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https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_vox_evangelica.php

The Worship of Jesus—A Neglected Factor In Christological Debate?

Richard T. France

[p.19]

The invitation to deliver this lecture in honour of the late Sir John Laing reached me shortly after I had read the life of Sir John, published soon after his death in 1978.¹ I never met Sir John, but his name had long been familiar to me not only from the hoardings on building sites but also from his involvement in many areas of Christian work. In reading his life, I came to realise more fully how much the Christian cause in this country (and indeed beyond) owes to the consistent, unassuming discipleship of this man. I represent Tyndale House, Cambridge, and it may truly be said that without Sir John Laing, Tyndale House would not now exist. The same, I believe, is true of this college. Sir John saw our two institutions as parallel instruments for the development of an informed and committed Christian scholarship, Tyndale House to provide the heavy-weight undergirding by research and writing for the academic world of theology, and the London Bible College as a centre for training men and women equipped with this evangelical theology to go out and apply it in the practical business of Christian ministry and teaching. We thank God for his vision and for his practical embodiment of it, and pray that together we may continue to live up to it. In the light of this, I could hardly refuse the invitation to lecture in his honour; it is not only a privilege, but an act of *pietas*.

I venture to hope that Sir John would have approved of my chosen subject for this lecture, for if there is one area where the ordinary Christian today may feel his faith threatened, and where it is the task of both our institutions to provide the pastor and teacher with solid biblical study to undergird his ministry, it must surely be in christology.

The ordinary Christian, and indeed non-Christian, who makes no pretence to theological expertise may well look back to 1963 as the beginning of an era of change; the publication of John Robinson's *Honest to God* in that year made it vividly clear that some leading theologians did not believe Jesus to be more than human, though of course at the top of the human ladder. Perhaps more surprising to those not in the know was the fact that official reaction to that book was muted and equivocal. Did this mean then that Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus had become an optional extra? From that time on theology dropped out of the headlines again, until in 1977 the title, if not the contents, of *The Myth of God Incarnate* revived public interest and showed that the spirit of *Honest to God* was still alive. About the same time a television series presented by one of the authors of that book set out a radically reduced estimate of Jesus to a wider audience than ever *Honest to God* reached, and more recently the same author has produced another book with a title designed to shock, *Taking Leave of God*,² which undercuts the question whether Jesus is God by questioning whether there is such a thing as 'God' for Jesus to be!

¹ Roy Coad, *Laing: the biography of Sir John W. Laing, C.B.E. (1879-1978)* (1979).

² D. Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (1980). See an interesting immediate review by David L. Edwards in the *Church Times* of 3 October, 1980.

But behind the headlines a vast and complex debate has been going on, involving theologians of all types, exegetes, biblical, systematic, and historical theologians,

[p.20]

philosophers and apologists. No part of the traditional structure of christology has remained undisturbed. One of the most popular whipping-boys has been the classical formula of the Council of Chalcedon, which proclaimed Jesus as 'truly God and truly man,... in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation'. It has been attacked as inadequate, as dry and scholastic, but above all as incredible or indeed meaningless to the ordinary man today.

I do not intend here to try to defend the Chalcedonian Definition, nor to enter directly into the modern christological debate as such, but to go behind the patristic distinctions and the Greek and Latin tags to the basic question of why the whole exercise was necessary in the first place. For if some of our modern theologians are right there is not much point in discussing just how the two natures could be combined in one person; there are not two natures to combine. The divine Jesus, we are told, is a myth which early Christian piety superimposed on a purely human figure, an expression of reverence which would have seemed preposterous, and even blasphemous, to Jesus Himself and to His earliest followers. By introducing this unnecessary and, to us, unintelligible category of personal divinity into their assessment of Jesus, they created the gigantic red herring of incarnation which has kept the theologians talking ever since. If only we could get back behind that pious mythology to the real Jesus, we could forget about *homoousios* and Chalcedon and Monophysitism, and start talking the language of modern man.

This scenario, which is fundamental to much current debate on christology, depends on the assumption of a radical discontinuity at some point between the original Jesus and the alien 'God incarnate' character which was superimposed on Him. This is what C. F. D. Moule dubs the 'evolutionary' approach.³ It supposes that 'when the Christian movement spread beyond Palestinian soil, it began to come under the influence of non-Semitic Saviour-cults and to assimilate some of their ideas'. The worship of Jesus as a divine being thus owed its origin to influences foreign to Jesus' own environment. It thus constitutes the 'evolution' of a new species.

In contrast to this approach, Professor Moule advocates a 'developmental' view, which accepts a difference in scale between the christology of earliest Christianity and its later forms, but sees the latter as 'attempts to describe what was already,' there from the beginning'. 'They are analogous not so much to the emergence of a new species, as to the unfolding (if you like) of flower from bud and the growth of fruit from flower.' On this view incarnational christology was not a red herring. It was the inevitable consequence of what Jesus was and said and did.

I am not convinced that Moule's evolution/development terminology is the most lucid, particularly for those to whom 'evolution' is a word with emotive connotations in another context, but the dichotomy which he discerns among christological approaches is true and fundamental. Let me, then, declare myself unashamedly a 'developmentalist'. It is my hope to

³ C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (1977) 2 and throughout the introduction.

indicate some of the evidence for this view in a study of the phenomenon which I have termed 'the worship of Jesus'. But first a few comments on one of the basic characteristics of the 'evolutionary' approach.

