivating a concern for the well-being of others (Phil. 2:5-11); and defending the apostolic ministry (2 Cor. 5:21). The desire to be like God can be a worthy aspiration as well as a satanic delusion, depending on how we perceive the nature

of God. In Christ we see the essence of God, and it is one of humble self-giving. To grasp that, or rather to be grasped by it, is the lowering of human pride and conceit in the dust.

For Further Reading

P. W. Barnett, *The Truth about Jesus: The Challenge of the Evidence.* Sydney: Aquila,1994.
J. M. Harris, *Three Crucial Questions about Jesus.* Carlisle: OM Publications: 1994.
L. T. Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1996.
N. T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus*? London: SPCK, 1992.
N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus.* London: SPCK, 1999.

Notes

1. *Signs of the Times* 15 (Dec. 23, 1889), p. 784.
2. *Ibid.*, 16 (June 9, 1890), p. 342.
3. Jews would have thought He meant He was God the Father, while pagans would have heard the claim within a polytheistic framework.
4. M. J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), p. 291.
5. The title occurs some eighty times in the Gospels and only four times outside of them. Of the eighty instances in the Gospels, nearly all of them are self-designations by Jesus (see R. E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994) p. 90.
6. Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 3.19, 20.
7. Quoting from the Chalcedon Formula (451 A.D.).
8. M. N. A. Bockmuehl, *This Jesus: Martyr, Lord, Messiah* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), p. 34.
9. J. R. Zurcher, *Touched With Our Feelings: A Historical Survey of Adventist Thought on the Human Nature of Christ* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1999), p. 295.
10. D. J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 479. Moo, rightly in my opinion, also relates the clause "God condemned sin in the flesh" not so much to the incarnational life of Jesus, but "the atoning death of his Son," p. 481.
11. All the great redemptive words of the New Testament (in bold type below) are related to Jesus' death, not his sinless life. "In him we have **redemption** though his blood" (Eph. 1:7); We are now "**justified** by his blood" (Rom. 5:9); Jesus "suffered outside the gate in order to **set apart** the people by his blood" (Heb. 1:12); "You are not your own; you were **bought** at a price" (1 Cor. 6:19, 20); "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the **forgiveness** of sins" (Matt. 26:28); he has **reconciled** you in his body of flesh by his death (Col. 1.22); "Your blood did **ransom** people for God" (Rev. 5:9); "they have **washed** their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14).
12. The genitive of *hamartia* is used elsewhere in Paul's writings: "the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20), "the body of sin" (Rom. 6:6), "slaves of sin" (6:17, 20), "the wages of sin" (6:23), "the law of sin" (7:23, 25; 8:2), "the power of sin" (1 Cor 15:56), "a servant of sin" (Gal. 2:17). In none of these is it obvious that the genitive means "sinful."
13. C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (BNTC; London: A & C Black, 1957), p. 156.
14. J. R. Edwards, *Romans* (NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), p. 202.
15. T. Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), p. 18.
16. In Docetism the divinity of Christ so overwhelms the humanity that the reality of His human person is compromised.
17. Weinandy, *op. cit.*, p.18. Similarly, H. Johnson, who defines "fallen human nature" as being "open to the possibility of sin," looks to the power of Jesus' divinity as the means of living a perfect life (*The Humanity of the Saviour*, London: Epworth, 1962), pp. 22, 31.
18. D. A. de Silva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 16-20 and *passim*.
19 I am indebted to the works of L. W. Hurtado for this section, especially *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (London: SCM Press, 1988).
20. Hurtado, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
23. N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh : T & T Clark, 1991), p. 114.
24. Hurtado, p. 108.
25. Stephen, the first martyr (A.D. 35), died with this prayer on his lips: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59).
26. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (5 vols.; Chicago: University Press, 1971), 1.173.