

# **The Theology of Paul**

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It is hard to imagine that the alleged theological revolution from unitary monotheism to multipersonal theism could have occurred without the involvement of Paul, “The Theologian of the Church.” Did the Apostle to the gentiles pioneer a new understanding of God? Are the conventional interpretations of his major theological texts correct, or are they colored by centuries of conditioning from orthodox indoctrinization? This lecture carefully examines Paul’s personal history as well as each of the proof-texts in the Pauline corpus commonly alleged to teach a multipersonal God.

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## The Theology of Paul

### Who was Paul the Apostle?

We know more about Paul than any of the other apostles, because he offers more autobiographical information in his public preaching and in his letters than do the others.

One key fact of Paul's personal biography which bears on this weekend's topic is the fact that Paul identifies himself as a Pharisee.

(NKJV)

"I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city (Jerusalem) at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today." (Ac. 22:3)

"And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers." (Gal. 1:14)

"...circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee;" (Phil 3:5)

Well then, who were the Pharisees? What did they believe? What did they teach? How were Jewish boys brought up in that day, and how were they educated? To help shed light on Paul's upbringing, let me quote at some length from William Barclay's biography of Paul, *Ambassador for Christ* (pp. 17-23).

"The Jews were always very particular that their children should be well educated. It was their boast that the children 'from their swaddling clothes were trained to recognise God as their Father and as the Maker of the world.' We know exactly the kind of education that Paul would receive. When he was six years old he would go to school for the first time. Once he had learned to read he would be given little rolls of parchment with certain scripture passages on them, which he would have to learn by heart.

(The first passage was) The Shema (Duet. 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Numbers 15:37-41). Shema is Hebrew for 'Hear!' And the title comes from Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord." That might be called the creed of the Jews because that was the verse with which every one of their synagogue services began...

Most boys would stop their education (at 13), but Paul did not. He was to become a Rabbi, which is something like a college professor, and for that purpose he would have to go on and take a higher education, which was the equivalent of going to the university today. There he would go on studying the Old Testament...

This intensive study would last until Paul was about twenty or twenty-one and then he would be qualified as a Rabbi and a teacher...Purely on Jewish grounds Paul had a further and still greater claim to distinction. He had been a Pharisee. Of all Jewish religious figures none were so respected as the Pharisees. There cannot ever have been

more than six thousand of them all told but, in one sense, however misguided they were, they were the very cream of the Jewish nation...

All life was hedged around by (their) detailed rules and regulations, which the Scribes had worked out and systematised from the great broad principles of the Law...It is easy to criticise the Pharisees and to condemn them as misguided and arrogant legalists. But one thing is clear—they must have been desperately in earnest. A life dominated by these rules and regulations must have been a most restricted and uncomfortable thing, and yet of their own free will they accepted such a life and kept to the utmost its every detailed regulation. Only someone with a fanatical intensity of belief would have attempted that.

Paul was like that. He was a man who had a passion for the Law. He was willing to make life as uncomfortable as its minutest regulations demanded in order to be, as he thought, true to God. We see how Paul's qualifications to appeal to his fellow countrymen are piling up. He was a Jew of the purest blood; he was a rabbi with the highest possible academic attainments; he was a Pharisee, one of that devoted six thousand who...were...the shocktroops and the spearhead of Jewish religion."

Today we tend to accept, without much contemplation, the Pharisees as a simple fact of Jewish history. But this group had reasons for existing, and for doing what they did. Their deep commitment—indeed, their fanaticism—was rooted in certain facts of Israel's history.

The Jews understood that the primary reasons they were taken into exile in Babylon were their willful neglect of the Sabbath, and their decline into pagan polytheism. When Ezra and Nehemiah attempted to reorder Jewish life upon the Jews' return from exile, they understood their most important task was to orient the Jewish culture toward the Law of Moses. They understood that if the Jewish people were going to survive, the Law needed to become the centerpiece of Jewish life (Neh. 10:29).

Israel's slide into polytheism did not occur by accident. It was in large measure a natural consequence of Israelite contact with and intermarriage with the pagan peoples of the land. So listen to what Nehemiah does when he discovers the Jews are again intermarrying with pagan women:

"In those days I also saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab...So I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, 'You shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things?...pagan women caused even him to sin'...Thus I cleansed them of everything pagan" (Neh. 13:23-30).

Ezra and Nehemiah became the inspiration for the Pharisaic movement, when it emerged in the second century BC in response to the Hellenization of Jewish culture. The fear now was not so much Canaanite infiltration but Greek, and the Pharisees banded together to

stand firm for Torah Judaism in the face of what was in reality a worldwide cultural onslaught from polytheistic Greece.

We're reviewing this history because we need to take stock of how critical it was for the Jew, and most especially the Pharisee, that they remain pure from any taint of paganism, which, for them, was synonymous with polytheism.

So then, if Paul was indeed a Pharisee, how, exactly, would he have been trained to think about God? How did the Pharisees understand God, and what did they teach others about Him?

There is a wealth of information in first-century Jewish writings on this subject, and they all agree that the scribes and Pharisees were ardent unitary monotheists, as the NT itself reveals:

“Then one of the scribes (the legal scholars of the day) came...(asking Jesus), ‘Which is the first commandment of all?’ Jesus answered him, ‘The first commandment is: ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one...’ So the scribe said to Him, ‘Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, *for there is one God, and there is no other but He...*’ So when Jesus *saw that he answered wisely*, He said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God’” (Mk. 12:28-34).