I. THE SEARCH FOR 'PARALLELS'

In 1961 the Jewish New Testament scholar Samuel Sandmel gave a presidential address to the Society for Biblical Literature the title of which has been remembered

[p.21]

and welcomed by many who never heard or read the address. It was called 'Parallelomania'.⁴ It focused in an attack on that crutch of NT scholars, Strack and Billerbeck's *Kommentar*. Sandmel questioned the value and relevance of collecting 'parallels' to NT passages and ideas from a wide range of Jewish sources of different periods and characters.

Sandmel's salutary warning is perhaps even more relevant to much current christological discussion than it was in 1961. The tendency is to look for 'parallels' to titles like 'Son of God' or to concepts of incarnation or pre-existence, or the attribution of divine honours to a man, and to regard these parallels as explanations of the NT data, as showing the sources from which these ideas crept into Christian language, and so precipitated the 'evolution' from the teaching of Jesus and the faith of his early followers to the incarnational theology of the later NT writings. The search for parallels extends enthusiastically far beyond the Jewish sources questioned by Sandmel, and draws in material from all over the Mediterranean world and even beyond.

Now I would not dispute for a moment the value of the fullest possible knowledge of the cultural background within which the NT came into being, in order to help us to interpret it correctly in its own context rather than on the basis of later Christian tradition. Some of the parallels produced are of immense value in this task, as, for instance, anyone who has had to disentangle the significance of John's *Logos* language will know. But 'parallels' can be abused, and I would suggest a few cautions.

1. Are the parallels real? A mere coincidence of words or imagery in itself proves nothing, particularly if those words are used in a quite different way in the supposedly parallel texts. Sometimes 'parallels' are claimed which are so partial as to be worthless. Thus to quote in the search for Graeco-Roman parallels to the idea of incarnation such myths as that of Philemon and Baucis (where the gods merely appear in human form) or of Heracles (a mortal who was taken up to heaven to be an immortal)⁵ is of little value, since while these myths might provide parallels to respectively docetic and adoptionist views, they contain nothing relating to the NT idea of incarnation. There is no real parallel here.

2. Do the 'parallels' come from a relevant culture? C. H. Talbert's recent book *What is a Gospel?* is essentially an attempt to fit the Christian gospels into the milieu of Graeco-Roman

⁴ Published in *JBL* 81 (1962) 1-13.

⁵ See especially C. H. Talbert, *What is a Gospel?* (1977) chapter 2 for a careful setting out of the material about such 'immortals'. A lengthy response is included in section IV of D. E. Aune, 'The Problem of the Genre of the Gospels' in R. T. France and D. Wenham (eds.) *Gospel Perspectives* Volume II (1981).

biographical writing. In the process he suggests how the gospel material would appear to 'the average Mediterranean man-in-the-street', 'a Mediterranean man', 'a Hellenistic person'.⁶ But the prior question must surely be whether the gospels were written for such a person, whether their materials were developed in a milieu where his Graeco-Roman cultural background would have any influence, or even be known. The culture in which Christianity arose was a mixed one indeed, but can we assume that the average Galilean was familiar with Ovid? A parallel, however real, is of no importance if it comes from a cultural milieu with which the NT writers are unlikely to have been familiar. Thus when Talbert produces his one example of the idea of preexistence applied to an 'immortal', it turns out to be from Plutarch's account of Romulus; on this basis 'a Mediterranean person who heard Jesus depicted in this way would find it difficult to avoid understanding him in terms of the mythology of immortals'.⁷ Maybe (though how many Mediterranean men-in-the-street were

[p.22]

familiar with Plutarch?), but what has this to do with the development of the idea of preexistence in (and before) the writings of *Paul*?⁸

3. *Are the parallels significant?* A similarity of wording or indeed of concept may be found to be real and to be from a relevant milieu, but it may still be of no significance. Thus if, for instance, two Jewish writers (e.g. Ben Sira and Paul) each make use of the same OT idea, this is evidence of their coming from the same cultural milieu, but not of any contact or dependence between them. Some of the similarities between the language of Qumran and that of the NT come under the same suspicion; are they perhaps evidence simply that both sets of writings belong to first-century Palestine, rather than indicating any relationship of dependence? The similarities are real, but are they significant?

4. *Is a parallel necessarily a source or influence?* This is a development of the last point. It seems sometimes to be assumed that when you have discovered a parallel to a NT idea which is earlier in time than the NT writing (or later in time, but apparently indicative of a continuing theme), you have thereby 'explained' this feature in the NT. The earlier is assumed to be the source of the later, or at least a dominant influence on it. At its worst this approach can depict Christianity as a sponge which soaked up whatever religious ideas were present in its environment, itself contributing nothing but a fresh synthesis of second-hand ideas. Indeed such a view is almost inevitable on the 'evolutionary' approach to christology, for it makes the determining factor in christological development not anything which was internal to Christianity or derivable from Jesus, but the more sophisticated religious climate of the world around.⁹

But non-Christian parallels, even if shown to be real and significant, are not necessarily the source of Christian religious ideas. Martin Hengel, having set out various Jewish parallels to

⁶ *Ibid.*, 39, 41, 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁸ Cf., J. Drury, *Tradition and Design in Luke's Gospel* (1976), 27-30 for a similar assumption that the world of Aesop and of Apollonius is the right milieu in which to set the development of NT christology. For a more sober assessment of the relevance of Graeco-Roman parallels, see M. Hengel, *The Son of God* (ET 1976), 23-41.

⁹ A remarkable recent example of this approach is Michael Goulder's chapter 'The Two Roots of the Christian Myth' in J. Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), 64-86, where he derives the developed christology of the NT from 'the Samaritan gnostical myth', a source which has escaped most other writers on christology.

