***Low Versus High Christology***

Jesus Christ is the center of the Christian faith, and was so for Paul. Christology is the subset of Christian theology dealing with the person and work of Jesus Christ. **Ontological Christology** concerns the identity of Jesus Christ as true God and true man, in one person. **Functional Christology** concerns how Jesus Christ saves us. Although we can make the distinction between Christ as a person and his saving work, it is really impossible to separate them. In fact, much of what Paul, the New Testament, and Christian theology has said about the person of Christ has been based on theological understandings of how Christ saves us, and vice versa.

New Testament scholars today speak of a low Christology and a high Christology. Low Christology focuses on the humanity of Jesus. For instance, the synoptic gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke all have a fairly low Christology, as they present Jesus in very human terms. High Christology focuses on Jesus’ divine identity, and the Gospel and Letters of John in the New Testament depict a very high Christology. A central concern of Pauline studies is determining whether Paul had a low Christology, a high Christology, or both.

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***The Conversion of Pagan Gentiles***

Perhaps Paul’s most central belief about Jesus is that he was the Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scriptures. His most frequent title for Jesus is “Christ,” which means “Anointed One,” and Messiah comes from the Hebrew word Mashiach, meaning “Anointed One.” The concept of the Messiah arose in ancient Israel as a hope for restoration of the glorious days of King David’s Kingdom (ca. 900s BC), which was the “high point” of Israel’s power and glory in her history. Things degraded after David, and eventually in the 700s BC and the 500s BC, the Israelites came to be ruled by foreign, “pagan” Gentiles, a situation that would endure with little interruption up until the time of Jesus during the Roman Empire.

The Hebrew Scriptures thus reveal an evolving hope for a particular Israelite and descendant of King David who would come to deliver his people from the pagan Gentiles. Over time, however, the Messiah was seen to be one who would not only deliver Israel, but who would convert pagan Gentile nations to know, love and serve the one true God (the God of Israel, Yahweh).1

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***Jesus as the Messiah***

For Paul, the promise of the Messiah began with Abraham, the father of the Jews, when God promised Abraham that he would be the “father of many nations” (i.e., not only Jews, but Gentiles alike) and through his descendant (“seed”) all nations would be blessed. This was four hundred plus years before the Law was given to Moses. Thus, the promise of the Messiah precedes the Law, and so the Messianic age is one in which the Law of Moses no longer functions.2 Paul understands Jesus as the Son of God.3 Today, when we use this title for Jesus we think of his divinity. However, for Jews and for Paul, this was a common title for the promised Messiah. It derives from the ancient Israelite and near Eastern practice of seeing the human king as a “son” of the deity.4 Paul speaks of God “sending” His son, but scholars debate whether this means Paul believed Jesus pre-existed in heaven or is rather a generic reference to God calling any human being (such as “God sent the prophet Elijah . . . “) on a special mission. Thus, for Paul, the title Son of God when applied to Jesus does not indicate Jesus as God but rather is another way of referring to His being the Messiah.

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***The Resurrection***

As we have seen, the pre-Christian Jew did not believe that Jesus was the Promised Messiah. Like many other Jews who did not believe Jesus was the Messiah, Paul probably believed that Jesus was a “bad” Jew leading other Jews astray, perhaps practicing sorcery in league with the devil, and saw his crucifixion as a punishment by God upon Jesus himself. As we also have seen, it was Paul’s encounter with the resurrected Jesus that changed his view of Jesus. For an apocalyptic Jew, resurrection meant divine vindication of one who was really on God’s side, despite great suffering, persecution, and death in the present evil age. Thus it was Paul’s encounter with the resurrected Jesus that convinced him that Christian claims that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God were true.5

How did Paul view Jesus’ work in saving us? First, Paul says very little about Jesus’ birth, life, teachings and public ministry, in contrast with the gospels. Paul focuses almost exclusively on Jesus’ death and resurrection, seeing these as the most important aspects of Jesus’ mission.

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***Christ the Redeemer***

Paul clearly sees Jesus’ death on the cross as an act of voluntary humility and obedience,6 contrasting Jesus’ obedience with Adam’s disobedience.7 Thus Paul also sees Jesus as a **New or Second Adam**, the head of a new, redeemed humanity. Although he never explicitly uses the word “**sacrifice**,” Paul clearly also views Jesus’ death as a sacrifice to “take away God’s wrath” toward sins.8 Paul also refers to Jesus as the “Passover Lamb,” whose blood delivers humanity just as the Passover Lamb’s blood delivered the Israelites from the angel of death in the Exodus.9 Paul also speaks of Jesus’ death and resurrection as an act of **redemption**, or “buying back.”10 This idea is based on the practice in the ancient Greco-Roman world of paying money to free a slave, often in association with a god or goddess as the slave’s patron.

For Paul, humans are enslaved by the evil apocalyptic cosmic forces of the flesh, sin, and death. The Law curses those who do not keep it, and the flesh and sin make humans unable to keep God’s Law. Again, this is epitomized in the history of Israel as the prime example, who continually failed to keep God’s Law. Christ took the curse of the Law upon himself11 and defeated death by His resurrection, which means sin and the flesh have also been defeated.12 Those united to Christ through faith and baptism participate in His apocalyptic victory over the flesh, sin, the curse of the Law, and death.13

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***The Trinity***

Christians believe that Jesus is not only a man, but also God. They also believe in the Trinity: God is one essence in three persons. Did Paul believe that Jesus is God? Did Paul believe in the Trinity? For the first Christians there was tension between affirming strong Jewish monotheism and affirming that God is somehow present in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. If Jesus and the Holy Spirit are also God, then polytheism, would have to exist.

The complete understanding of Jesus as God and the Trinity took the Church centuries to develop; however, the beginnings of both beliefs are clearly in the New Testament (especially the Gospel of John), and can even be found in pre-Christian precedents in Second Temple Judaism. Encountering Greek culture and thought, Second Temple Judaism took the Greek philosophical concept of the divine “Word” (Logos in Greek) to be equivalent to the frequent references to God’s Word in the Hebrew Scriptures, by which God created and saves. Jews also reflected on the “Spirit of God” in the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact, before Christ, some Jews believed in something analogous to the Trinity with God’s Word and Spirit being the means by which God interacts with the world.

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***Jesus as Lord***

Many scholars contend that Paul had a relatively “low” Christology. Yet, Paul does seem to affirm that Jesus is divine in some sense. He refers frequently to Jesus as Lord. “Lord” was the Jewish way of referring to God in order to avoid pronouncing the divine name, Yahweh, out of reverence. We have seen that in the Philippians “Christ Hymn” Paul quotes an early Christian hymn about Christ in which the identity of Jesus with Yahweh is in some sense affirmed. Paul also modifies the Jewish confession that there is only one God, called the Shema,14 to now include Jesus as Lord.15

Paul also uses very basic references to the Trinity when he says: “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work” and “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.16

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