Here, Jesus cites the *Shema* as the first, or most important foundational teaching of the Law. But the scribe understands the *Shema* in terms of one God being, not a multiple unity within God, evidenced by the fact that he uses the singular personal pronoun—He—to explain to Jesus what “the Lord is one” means. To the Pharisee, the Lord God is not a compound unity of Persons. They believed that the Lord is one person, a “he.” And Jesus approves of this understanding.

Thus in this encounter we see a reflection of the fact documented in many contemporary writings that first-century Pharisaism, as in Judaism generally, understood God as a single being, apart from all others and standing above all others.

Now, in the passages quoted earlier, you may have noticed that Paul cited his status as a Pharisee specifically in the context of his pre-conversion years. Did this end when he became a Christian?

Before the Sanhedrin in a public trial, in the latter part of Paul's career, Luke reports, “But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out at the council, ‘Men and brethren, I am (present tense) a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!’” (Ac. 23:6)

Now, there were several schools of thought among the Pharisees at this time, some more liberal, some more conservative. Which did Paul belong to?

Later, in his defense before King Agrippa, Paul charged, “(The Jews) have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the *strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee*” (Ac. 26:5, RSV).

The publicly known fact of Paul’s strict Pharisaical belief and practice allowed him to proclaim publicly once more, “But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, *so I worship the God of my fathers*, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets.” (Ac. 24:14)

Here Paul claims perfect continuity with his understanding of God as a Pharisee and his worship of God as a follower of Messiah Jesus. There is no hint here of any kind of break with Judaism in any point of theology. His understanding of the Law and the Prophets—which contain many passages the Jews understood in the strictest monotheistic terms—remains intact. Not even being struck down and blinded by the glorified Christ on Damascus Road could shake Paul’s belief in the one God of his fathers!

For Paul, following “the Way”—being a Christian, we would say today—did not alter, or require altering, his understanding and worship of the one God introduced to him by his Jewish fathers. Clearly, there have been developments in theology since Paul’s day, have there not? Because what Paul says here simply could not be accomplished in today’s Trinitarian and bithestic Christian environments. Indeed, perhaps the greatest barrier for Jews to accept Christianity today is their understandable reluctance to embrace a multi-personal God. Clearly, something has changed in Christian theology from Paul’s day to ours.

Paul’s allegiance to the one God of his Jewish fathers was maintained throughout his Christian career with wholehearted and unwavering devotion, so that he could write in truth to Timothy: “I thank God, whom I serve with a pure conscience, *as my forefathers did...*” (I Tim. 1:3)

At this juncture we need to ask ourselves a question: If, as it has been alleged, Paul was in fact beginning to move away from the unitary monotheism of the Pharisees and indeed of the entire Jewish religion and culture, what would the reaction have been to that?

To begin to answer this question we must first take into account the fact that Paul had enemies. Enemies without, and enemies within. Indeed, these trials we’ve been reading about would not have occurred otherwise. Now, who were Paul’s adversaries? The Jews! Five times he received 39 lashings from nonbelieving Jews, three times he was beaten with rods, and at Lystra the Jews stoned him and left him for dead. (II Cor. 11:24; Ac. 14:19).

Things weren’t much better within the church. Once, Paul was strenuously opposed by Jewish believers who came to Antioch—“false brethren” Paul calls them—and insisted that the gentiles there must be circumcised as a sign of allegiance to the Law of Moses. This same party, apparently, was behind the trouble in Galatia, occasioning Paul’s impassioned letter to that beleaguered congregation.

Who were these Jewish believers? Luke identifies them as Pharisees: “But some of the sect of the Pharisees *who believed* rose up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise (the gentiles), and to command them to keep the law of Moses’ ” (Ac. 15:5).

We don’t often consider that there were Pharisees *in the church*. And they opposed Paul on the issue of the gentiles’ relationship to the law of Moses. Paul calls them “the circumcision group” (Gal. 2:12; Tit. 1:10), and they dogged him all of his career in the church.

So, what was the source of conflict between Paul and his enemies? To the Jews without, it was his teaching that Jesus, a convicted criminal who died a shameful death on a Roman cross, could be the promised Messiah. To the Jews within, it was Paul’s insistence upon gentile freedom from customs associated with the Law of Moses.

But note this. Not one time do Paul’s Jewish enemies, who followed him everywhere he went and knew well his life and doctrine, ever lay the charge of polytheism upon him. Not once do they accuse him of departing from the pure monotheism of the Hebrews. Not once do they lay upon Paul the charge that he has made Jesus a “second God,” which is what they surely would have had he begun to teach what defenders of orthodoxy suggest he did.

How could Paul’s determined enemies have possibly failed to seize their best opportunity to discredit Paul by laying upon him the devastating charge of polytheism? Knowing what we know about Pharisaic fanaticism in confronting paganism, and their singular desire to protect Israel from the polytheism of the occupying Romans, their refusal to even hint that Paul was sliding into polytheism speaks volumes about how Paul’s audiences understood his teaching about Jesus, and about God.

We can be sure Paul’s Jewish enemies would have had little patience with intricate expositions concerning multipersonal unity within a multidimensional monotheism. The Pharisaic mind would surely have dismissed this as transparent double-talk before running headlong at Paul with charges of polytheism, in the hope of justifying his stoning and finally ridding the earth of the man.