NT 'Son of God' language, helpfully refers to them as 'building material which would be used by the early church in the conception of its christological outlines'.¹⁰ The church had something new and unparalleled to say; Christianity drew its essential message not from surrounding religious influences but from the fact of Jesus. In constructing their theology the early Christians (and indeed Jesus Himself) necessarily used as 'building material' the ideas and language of the culture to which they belonged, both to give form to their own growing perception of the significance of Jesus and also to present their message in a way their contemporaries could understand. Traditional language might be drawn on sometimes by way of contrast, to show how Jesus differed from existing religious ideas, sometimes approvingly, to show how He developed and fulfilled them. But all the time the determining factor was Jesus. Sandmel puts the point clearly: 'Only by a supposition of such distinctiveness can I account to myself for the origin and growth of Christianity and its ultimate separation from Judaism.... I am not prepared to believe that the writers of Christian literature only copied sources and never did anything original and creative.'¹¹ Given such an understanding, while parallels may usefully be studied as 'building materials', we should be very cautious of regarding them as sources.

An example may be taken from the Jewish traditions about Wisdom. The idea of Wisdom as a semi-personified mediator, God's agent in creation, who came from God and made her home among men, to be the channel of God's guidance and His blessings, is a prominent feature in Jewish wisdom literature from Proverbs to

[p.23]

Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon, and it is widely accepted that wisdom language has been an element in the fashioning of NT christology.¹² But when one turns to a specific text where verbal echoes are clear, such as Matthew 11: 28-30 with its echoes of Ben Sira 51: 23-27 (cf. 6: 24-31), the difference of essential content is as clear as the indebtedness in regard to words and concepts. Ben Sira calls men to come and learn from him and to take up Wisdom's yoke; Jesus also calls men to come and learn from Him, but the yoke He offers is His own. Ben Sira has found for himself by 'labouring a little' the rest which Wisdom gives; Jesus Himself gives rest to those who labour. Ben Sira can only point to a mediator other than himself; what is lacking in his call, and central to that of Jesus, is precisely the idea of incarnation, the Wisdom of God as a man among men. Important as the 'parallels' in the wisdom-tradition are, none of them offers a source for this central and radically new concept of NT christology.

Parallels, then, must be used with caution. Even when they are real and significant, and come from a relevant culture, they still leave us with the question why the Christian writers felt it appropriate to use these particular models in setting out their estimate of Jesus. The 'evolutionary' view suggests that the Christians transferred alien religious ideas to Jesus as if not to be outdone; if others have divine Saviour-figures, so must we! I wonder about the psychology such a view implies, and how it squares up to what we know of early Christianity. Does the NT really suggest an earnest search for ever higher models from other religious traditions which might be appropriated and imposed on the purely human Jesus, or does it

¹⁰ *The Son of God*, 57.

¹¹ *Art. cit.* (note 4), 4.

¹² See, e.g., M. Hengel, *The Son of God*, 48-51, for a brief review of the material.

rather indicate a progressive grappling with the implications of what was already there in the traditions and experiences of His ministry and teaching, in which surrounding cultures may indeed have provided 'building materials', but for which the dynamic was internal to Christianity, a new and essentially unparalleled experience of God in Jesus? It is this latter reading of the NT evidence that I now wish to support.

II. THE WORSHIP OF JESUS

New Testament christology is a complex study, and allows several different lines of approach, all in their own ways valid and illuminating.

We might start 'at the top', by discussing whether the NT calls Jesus 'God'.¹³ We would then study a small number of passages where explicit God-language may be applied to Jesus. In that case we will find ourselves disappointed that in many cases the apparent direct attribution of divinity to Jesus melts away in the light of uncertainty about either the text, or the punctuation, or the syntax,¹⁴ leaving us with no undisputed (or almost undisputed!) direct attribution of divinity to Jesus outside the opening and closing declarations of the Gospel of John (Jn. 1: 1; 1: 18;¹⁵ 20: 28).

Or we may focus our attention on the classic christological passages of the NT which, without actually calling Jesus 'God' (except in John's prologue), present conscious theological reflection on His relationship with the Father. Passages such as John 1: 1-18; Philippians 2: 6-11; Colossians 1: 15-20 (cf. 2: 9); Hebrews 1: 1-4 provide ample and rewarding scope for a study of some of the earliest deliberate christological formulation, and are of course crucially important for any adequate discussion of NT christology.

Thirdly we might take one of the most popular routes in recent discussion, a

[p.24]

study of the titles applied to Jesus in the NT. This route has the advantage of taking us behind the formal statements to an important indicator of how Christians habitually thought and spoke of Jesus, and as such is an invaluable complement to the study of more formal language.¹⁶

All these approaches are right and necessary, and all will be presupposed as parallel and complementary to the study which follows. But I believe we can and must go further back, to the underlying attitudes which made it appropriate for the NT Christians to use such titles as 'Lord' and 'Son of God', to work out their understanding of His eternal relationship with the

¹³ For some examples of this approach see A. W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the NT* (1962), 53-74; R. E. Brown, *Jesus: God and Man* (1968), 6-28.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Acts 20: 28; Romans 9: 5; Galatians 2: 20; Colossians 2: 2; 2 Thessalonians 1: 12; Titus 2: 13; Hebrews 1: 8; James 1: 1; 2 Peter 1: 1; 1 John 5: 20.

¹⁵ Reading *theos*, as surely we must since the publication of papyri 66 and 75; English versions have been slow to catch up with the consensus of textual scholars, but see now GNB and NIV. The textual history of John 1: 18 may be traced in a fascinating graphic form in J. Finegan, *Encountering New Testament Manuscripts* (1975), 111-177 (summarised 174-177).

¹⁶ A useful short introduction to the study of the titles of Jesus is by I. H. Marshall in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (1980), II 771-780. Cf., more fully, his *The Origins of New Testament Christology* (1976), chapters 4-7.