Aside from the issue of Paul’s enemies, we need to also consider the effect Paul’s alleged transition toward a multipersonal God would have had upon rank-and-file members of the growing Christian church.

In the earliest period, the period covered roughly by the first ten chapters of Acts, the church was entirely Jewish. Cornelius’ introduction to full fellowship in “the Way”—as they called it then—and later, Paul’s evangelism of the gentiles throughout the larger Western world, eventually created a Jew/gentile mix in the church. But the church still retained much of its original Jewish character in the period that covers Paul’s ministry.

Aside from the Jews themselves, the majority of the gentiles that converted to Christianity had been former proselytes—full, circumcised converts to Judaism—and “God-fearers,” gentiles who attended synagogue to learn of the God of Israel and His Law, but yet to be circumcised in a full commitment to Judaism. Thus by preaching in synagogues throughout gentile lands, Paul reached both Jews and gentiles. But this point needs to be recognized: even though many converts to Paul’s preaching were gentiles, most of them had been schooled in monotheistic Judaism and were believers in the one God of Israel before Paul ever reached them. Indeed, it was precisely the belief in one God which attracted many gentiles to Judaism in the first place, weary as they were of currying favor with the conflicting and capricious demands of the many gentile gods.

So both the Jewish population within the church membership, and much of the gentile membership, embraced Jesus as the Messiah of Israel, the fulfillment of all the promises of the OT. But they would not have had any reason to believe Jesus was very God, unless someone held in high esteem in the leadership—an apostle, to be sure—taught them that and took the time to explain it all to them carefully and thoroughly.

Even there, we can expect that there would have been impassioned debate as there was concerning other important changes, like circumcision. No evidence of any such discussion or dispute exists in the book of Acts or any of the NT epistles. I think it would be worthwhile to put the NT’s silence on this alleged revolution in Christian theology in a cultural context we can better appreciate.

Imagine for the moment that it is late January, and the President of the United States is about to give his annual State of the Union address. All the members of both houses of Congress are there, Supreme Court justices, military personnel, along with a large gallery of citizens, notable and not so notable, watching from the balcony. The press is out in force, as always for these events, several hundred newspaper reporters, photographers and news broadcasters from around the country and around the world. The President’s image is beamed by satellite to every home and tavern in America. Families all over the fifty states gather around their televisions to see and hear their President. The nation waits. Mr. Bush steps up to the podium, and after the hearty applause from the assembly finally dies down, this is what he says:

“Mr. Speaker, members of Congress, distinguished guests, I, George W. Bush, declare that the Constitution of the United States, which has governed this nation for over two hundred years, is, from this moment on, revoked, rescinded, and rendered null and void. Congress has been disbanded, and all religion will center upon myself; all churches will be closed, and all media will be produced by my office alone. I am personally taking control of all powers and offices of government, including the military, and will decide all court cases personally according to my whims and personal interests. We will no longer be regulated by laws in America, because laws no longer exist. From this moment forward, until the day of my death, I, George W. Bush, am the law. Good night, and God bless America.

Can you imagine the press and members of Congress simply shrugging their shoulders, rising up out of their chairs, and quietly filing out of the room, knowing the very foundation of their beliefs—not to mention careers—had just been blown to pieces? Without a single word of protest in the broadcast media, not a single contrary editorial in what was destined to be the last edition of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*?

Can you imagine the millions of Americans who still understand the significance of the Constitution to our freedoms not uttering so much as a single word of objection to this heretofore unthinkable revolution in governance? And ministers and priests abandoning their congregations and parishes, knowing they've preached their last Sunday sermon, without a hint of resistance? Can you imagine it?

No, you can't. I know you can't. You know you can't. It's simply not possible given what we all know about human beings and how they work. So why should we assume such a thing could be possible among first century Jewish Christians, who, if anything, believed in their monotheistic faith even more passionately than we Americans believe in our Constitution?

With that as our historical backdrop, let's search the writings of Paul and discover exactly what he taught his followers about Jesus, and about God.

### **Pauline proof-texts**

#### Clear statements of monotheism

#### **I Cor. 8:4-6**

It is important to note that Paul writes this passage with the full intention of establishing, once and for all, his convictions concerning the powers that be in the universe. The practical issue at hand is this: Are idols anything, that we need to worry about them contaminating our meat when it is ritually presented to idols in the public markets? The Corinthians needed to know. Paul quickly identified the key, underlying question: What is, after all, the reality of the unseen divine world? Though our circumstances are different today, and meat offered unto idols is no longer an issue for most of us, the question of the nature of the divine realm is very much a live one, and indeed is the purpose for this conference. Therefore, this passage has the highest possible teaching authority with respect to our subject, because it *is* Paul's subject. Paul is deliberately endeavoring to answer the question we are all asking this weekend. And here it is:

“Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. ...for us there is only one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Messiah...”

Trinitarians and followers of Armstrong theology claim they agree with Paul that there is only one God. The problem is that they do not agree with Paul that that one God is the Father. Instead they believe God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit in unity, or, Father and Son in family relationship. This is the source of the disagreement between us. We believe

all of Paul's creedal statement on the nature of God, and they—it must be said—do not. We believe, as this passage clearly proclaims, there is, and has ever only been, one eternal creator God, and one Lord Messiah, the only begotten son of God, who has been exalted to his father's right hand. But Paul's proclamation of one God didn't end with his letter to the Corinthians:

**Ro. 3:30**

“since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith...”

**Gal. 3:20**

“Now a mediator does not mediate for one only, but God is one.”

**Eph. 4:6**

“There is...one God and Father of all...”

**I Tim. 1:17**

“Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

**I Tim. 2:5**

“For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,” If language means anything, Jesus cannot be part of the one God Paul speaks of here. He can, however, be a man and mediate between God and men, because Paul *does not claim that there is only one man.*

Have you noticed that all of these theological proclamations are clearly stated, with no ambiguities in language? Let's compare these to the passages which have been put forward to prove Paul believed Jesus was God, and ask ourselves this fundamental question: If the only sound method of doctrinal study is to understand unclear scriptures in light of clear ones, what shall we conclude Paul believed about God?

Alleged statements of Jesus' deity

**Ro. 9:5**

About this verse Robert H. Mounce wrote: “The meaning of (v. 5b) is one of the most hotly disputed questions of the New Testament.” (*The New American Commentary*, Vol. 27, p. 349.) Are clear scriptures “hotly disputed?”

The literal word order of the Greek text is the source of the difficulty: “of whom the fathers and from whom the Christ according to flesh the one being over all God blessed unto the ages amen”

There is no punctuation in the earliest Greek manuscripts. So here the difficulty lies not in the meaning of the individual words but in their syntax—how they should be arranged to create a sensible sentence:

“Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen” (NIV)

“of whom are the fathers, and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen.” (NKJV)

“to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen.” (RSV)

“Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them, in natural descent, sprang the Messiah. May God, supreme above all, be blessed for ever! Amen.” (NEB)

All these renderings are possible given the source material at hand, which is the reason for the “hot dispute” concerning this verse. Many commentators agree with the NIV/NKJV’s choice of wording here, some do not. Therefore it is impossible to know for sure which is closest to Paul’s intended meaning simply by examining the text itself.

So, can we receive any guidance from the rest of the letter?

“God” appears in Romans 154 times and it is generally agreed that each time its use refers to the Father. This would truly be an exceptional exception if “God” referred to Jesus here.

Also a similar doxology in Gal. 1:4, 5 explicitly refers to God the Father: “who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen”

Moreover, if the NIV/NKJV translators are correct, it would prove perhaps more than orthodox apologists might desire, because this reading would suggest that Jesus stands “over all,” which would naturally include his Father—contrary to the entire NT teaching on that subject.

In any case it seems that a certain—or nearly certain—understanding of this passage is not too much to ask given the theological stakes involved, and this verse is not able to supply that. Until it is clear what, exactly, this verse is saying, it can never serve as the decisive proof-text defenders of orthodoxy seek.

### **Phil 2:6-8**

“who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even the death of the cross.” (NKJV)

“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in

human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (NIV)

v. 6

“being” Gk., *hyparchon*, which is the root *huparko* with a present tense participle. Thus it carries the sense of continuity past to present. I.e., whatever he was then, continues until now.

“in the form of God” Gk., *morphe*. Does this mean, as the NIV says, “in very nature (God)?” For obvious reasons, defenders of orthodoxy prefer this translation. But which rendering of this phrase is more accurate, “being in the form of God” or “being in very nature God?”

Kittel defines *morphe* as “ ‘form,’ ‘external appearance.’ ” Thayer defines it, “the form by which a person or thing strikes the vision; the external appearance.” Are these definitions (contrary to the sense of the NIV) borne out by the NT text?

The only other NT usage of *morphe* is in Mk. 16:12: “After that, He (Jesus) appeared in another form to two of them as they walked and went into the country.”

Are we supposed to believe that Jesus transformed his inner nature to hide his identity to these men on the road to Emmaus? No, the obvious meaning is that Jesus’ outer appearance was disguised from them.

*Morphosis* is a close relation to *morphe*. Paul uses it in II Tim. 3:5 with regard to wicked men “...having a form (*morphosis*) of godliness but denying its power.” Obviously these people only have the outer appearance of godliness; indeed, their inner nature is precisely the opposite of their *morphosis*.

Those of us who are content to allow the Bible interpret the Bible must conclude that Paul’s use of *morphe* here, contrary to claims made by defenders of orthodoxy, does not necessarily mean Jesus possessed very Godhood in some past existence, but possessed and possesses the image or likeness of God.

Well, so, if Jesus exists in the image of God, would not that fact alone make him very God? Not necessarily, because in I Cor. 11:7 Paul teaches that all men exist in the image of God: “For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God;” This is an obvious reference to Gen. 1:27.

That said, we do see in Paul and in the NT generally the conviction that Jesus embodied the character and moral perfection of God in a unique and ultimate sense. As God’s only begotten son, Jesus could truly say, “he who has seen me has seen the Father.” This is not true of men in general. However, there is nothing in *morphe*, as we’ve noted, which touches upon the issue of one’s *category of being*.

“did not consider it robbery to be equal with God” (NKJV)

“did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,” (NIV)

Key Gk. word: *harpagmos*, used only here in the NT, and the key question is this: did Paul mean to suggest that equality with God was something Jesus had all along but didn't hold on to, or that it was something he chose not to attempt to take from God?

The root word for *harpagmos* is *harpazo*, which Kittel defines: “to steal, to capture, to snatch, to seize, to take by force.” Thayer, “the act of seizing, robbery.”

*Harpazo* is used 13 times in the NT and always carries the above sense. I.e.:

Mt. 11:12: “...the violent *take* (the kingdom) *by force*...”