Father in theological language, and ultimately to call Him 'God'. All these forms of expression are, I believe, the outcrops of an underlying stratum which ran deep in the life and experience of Jesus' first followers, and which may be discerned in many incidental ways in the NT writings, a stratum which I have called 'the worship of Jesus'.

I am using 'worship' in a broad sense. My dictionary defines the noun as 'adoration paid, as to a god', and the verb as 'to pay divine honours to'. So I am not speaking only, or even primarily, of formal acts of worship, involving prayer and adoration, but of the attitude which treats Jesus as divine. This attitude will of course express itself in formal acts of worship, and these will be included in our study, but I want to consider more generally how the earliest Christians thought of Jesus, what was their experience of Him. I want to suggest that to regard Him as divine was not a late addition to Christian thought, but was there at least in embryo from the beginning, that the formal christological language of the NT was not a new intellectual idea which then had to be translated into experience, but rather was the ultimate working out in theory of what was already present in Christian experience of Jesus.

In considering this subject one very obvious point must be emphasised: the earliest Christians were *Jews*. Monotheism was the hallmark of Judaism. To be a Jew was to be committed, often fanatically committed, to the maintenance of faith in only one God, in the face of a surrounding hellenistic culture which worshipped many gods, not to mention many semi-divine heroes, and a deified emperor. Hellenism had made great inroads in Palestine, to be sure, but not to the extent of modifying the monotheistic fervour of the ordinarily religious Jews out of whom Jesus' first followers were drawn, still less that of the Pharisee Saul of Tarsus. For a Jew then, as now, to speak of a man of his own times as divine was as impossible as it is for a Muslim to welcome the Christian doctrine of the Trinity or of Jesus as the Son of God. A docetic christology might be acceptable, for the Old Testament provided sufficient precedent for the appearance of God on earth, particularly in the anthropomorphic 'angel of Yahweh'. But this is poles apart from the idea of *incarnation*. If one thing was clear and undisputed about Jesus as He lived in Palestine, it was that He was truly human. Yet it was this real man whom His Jewish followers began to regard as divine and ultimately came to call explicitly 'God'. It is perhaps impossible for us, with nearly twenty centuries of familiarity with Christian doctrine, to grasp the shocking nature of this belief. But it is important to realise that no Jew would calmly listen to a man being described as divine, and it can only have been with the utmost reluctance that Jesus' Jewish followers, however great their respect and love for their leader, could be brought to use such language. We are told today that incarnational language is incredible and offensive to modern man; if he, with his cultural condi-

[p.25]

tioning, cannot take it, how hard must it have been for first-century Jews to speak like this?!

It is in this light that we must understand the fact, mentioned above, that the explicit use of God-language about Jesus is infrequent in the NT, and is concentrated in the later writings, and that hardly any such language has avoided textual surgery or syntactical ambiguity. It was such shocking language that, even when the beliefs underlying it were firmly established, it was easier, and perhaps more politic, to express these beliefs in less direct terms. The wonder is not that the NT so seldom describes Jesus as God, but that in such a milieu it does so at all. There must have been a very strong compulsion behind such a radical conversion of language.

What then was the driving force behind this remarkable development of thought which produced NT christology and culminated in Chalcedonian orthodoxy? In a word, it was Jesus Himself and the impact He made on His followers. NT christology was the theoretical outworking of the prior attitude which I am calling 'the worship of Jesus'. We can now only trace this theme sketchily through some of the earlier strata of NT thought and life; its fuller development deserves more extended exposition than is possible here.

1. *The Ministry of Jesus*

I realise, of course, that to take the gospels at their face-value as a factual report of words and events in the earthly ministry of Jesus is an unfashionable thing to do, and the more so when the subject under discussion is so evidently theological an issue as the divinity of Jesus. But it is not possible here to defend the authenticity of every saying under discussion, and I must simply hope that the total impression which I am trying to outline may be found strong enough to survive any doubts which may be felt on individual passages cited. For myself, I have given my reasons elsewhere for believing the gospel accounts to be essentially historical in character, and to be a reliable record of the content of Jesus' teaching, even when due allowance has been made for the evangelists' individual interpretation of the material they recorded.¹⁷ Some will prefer to view the material here presented as evidence not for what Jesus said and did, but rather for the attitude to Jesus of Christians in the middle decades of the first century, when the gospel materials were taking shape; in that case it will testify to a later stage in the development of the Christian attitudes which underlie NT christology, but one which is also important to the theme of this study.

Now the gospels do not provide clear evidence that Jesus was worshipped in the formal sense during His lifetime. That requests were addressed to Him, including requests for miraculous help (e.g. Mk. 1: 40; 5: 22f.; Mt. 8: 25; 14: 30) is not evidence of worship, any more than it would be in the case of any one else who was known to heal by the power of God. Nor need the fact that many such requests include the address *kyrie* ('Lord') imply divine honours, despite the clearly divine implications of that title as used later, for *kyrie* as addressed to a living person was a polite form appropriate to anyone regarded as in some sense superior to the speaker, more deferential than our 'Sir', but far from implying divinity.¹⁸ Similarly, the mention that suppliants and others 'worshipped' Him, as the AV put it (e.g. Mk. 5: 6; Mt. 8: 2; 9: 18), or knelt before Him (e.g. Mk. 10: 17; Mt. 17: 14), while it clearly conveyed more than mere politeness particularly to

[p.26]

Matthew, who is fond of the verb *proskynein*, does not in the historical context of Jesus' ministry necessarily imply what 'worship' means to us; it is more than social politeness, but is not a gesture appropriate only to God (see e.g. Mt. 18: 26; Rev. 3: 9).¹⁹

¹⁷ See my essay 'The Authenticity of the Sayings of Jesus' in C. Brown (ed.), *History, Criticism and Faith* (1976), 101-143.