Jn. 6:15: “...would come and *take* (Jesus) *by force*.”

Ac. 23:10: “...commanded the soldiers to go down and *take* (Paul) *by force* from among them, and bring him into the barracks.”

I Thess. 4:12: “...(we) shall be *caught up* into heaven...”

Here four NT authors use *harpazo* with the sense of taking away, of *removing something to another place where it had not been previously*.

*Expositor's Greek New Testament*, p. 436: “We cannot find any passage where *harpazo* or any of its derivatives has the sense of ‘holding in possession,’ or ‘retaining.’ It seems to invariably mean ‘seize’ or ‘snatch violently.’”

So, of the major translations perhaps the NEB has it best: “he did not think to snatch at equality with God.” Contrary to what some of us have been taught, this verse does not teach that Jesus always possessed equality with God but voluntarily gave it up, but quite the opposite—that he did *not* have equality with God and *never attempted to take it*.

As the “second Adam,” Jesus stands in direct opposition to the first Adam, who took the forbidden fruit in an effort to “be like God.” He also stands in opposition to Lucifer in Isa. 14:13, 14 who attempted to “be like the Most High.” And in the temptation in the wilderness Jesus refuses Satan's offer of preeminence and promotion to higher status as ruler over the kingdoms of the world.

So the highest irony is present here; the orthodox Jesus does, in fact, “snatch at equality with God,” even though Paul tells us that's precisely what he would never do!

V. 7a

“but made Himself of no reputation...” (KJV + NKJV)

“but made himself nothing...” (NIV)

“but emptied himself...” (RSV)

Gk. *houton ekenosen*, literally, “himself emptied...” This phrase is ambiguous. Does it mean, as the RSV suggests, that Jesus literally emptied himself of something? Or, as the KJV, NKJV and NIV suggest, that he accepted a lowly position?

The root word of *ekenosen* is *kenoo*. Thayer, “(1) to empty, to make empty...2) to make void...render vain, useless, of no effect...”.

The notion—still popular with laymen and uninformed clergy—that the “emptying” here refers to an emptying by the incarnate Jesus of the divine qualities which could not be mediated in a human form (omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, etc.) is known as the Kenotic Theory; *kenosis*, Kenotic.

There are two major difficulties with the Kenotic Theory, one exegetical, the other theological. We will discuss the theological problem tomorrow. The exegetical problem is that *ekenosen*, which gives the Kenotic Theory its name and without which there would be no theory, does not mean “divine self-emptying” in any known writing; it means, simply, “emptied,” and nothing more. The Kenotic Theory, then, shows itself to be merely the product of theological imagination bringing meaning to a text which does not secrete from the text itself.

Since *ekenosen* is ambiguous, we must check our understanding of it against the immediate context. When we do, the KJV/NKJV/NIV rendering “but made himself of no reputation” appears to better fit Paul’s main point in this entire passage, that is, of the Christian obligation to accept the burden of voluntary humility relative to others: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.” (v. 3) There is no discussion here of adopting a lower level of ontological existence, obviously, but of voluntarily accepting a lower *role* of servant relative to others.

V. 7b-8

“...taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”

Notice that this section of the passage features three virtually synonymous claims. Jesus:

- took the form of a servant;
- came in the likeness of men;
- was found in appearance as a man.

Why does Paul state this one fact three different ways? It has been widely noted by scholars that the entire passage from v.6-11 is either a hymn, perhaps in wide use in the Christian community by this time, or a lyrical poetic work penned by Paul himself. This is why the NIV and other newer translations typeset the passage in the form of a hymn, like they do the Psalms.

Taking this fact into consideration helps us understand the triple repetition here, because such multiple references to identical facts were very common in Hebrew hymnic verse:

“Blessed is the man who (1) walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, (2) nor stands in the path of sinners, (3) nor sits in the seat of the scornful.,” (Ps. 1:1)

“I am weary with my groaning; (1) All night I make my bed swim; (2) I drench my couch with my tears. (3) My eye wastes away because of grief;” (Ps. 6:6, 7)

“Depart from me, all you workers of iniquity; For (1) the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping. (2) The Lord has heard my supplication; (3) the Lord will receive my prayer.” (Ps. 6:8, 9)

This kind of lyrical repetition is found throughout the Psalms because it is a dominant feature of Hebrew hymnic method. Repetition focuses the mind upon a single fact, turning the phrasing slightly to keep interest, yet returning again and again to the point of emphasis. This is what we see in Phil. 2:7, 8.

So, three crucial claims that have been made of this verse have been examined and found wanting. We have been told Jesus was “by very nature God,” but *morphe* doesn’t mean this. We have been told Jesus possessed equality with God, but *harpazo* means precisely the opposite. Then we have been told Jesus emptied himself of his divine powers, but *ekenosen* doesn’t mean this, either. It is hard to think of a passage of scripture which has suffered more misinterpretation than this one.

Taking all these facts into consideration, then, how should we understand Paul’s meaning here? NT usage of the key Greek words suggest the following meaning:

“who, though existing in the form of God, did not think to snatch at equality with God, but made himself no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and came in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even the death of the cross.”

Paul is reminding his readers that, as God’s son, Jesus existed in the very image of God; but rather than seeking selfish advantage, as did Adam and Lucifer, he chose instead the role of humble servant, even death on the cross. Jesus did not use his affinity with God to gain position for himself; rather, to pour himself out for others in ultimate service and sacrifice.

### **Col. 1:19 + 2:9**

“For it pleased the Father that in (Jesus) all the fullness should dwell...For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.”

“Godhead,” Gk., *theotetos*, appears only here in the NT. It is translated “Deity” in the NIV and elsewhere. “Godhead” is problematic because if *all* the fullness of the Godhead indwelt Christ, the Godhead would exclude the Father!

This difficulty is resolved when we understand that *theotetos* is an abstract noun for *theos*, (God). An abstract noun indicates the quality of something, such as goodness or

beauty. Thus when Paul writes that in Jesus dwells “all the fullness of deity” he meant that the *qualities* of God’s *character* indwells Jesus.

Paul is countering gnostic heretics in Colosse who apparently taught that Jesus was only one of a series of intermediaries between God and men, emphasizing, in opposition to this, that *all* the attributes and activities of God are centered in Jesus, and in him exists the full expression of God’s divine character. God’s expression of His nature is not divided up into countless mediating spiritual powers extending out from God, as the gnostic heretics were teaching the Colossians, but could all be found in Jesus alone.

Weymouth seems to best capture the essence of Paul’s meaning: “For it was the Father’s gracious will that the whole of the divine perfections should dwell in Him.”

There are two things to notice about this, however. First is that, according to v.19 “it pleased the Father” for this to occur (“By God’s own choice,” NEB). Jesus is said to possess divine attributes only by the will, prerogative and action of the Father. This is not compatible with the idea that Jesus is a self-existent, eternal, uncreated God Person.

Secondly, the verb in 2:9 “dwells” is present tense and explains what Jesus is now, in his post-resurrection glorified state. Thus Paul would have us understand that this plenitude of knowledge, glory and power has been received by Jesus from his Father post-ascension, being the “firstborn from the dead” (1:18).

There is no discussion here of Jesus’ essential divine nature during his time on earth, or in some preexistent state. Therefore we see no move away from unitary monotheism reflected here because these divine attributes, while indeed now permanently housed in the glorified Christ, were given to him by his Father when He “seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion...” (Eph. 1:20, 21)

### **I Tim. 3:16**

“And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh...”

There is now nearly universal agreement that this is an incorrect rendering of this verse. The uncial Greek manuscripts upon which the King James Versions based their translations of this passage included a scribal error which features the letters QC, an abbreviation of “God,” where nearly all other manuscripts feature the letters OC, the Greek word for “who.” The accidental (ahem) scribal pen stroke which created a “Q” out of an “O” led to an inaccuracy which other translations have noted and corrected:

“He appeared in a body...” (NIV)

“He was revealed in the flesh...” (RSV)

“He who was revealed in the flesh...” (NASB)

Thus, this passage is no longer used by informed proponents of orthodox Christology

### **Tit. 2:13**

The ambiguity of syntax (sentence construction which creates meaning) of this passage is so great, translators have rendered it with three different meanings:

“Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ;” (KJV)

“looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,” (NKJV)

“awaiting the blessed hope of the appearance of the Glory of the great God and of our Savior Christ Jesus,” (Moffatt)

None of these translations can be dismissed on syntactical grounds alone. What is currently known of *koine* Greek grammar allows for the possibility of each of these constructions. The grammatical discussion is quite technical and it is beyond the scope of this lecture to explore it in detail.

Suffice it to say that experts in ancient Greek who know more of the subject than anyone here have not come to consensus on the best grammatical construction of this text. So the discussion turns on the probabilities of the correctness of each translation as it compares with the teaching of the rest of the letter, the whole of Pauline writings and NT literature in general.

The first translation option suggests that both God the Father and Jesus will appear together. If this is true it would be unique in the NT and runs counter to the weight of NT evidence that Jesus will appear alone in his second coming.

The second translation option suggests that Jesus is “our great God,” yet this runs counter to Paul’s usage of “God” in this letter, in which 12 times “God” refers to God the Father. Of course that fact, by itself, does not make it impossible that Paul intended “God” here to refer to Jesus. But if that were Paul’s intent, one would expect that he would have been more clear in his sentence construction so as to leave no doubt in Titus’ mind that, in this one instance, when he says “God,” he means to refer to Jesus, and not to the Father.

Moreover, one must ask proponents of orthodoxy to explain why this Pharisee should or could choose to upend thousands of years of Hebrew monotheism

- through a passing comment in a private letter to an assistant,
- with no explanation or argumentation whatsoever,
- without proclaiming this earthshaking theological understanding to the Christian community at large, and
- directly contrary to explicit monotheistic statements in his other letters.

The third translation option is the only one which avoids these weaknesses while retaining a complete compatibility with Jesus’ teaching concerning his return:

“For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes *in His own glory, and in His Father’s* and of the holy angels” (Lk. 9:26).

Gordon Clark: “The text (Tit. 2:13) does not clearly say that the great God...appears. It says that the *glory* of the great God appears; and surely one may say that the appearance or return of Christ exhibits the glory of God the Father” (*The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 224).

For all these reasons it’s impossible to say with confidence that Paul intended Titus to understand that Jesus is “the great God” and significant reasons to suspect that he did not. Once again, as with Ro. 9:5, until it is certain that this verse is stating what defenders of orthodoxy claim it is, it can never serve as the decisive proof-text that they seek.

### Alleged statements that Jesus is the Creator

These three passages from Paul, which appear in some English translations to say that Jesus created the world, have much in common. They use similar key Greek words and concepts.