¹⁸ See W. Foerster, *TDNT* III, 1086, 1093; C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology*, 35. For a fuller discussion of the cultural background see G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (1973), 111-127.

¹⁹ See the discussion by C. F. D. Moule, *ibid.*, 175-176; for the Jewish background see H. Greeven, *TDNT*, VI, 760-763.

Indeed, it is not easy to imagine what it would mean, especially in a Jewish milieu, to offer formal worship to a man standing in front of you (cf. Acts 10: 25f. for atypical Jewish reaction). There is only one incident in Jesus' pre-resurrection ministry where *proskynein* seems to approach what we would call 'worship', and that is in a 'numinous' context where the disciples saw Jesus first as a ghost, and then were led by His miraculous power to confess Him as 'Son of God' (Mt. 14:33).²⁰

To look for formal worship in the normal circumstances of Jesus' ministry is, then, not likely to be helpful. But the formal worship which began very quickly after His death and resurrection was a response to what they had seen and heard during the ministry, as He presented Himself to them, indirectly but unmistakably, as more than a man of God.

Not that Jesus went around proclaiming Himself to be God. The feature of His teaching which comes closest to this is His use of Father/Son language, which indicates a unique relationship between Jesus and His Father, different in kind from that by which He encouraged His disciples to approach God as 'Our Father'. The claim to an exclusively intimate relationship with God in Mt. 11: 27²¹ is often suspected as a later formulation because it is regarded as untypical of the Synoptic accounts of Jesus' teaching,²² but while it is undoubtedly the most explicit such saying, it is only bringing to clearer expression what all the other Father/Son' language implies, and this is a persistent feature of both Synoptic and Johannine' records. In any account of the christological implications of Jesus' own teaching this 'Son of God' language must play a significant role.

Less obvious, but arguably more impressive, is the way Jesus' sayings sometimes assume divine functions for Himself, or seem to put Him in the place of God. It is hard to miss this implication in Jesus' assertion, in the face of the suggestion of blasphemy, of His right to the divine prerogative of forgiving sins (Mk. 2: 1-12; cf. Lk. 23: 43). Similarly, He sees Himself as the arbiter of men's destiny (Mt. 7: 21-23) and as the judge at the final assize (Mt. 25: 31ff.; cf. Jn. 5: 22f.). He is able to give life (Jn. 5: 24; 6: 40, 51) because He has life in Himself (Jn. 5: 26). Meanwhile He teaches on His own authority, unlike other Jewish teachers (Mt. 7: 28f. etc.), and attributes to His own words the eternal validity of the word of God (Mk. 13: 31; cf. Is. 40: 8). He can even picture Himself as the king in an eternal kingdom (Mt. 25: 31-34; cf. the references to the kingdom of the Son of Man, Mt. 13: 41; 16: 28). He demands of His followers an absolute personal loyalty (Mt. 10: 37-39 etc.), and offers them rest, which He Himself will give (Mt. 11: 28-30). To reject or to receive Him is to reject or to receive God (Mt. 10: 40; Lk. 10: 16).

All this, and it is not a complete account, is evidence not of a formal claim to divinity so much as of an assumption of a divine role which is the more impressive because it does not

²⁰ In John 9: 38 it is not clear how much christological understanding lay behind the man's 'Kyrie, I believe'; it relates to Jesus' status as 'Son of Man', not to His divinity, and the context suggests rather a confused expression of indebtedness and of Jesus' God-sent authority than any attribution of divine honours to Him, though undoubtedly John would want his readers to apply it in a deeper sense.

²¹ If J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* I (ET 1971), 59-61, is right in his suggestion that 'the son' and 'the father' are here not specific but general, making this a simple observation about human family relationships, the point of such an observation in this context could only be as a 'parable' of the special relationship Jesus claims with His Father, making the same claim by analogy rather than directly.

²² On the authenticity of this saying see especially J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (1975), 27-34.

seem to require argument or defence, and which occurs in a wide variety of gospel traditions, Synoptic as well as Johannine.

It is consistent with this that in Jesus' use of OT texts and imagery we find the same tendency to put Himself in the place of God, not ostentatiously, but almost incidentally, as if it were a perfectly natural substitution. Thus the children's

[p.27]

praise of Jesus is defended by reference to a psalm about the praise of God (Mt. 21: 16; cf. Ps. 8: 2 (Heb. 8: 3)), His mission to seek and save the lost echoes Ezekiel's prophecy of the divine shepherd (Lk. 19: 10; cf. Ezek. 34, especially verses 16, 22), the rejected stone (Jesus) becomes the stone on which men stumble, echoing an image of God in Isaiah (Lk. 20: 18; cf. Is. 8: 14f.), and the portrayal of the Son of Man as judge and king at the final assize echoes the wording of at least three OT accounts of the appearance of God for judgement (Mt. 25: 31-34, echoing Dan. 7: 9-10; Joel 3: 1-12 (Heb. 4: 1-12); Zech. 14: 5). The equation of John the Baptist as His forerunner with the prediction in Malachi 3: 1 and 4:5-6 (Heb. 3: 23-24) of the coming of the messenger/Elijah (so Mk. 9: 12f.; Mt. 11: 10, 14) has similar implications if, as I believe, Malachi's figure is the direct precursor of the coming of God, with no third 'messianic' figure in view.²³ Similar implications may be discerned in Jesus' use of other OT texts, as of course in many later NT allusions.²⁴ It is also remarkable how many of Jesus' parables apparently apply to Himself figures which are typically used for God in the OT, such as shepherd, king, bridegroom, sower.²⁵

What may be said of a man who used such language? The whole of this evidence can hardly be dismissed as later Christian creation in view both of its varied and pervasive nature and of its very unobtrusiveness. It does not look as if it was designed to make a theological point. But if even some of this material is genuine, and if we may assume that Jesus' disciples, however gradually, were able to discern its implications, then we have the raw material in Jesus' own teaching for an increasing awareness that He was more than a prophet, and for that attitude to Him which could ultimately result in worshipping Him as God.