#### **I Cor. 8:6**

“...(there is) one Lord Jesus Christ, *through* whom are all things, and *through* whom we live.” (See also Heb. 1:2)

#### **Col. 1:16**

“For *by* him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things were created *through* him and for him.”

#### **Eph. 3:9**

“and to make all people see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of ages has been hidden in God who created all things *through* Jesus Christ.”

There are two key words in these passages (and in Heb. 1:2). In the passage which reads “For by him all things were created...” the word “by” is from the Greek *en*. In the majority of instances, *en* is translated “in,” which, if so here, would render a meaning different than that Jesus created everything.

Next is the word “through,” from *dia*, variously translated in the NT “by,” “through,” “for,” “because of,” and “for the sake of.” Whether *dia* is translated “through” as opposed to “because of” is regulated by the cases which accompany. With genitive cases it is usually translated “through” and with accusative cases it is sometimes translated “because of” or “on account of.” In all these passages *dia* is in the genitive case, which would favor “through” as the correct translation. Did Paul mean to say, then, that the universe was created by Jesus?

First, let's recognize a difficulty with that conclusion within one of these proof texts. Col. 1:16 reads, "...all things were created through him and *for* him." Did Jesus make everything for himself? Is this how we are to understand the universe, then, as a cosmic playhouse for Jesus? If not, then we cannot take "for him" exactly literally, can we? And if we cannot understand "for him" literally, by what principle must we then take its adjoining phrase—"through him"—literally?

Hold that thought and consider that Jesus himself appears to be blissfully unaware that he had anything to do with creation. In each case Jesus gives God—whom he refers to in the third person—full credit for the creation. (Mt. 19:4; Mk. 10:6; Mk. 13:19).

Adding to this difficulty for the Jesus-as-creator theory is that Paul also is very clear in his public and private teaching concerning the creation and exactly who was responsible for it. To the men of Athens he said: "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands, nor is He worshipped with men's hands, as though He needed anything. Since He gives to all life, breath, and all things... Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all, by raising him from the dead" (Ac. 17:24, 25, 30, 31).

God the Father alone is credited with the act of creation; the man Jesus, whom he ordained by resurrection from the dead, is not said to have anything to do with it. In like manner Paul taught his assistant Timothy: "I urge you in the sight of God who gives life to all things, and before Christ Jesus who witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate..." (I Tim. 6:13). Again, two persons in view: the creator God, and Jesus. This agrees precisely with the early Christian community's understanding (Ac. 4:24-28).

What's going on here? On the one hand, Jesus and Paul keep saying the Father created everything, with Jesus not in the picture at all, then these other verses seem to be saying everything was created through Jesus.

To resolve this apparent contradiction I think we need to dig beneath the surface and try to drink in what Paul is really attempting to express in I Corinthians, Ephesians and Colossians. This will require some investment of time to lay the foundation for that understanding, but I trust when we're finished you'll consider it time well spent.

Last time, we mentioned the influence of Hebrew wisdom literature upon the Apostle John and how that, in turn, influenced his use of *logos* in the prologue to his gospel. What is sometimes not recognized is that wisdom theology also had a profound effect upon Paul, and in his letters he draws the closest possible connection between wisdom and Jesus.

To help us better understand the significance of these passages, let's first review the significance of the ancient Hebrew concept of wisdom and how it filtered down to the first century, when the NT was being written.

We mentioned last time that wisdom, in the Hebrew sense of meaning, is far more than making shrewd decisions in everyday life. Back then it included a much broader and deeper understanding, of wisdom being the divine intelligence whereby God created the universe.

Proverbs 3:19 and 8:22-31 are the best known of these passages: “The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding He established the heavens” (Prov. 3:19).

“Does not wisdom cry out, and understanding lift up her voice?...The Lord possessed me at the beginning of His way, before His works of old. I have been established from everlasting, from the beginning, before there was ever an earth...When He prepared the heavens, I was there...Then I was beside Him, as a master craftsman; and I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him, rejoicing in His inhabited world...” (Prov. 8:1, 22f)

In Proverbs 3, wisdom is understood to be the divine intelligence which created the worlds. In Proverbs 8, the writer draws a far richer literary picture, with wisdom described as an agent of creation—indeed, a person—who delights in God and who is delighted in by God. There appears to a relationship here between God and wisdom. Yet we know there was no Mrs. Wisdom in heaven, helping God create the universe. Wisdom here signifies God’s wise ordering of the worlds, and despite its colorful personification, is not intended to be understood as a person actually standing next to God creating everything.

What we are witnessing here is the Hebrew penchant for personalizing concepts in a highly poetic fashion. A literal reading of these passages would yield quite an inaccurate picture, and the Jews understood this.

In the period between the Testaments, we see the wisdom tradition continued directly along the lines of the Proverbs:

“For she (Wisdom) is an initiate in the knowledge of God, and an associate in his works. If riches are a desirable possession in life, what is richer than wisdom who effects all things? And if understanding is effective, who more than she is fashioner of what exists?” (Wisdom of Solomon, 8:4-6)

“Wisdom, by whose agency the universe was brought to completion...” (Philo, *Quod Deterius Potiori*, 54)

“From eternity, in the beginning, he created me, and for eternity I shall not cease to exist” (Ecclesiasticus 24:9).