2. The Primitive Church

The NT accounts of the church in the period following Jesus' resurrection indicate that this phenomenon of the worship of Jesus developed remarkably quickly. Thus we find Jesus described in Peter's sermons in Acts as Saviour (4: 12), author of life (3: 15; 5: 31), giver of repentance and forgiveness (5: 31), and judge (10: 42; cf. 17: 31). We find too a significant difference in the use of *kyrios* from that in the gospels: the vocative *kyrie* addressed to a living person need have no superhuman connotations, but when a man is described after His death as *ho kyrios*, this is a different matter altogether, especially when those references are to His present rather than His past status (Acts 2: 36; 4: 33; 7: 59; 10: 36, etc.). Such uses immediately bring into view the associations which *ho kyrios* inevitably carried for a Greek-

²³ See on this exegesis J. A. T. Robinson, *Twelve New Testament Studies* (1962), 35-37; R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (1971), 91., n.31.

²⁴ See my *Jesus and the Old Testament*, 150-159.

²⁵ See P. B. Payne, in the appendix to his article 'The Authenticity of the Parables of Jesus', in R. T. France and D. Wenham (eds.), *Gospel Perspectives Volume II* (1981); the material is based on Payne's Ph.D. dissertation (Cambridge, 1975).

speaking Jew, in that it was the standard LXX translation for the name of God. He could no more use *ho kyrios* without thinking of its divine connotations than we could use 'the Lord' of a human leader today. And this title springs into prominence in Christian preaching immediately after the resurrection; indeed its applicability to Jesus is confirmed by reference to the resurrection (Acts 2: 36).

Moreover, alongside the attribution to Jesus in preaching of those divine functions and status which His own teaching had implied, we find from a very early period the beginning of prayer addressed to Him, first by Stephen at his martyrdom (Acts 7: 59) and then by Ananias in Acts 9: 10-16, where verse 17 shows that the 'Lord' addressed is Jesus, and Jesus' followers are already characterised as 'all who call upon his name' (verse 14; cf. 9: 21; 22: 16).

[p.28]

Here then is evidence of the beginning of worship of Jesus in a more formal sense.²⁶ I realise, of course, that Acts is for many as suspect for anachronistic features as are the records of Jesus' ministry, but when the above evidence is compared with what Paul's letters indicate of the nature of Christian devotion to Jesus in the period prior to their writing in the 50s and 60s, there seems good ground for questioning why this account may not fairly represent the impact made by the risen Jesus on His followers, an impact for which His own teaching had prepared the way.

3. The Letters of Paul

Paul's letters are generally agreed to be the earliest completed writings of the Christian movement which have survived. They are thus an essential means of testing the picture of earliest Christianity which the later gospels and Acts present.

Leaving aside the explicit christological formulations of Philippians 2 and Colossians 1, and the titles he used for Jesus, I would like now to sketch briefly the evidence for an underlying attitude of worship towards Jesus both in Paul's own mind and in the churches within which he worked.

It is striking first to note the 'definition' of Christians in 1 Corinthians 1: 2 as 'those who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Not only does the phrase in itself indicate that prayer to Jesus was a normal and distinguishing characteristic of Christians in the 50s, but 'to call on the name of the Lord' is a regular OT formula for worship and prayer offered to God (Gen. 4: 26; 13: 4; Ps. 105: 1; Jer. 10: 25; Joel 2: 32, etc.). Thus the phrase as a whole suggests that Pliny's description of Christian worship about 115 as singing 'to Christ as God' could already have been an outsider's impression sixty years earlier.²⁷ Indeed this characteristic is apparently earlier still, for the use of the Aramaic formula of prayer to Jesus, *Maranatha* ('Our Lord, come') in 1 Corinthians 16: 22 when writing to a Greek church can only indicate that this formula, like such foreign expressions as 'Hosanna' and 'Hallelujah' today, was hallowed by long usage. When it originated in the Aramaic-speaking church can only be

²⁶ Cf. also Matthew's use of *proskynein* in 28: 9 and 17 of the reaction of the disciples in the presence of the risen Jesus; they are not now suppliants, but, as in 14: 33, overwhelmed by a sense of numinous awe.

²⁷ If it is legitimate to discern a trinitarian structure in Ephesians 5: 18-20 ('filled. with the Spirit... singing to the Lord... giving thanks to God the Father') this would explicitly describe 'singing to Christ', an even closer approximation to Pliny's observation.

guessed, but to be familiar in Corinth in the 50s it is likely to date from the very early days of the Jerusalem church; in that case Jesus, not long after His death, was being 'called upon' by Christians from His own cultural background.

That the worship of the Christian congregations in Paul's day was focused on Jesus is indicated by the fact that believers were baptised 'into Christ' (Rom. 6: 3; Gal. 3: 27), and that their central act of worship was 'the Lord's supper' (1 Con 11: 20; cf. 10: 21). Thus it is not surprising that they can be called 'the churches of Christ' (Rom. 16: 16), or that He is described as the head of the whole church (Eph. 1: 22f.; 5: 23), or as its bridegroom (Eph. 5 : 25-32).