James Dunn is helpful in understanding the larger intent of these expositions on wisdom: “Wisdom...was a way of asserting God’s nearness, his involvement with his world, his concern for his people...of God’s immanence, his active concern in creation...while at

the same time protecting his holy transcendence and wholly otherness.” (*Christology in the Making*, p. 176)

Coming into the first century, we see some striking parallels to wisdom literature in the NT:

“With you is wisdom, who knows your works and was present when you made the world” (Wisdom of Solomon 9:9) + “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God...” (Jn. 1:1).

“All light comes from her...” (Aristobulus) + “The life was the light of men” (Jn. 1:4).

“Wisdom went forth to make her dwelling among the children of men, and found no dwelling place” (I Enoch 42:2) + “He came to his own home, and his own people received him not” (Jn. 1:11).

“She is the radiance of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God...” (Wisdom of Solomon 7:26) + “He is the radiance of God’s glory...” (Heb. 1:3).

“The stamp is the eternal Word” (Philo, *De Plantatione* 18) + “...the stamp of (God’s) nature...” (Heb. 1:3).

Finally, then, let’s narrow our focus to the writings of Paul himself. In Paul’s vocabulary, wisdom is *sophia*, which can mean either worldly or divine knowledge, depending upon the context. In some places, however, Paul uses the term just as we’ve been reading in the wisdom literature: “But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory” (I Cor. 2:7).

In the following passages Paul directly equates the hidden wisdom of God with Messiah Jesus:

“but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (I Cor. 1:24).

“But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God...” (I Cor. 1:30).

With that background we are better prepared to understand Paul’s expression in I Corinthians, Ephesians and Colossians, that all things were made *through* Jesus Christ. As we’ve seen, for Paul, in Christ Jesus dwelt the hidden wisdom of God, that divine intelligence which personified God’s creative power in Hebrew thought and literature. We saw that understanding reflected in John and the letter of Hebrews as well.

We need not think *Christ* made the worlds, any more than we need think wisdom literally made the worlds. God the Father made the worlds, as Jesus and Paul both clearly taught, and the first century Christians all believed. Paul isn’t attempting to inform us of

something Christ himself didn't know he did, and there is no contradiction here of his own teaching on the subject either.

Rather, Paul—and the other NT writers—applies God's creative wisdom to Jesus exclusively, whom he directly identifies as “the wisdom of God.” He is trying to convince his readers that the *power and divine intelligence which made all things has now been revealed finally and completely in Christ Jesus*.

So then, if

- a) wisdom figuratively identifies the divine mind through which all things were made; and
- b) Jesus uniquely and ultimately embodies that wisdom, then:
- c) Jesus embodies the divine mind through which all things were made.

This is the sense in which Paul means to say that all things were made “through Jesus Christ.” The wisdom of God, which was said to be at work with God in creation, is embodied in Jesus Christ.

“Christ who because he is now Lord (by virtue of his resurrection—Ac. 2:36; Phil. 2:9-11) now shares in God's rule over creation and believers, and therefore his Lordship is a continuation and fullest expression of God's own creative power.” (Dunn, *Christology*, p. 181, 182).

#### Statements suggesting Jesus was created

##### **Col. 1:15**

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.”

“Firstborn” is *prototokos*, meaning literally, “the first one born,” as in Mt. 1:25, Lk. 2:7 and Heb. 11:28. However, *prototokos* carries with it the cultural weight of connoting rank, status and esteem. In Hebrew society, the firstborn son was greatly favored over the rest. The firstborn son of a Jewish family was considered preeminent over his siblings (Gen. 49:3). He, not his younger brothers, became the head of the family after the father's death and received a double portion of inheritance. Hence, the term *firstborn* took on a connotation of authority and position of favor (Jer. 31:9—Ephraim was actually, literally, second-born to Manasseh, yet is called God's *prototokos* in the septuagint).

So, a literal understanding of this passage which suggests Jesus was the *first one made*, while not necessarily incorrect, cannot be held with certainty. It may be that Paul is using *prototokos* in a figurative way and only means to say that Jesus was God's most esteemed and preeminent son. Indeed, the entire passage of v. 15-20 emphasizes this very point.

At the same time, certainly *prototokos* is fully compatible with the idea that Jesus is, in fact, a literal offspring of God, and this is not the term one would normally use to refer to an eternal, uncreated being. After all, to be “born” at all is to have a beginning.

**Ro. 15:6**

“...so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

**II Cor. 11:31**

“The God and Father of our Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever...”

**Eph. 1:3**

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...”

Defenders of orthodoxy have never given us a plausible understanding of what the NT means when it repeatedly presents God as Jesus’ “father” even though he is allegedly nothing of the sort, since Jesus allegedly existed eternally and was created by no one. If a “father” is not his “son’s” progenitor, what meaning, exactly, could these terms have at all? Until promoters of the traditional doctrine can answer this fundamental question, we are right to suspect their conclusions.

Having finished examining the alleged proof-texts of Jesus’ Diety in the writings of Paul, let us return to our original question. Do we see in any of these passages a clearly stated, unambiguous teaching that Jesus is God? The answer is no. There is not a single passage in all of Paul’s writings which clearly teach such a thing, and several, as we’ve seen, which either explicitly state, or strongly imply, precisely the opposite. The burden of proof which orthodoxy must bear in positing Paul’s move away from the unitary monotheistic faith of his fathers has yet to even be touched, much less fully borne.

Paul’s straightforward proclamation that “...for us there is only one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Messiah...” stands uncontradicted. Paul the Pharisee, Paul the unitary monotheist, still speaks, to those who are willing to listen.