In this context we must at least mention the famous Pauline phrase 'in Christ', even if we do not have time to discuss it adequately. At the least it must point to Jesus as the focus of Christian faith, the one to whom they owe their spiritual life, and who claims their total loyalty. Even this aspect of its meaning indicates an attitude to Jesus which approaches what we have called 'worship'. But most interpreters find it impossible to do justice to some of Paul's uses of the phrase without using terms such as 'participation', 'incorporation', or 'mystical union'. C. F. D. Moule devotes the second chapter of his *The Origin of Christology* to a careful examination of this idea of 'the corporate Christ', in which he recognises

[p.29]

the difficulty of envisaging what such language means, but concludes that it is an essential part of Paul's thought, indicating that for him Jesus 'was found to be an "inclusive" personality. And this means, in effect, that Paul was led to conceive of Christ as any theist conceives of God: personal, indeed, but transcending the individual category.'²⁸

That Paul did in fact think of Jesus in much the same way that he thought of God is confirmed by the salutation with which his letters typically begin, 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' Jesus and the Father are jointly the source of blessing, and this is confirmed by prayers such as those in 1 Thessalonians 3: 11 and 2 Thessalonians 2: 16, which envisage Jesus and the Father acting together to answer the prayer.

So it is not surprising that in Paul's letters the same divine function is credited sometimes to God and sometimes to Jesus. The most remarkable instance of this is of course the description of Christ in Colossians 1: 16f. as the one in whom and through whom and for whom everything was created, and in whom the whole creation is held together (cf. 1 Cor. 8: 6). Not only does this passage attribute to Jesus the agency in creation, which is in the OT an exclusively divine prerogative, but it does so in language which echoes closely what Paul says elsewhere of God the creator in Romans 11: 36. Similar transfers of attributes and activities of the Father to Jesus occur elsewhere in Paul's letters. In Romans 14: 10-12 we are to stand before the *bēma* of God for judgement, but in 2 Corinthians 5: 10 it is before the *bēma* of Christ. The 'kingdom of God' (Col. 4: 11, etc.) is also described as 'the kingdom of his son' (Col. 1: 13), or even, 'the kingdom of Christ and of God' (Eph. 5: 5). The Holy Spirit is generally for Paul the Spirit of God but can also be described as the 'Spirit of Christ' within the very same verse (Rom. 8: 9) and is elsewhere 'the Spirit of Jesus Christ' (Phil. 1: 19). The 'churches of God' (1 Cor. 11: 16; 1 Thes. 2: 14) are also the 'churches of Christ' (Rom. 16:

²⁸ *The Origin of Christology*, 95.

16). The 'gospel of God' is also the 'gospel of his Son' (Rom. 1: 1 with 1: 9; 15: 16 with 15: 19, etc.).

I do not imagine that Paul deliberately set out to parallel what he said about Christ with what he said about God. Many of these are merely incidental turns of phrase. But that is why they are so revealing; they suggest that for Paul the functions or attributes of God and of Christ were so interchangeable that it did not really matter which he mentioned—it came to the same thing. The same is true, of course of his uses of 'the Lord'; it is often impossible to say whether Paul intends this title as a designation of the Father or of Jesus, just as many Christians today would find it hard to say which they meant by 'Lord', and would not feel that it mattered very much. In 2 Corinthians 12: 8, for instance, who was the 'Lord' to whom Paul prayed? Normally his prayers are addressed to God, but 'my power' in the answer to Paul's prayer appears to be identified with 'the power of Christ' (verse 9). It seems then that for Paul, Jesus was already so much identified with God that the same language was naturally applicable to each.

Now this is amazing! To us it seems natural enough, for we have learned from Paul and from his successors for many centuries. But here was a Pharisaic Jew only some 25 years after the death of the Nazareth carpenter, and even less time since he himself had repudiated Him as a blasphemer, already so naturally associating this man with the one true God that he could slip apparently almost unconsciously into using the same language about Jesus that he used about God

[p.30]

and could attribute to Him uniquely divine functions without feeling the need to explain such an outrageous idea. It is this, and we have seen only a sample of the material available, which I regard as convincing evidence that the attitude to Jesus which Paul and his churches shared could fairly be called 'worship'.

4. *The New Testament as a whole*

We have been considering evidence that already in the earliest post-Easter period Christians were learning to think and speak of Jesus in much the same way as they thought and spoke of God. We have seen that Jesus' own teaching had laid the foundation for this attitude, and we have seen how it resulted even within a few years of Jesus' death and resurrection in the addressing of prayer and formal worship to Jesus as well as to His Father.

The study could be extended through the rest of the New Testament writings. Let us merely note the natural culmination of this process in the last book of the New Testament, where not only is Jesus ('the Lamb') regularly associated with God in His glory and sovereignty (e.g. Rev. 7: 14-17; 11: 15; 12: 10; 14: 1, 4: 20: 6; 21: 22f.; 22: 1-4)²⁹ but worship and praise are offered to Him equally with the Father (Rev. 1: 5f.; 5: 8-14; 7: 9-12; 22: 3). The great doxologies of Revelation are not a new experiment involving the worship of one previously regarded in a less exalted light, but the proper expression of an attitude to Jesus which had been there from the beginning, increasing no doubt in intensity and in sophistication, but deriving from the impression made by Jesus Himself during His earthly ministry.

²⁹ Note the remarkable use of singular pronouns to refer to 'God and the Lamb' in 22: 3f.; cf. 11: 15; 20: 6.

It is instructive to notice that these great doxologies of Revelation ground their praise of the Lamb on the work of salvation which He has accomplished by His death, and which His worshippers have experienced. A similar pattern has emerged in our study of the earlier NT material. The attitude of worship towards Jesus is often directly traceable to the Christians' experience of His saving work. They found in Jesus forgiveness, revelation, new life, and thus they saw Him to be fulfilling to them the functions of God Himself, and they worshipped Him. It was this attitude of worship which in turn found expression in the more explicit and sophisticated christological language which has remained outside the scope of this study.

I am suggesting, then, that the incarnational christology of the New Testament had its roots not in philosophical speculation, and still less in the gratuitous imitation of supposedly similar ideas in other religions and cultures, but in Christian experience of Jesus, both in His earthly ministry and in His risen power, and that it was the natural translation of this experience into an attitude of worship which provided the seedbed for New Testament christology. To fail to explore and account for this attitude of worship, as has much modern discussion of the origins of christology, is to discard the real life-situation of a warm and experience-centred devotion to Jesus in favour of a process of philosophical speculation which lacks an adequate starting-point in the life of the Christian church.

Some scholars draw a distinction between 'ontological' and 'functional' approaches to christology. In those terms, I have here suggested a functional origin to NT christology. Put this applies only to its origin, not to its ultimate character. The truth about Jesus which was first perceived functionally was then necessarily worked out in ontological terms. This was surely inevitable for Jews who could

[p.31]

hardly think of a man as exercising divine functions without considering what effect this belief had on their monotheism. Functional and ontological approaches to christology would thus be complementary, and it is perhaps unrealistic to speak in terms of a linear progression from one to the other. Neither could exist for long in isolation. But in so far as a chronological development may be postulated, I believe that it was the functional that gave rise to the ontological. Or, to return to the terminology I have preferred in this lecture, christological formulation arose out of worship, and worship arose out of the Christians' experience of Jesus.

Thus a study of the development of NT christology must first take account of the attitude of worship which I have outlined in this paper if it is to have the appropriate background against which to go on to the study of the christological titles. The full significance in particular of the titles 'Lord' and 'Son of God' is not likely to be revealed by studying their background in Jewish and pagan thought without giving prior consideration to the life and thought and worship of the Christian community which applied them to Jesus. But once this attitude of worship is discerned, it is easier to explain why the use of the titles developed in the direction of a more confident attribution of divine honours to Jesus.

This is the background also for the great christological affirmations of such passages as Philippians 2: 6-11, Colossians 1: 15-20, Hebrews 1: 1-4, and John 1: 1-18. These are seen not as brilliant *tours de force*, formulating hitherto unheard-of ideas, but as the explicit

theological working out of an estimate of Jesus which was already established in Christian devotion. The idea of Jesus' pre-existence, which features prominently in these and other NT passages, is also a natural inference from the attribution to Him of divine functions, especially in creation. The idea of Jesus' 'being sent', 'coming from God', which inevitably implies His pre-existence, is widespread in the NT even before Paul set it out more formally in Philippians 2: 6.³⁰

Given this attitude, too, it was inevitable that the Christians should discuss the relation of Jesus with His Father, resulting in the implicitly trinitarian language and thought which occurs unobtrusively in much of the NT and in such passages as John 14-16 gets close to theological formulation. You cannot worship a man who Himself worshipped God without having to think out the sort of issues to which trinitarian thought addresses itself.

Thus when Jewish Christians ultimately reached the stage of calling Jesus 'God', in spite of all the inhibiting traditions of their culture, this was not a brash new doctrine, but the eventual outcome of a process of christological development which can be traced throughout New Testament Christianity right back to the teaching and impact of Jesus Himself.

CONCLUSION

This paper has made no pretence to be a comprehensive presentation of the New Testament material relating to the worship of Jesus. Indeed the last few paragraphs have indicated that we have left on one side the main lines of New Testament evidence for belief in His divinity. What I have tried to indicate is that to go straight to these more obvious aspects of christological language and to debate them either in isolation or in comparison merely with non-Christian 'parallels', is to leave out of account the most relevant and important background against

[p.32]

which they must be understood, the thought and devotion of the early Christian community out of which they arose. Here there is scope for much more detailed study, but I have tried to sketch out some pointers to an underlying attitude to Jesus which antedates and gives rise to the more deliberately theological reflection. If we may therefore assert that incarnational christology did not appear either as a bolt from the blue or as an importation of alien mythological ideas, this must have important implications for both the contents and the orientation of christological debate in so far as it purports to relate to New Testament Christianity.

The basic fact which lies behind all the theological terms and titles is the worship of the carpenter. That is a phenomenon sufficiently arresting to require explanation, even if they had never progressed to the stage of openly calling Him 'God'. This worship was no easy option for pious Jews. If their own monotheistic upbringing rebelled against it, they could be sure it would provoke the violent hostility of their fellow-Jews. Even among Gentiles it was a preposterous idea, as is vividly illustrated by the famous Alexamenos graffito from third

³⁰ See M. Hengel, *The Son of God*, 66-76. Hengel emphasises how early this element came into NT christology, by an 'inner necessity'.

century Rome: a young man worshipping a crucified human figure with a donkey's head, over the caption 'Alexamenos worships his god'.³¹

Men do not gratuitously court such opposition and ridicule merely out of a dispassionate search for a new religious ideology. There must have been an irresistible compulsion, so that they could do no other. It is the task of our christology, as it was of theirs, to account adequately for this compulsion.

In this paper I have tried to suggest something of the thought and experience which could produce this result. If there is any validity in this presentation, it indicates that modern christological discussion, if it is to maintain its links with New Testament Christianity rather than set up a new discipline unrelated to historical Christian origins, must begin where christology itself began, in the worship of Jesus.

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³¹ Illustrated, e.g., in Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (1970), 174f.