

“HE CAME DOWN FROM HEAVEN”: THE PREEXISTENCE OF CHRIST REVISITED

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The preexistence of Christ is not a doctrine most people give much thought to. From the early ecumenical councils until recently, its truth has been assumed. Few books or articles concentrate on the subject. Theologians who discuss the doctrine usually treat it as an appendage to some other aspect of Christology. Christ's preexistence is not part of the readily visible superstructure of Christianity in the way his incarnation, resurrection and atoning work are. And this is not inappropriate.

The preexistence of Christ is part of the foundation of Christian faith on which these other doctrines depend. It is a necessary premise for belief in Christ's deity, but by itself it is not sufficient. Because Christ's preexistence is foundational, how one understands it or rejects it affects the remainder of Christology and one's overall understanding of Christianity. This has been nowhere more evident than in the modern attempts to explain (or explain away) the doctrine. Those modern theologians who ignore or deny Christ's preexistence do so because it is incompatible with their understanding either of his humanity or of the nature of religion.

The traditional teaching of the Church is that God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, became human in Jesus of Nazareth. So the preexistence of Christ means not that the man Jesus existed in any real sense before the incarnation but that God the Son existed apart from and prior to the incarnation. Without the Son's preexistence there can be no incarnation.

Christ's preexistence as the Son of God is presumed in early Christian confessions and creeds and is taught explicitly in the Nicene Creed: “For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven . . . was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man.” These creeds and confessions teach preexistence because those who wrote them found existence for the doctrine in the NT.

Recently there has been a reconsideration of the doctrine of Christ's preexistence, and it is this I wish to examine. Preexistence in Christology means that the one we know as Jesus Christ existed in reality before he entered into our world through the incarnation. This has been called “real preexistence” in contrast to several other understandings we will look at later. The doctrine also means Jesus finds his identity on the side of God before he finds it as a human. Thus the doctrine of Christ's preexistence explains why the incarnation is an expression of God's love for fallen humanity.

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I. BACKGROUND

From its earliest days the Christian Church has evaluated teachings about Jesus Christ by asking if the Jesus portrayed was sufficient to save us.¹ The Christ such a question requires may not be the Christ we would have come up with or desired. But, as Thomas Oden has written, “the decisive question of Christian testimony is not whether it is palatable but whether it is true. The vocation of theologian places the writer under obligation to deliver an accurate reading of Christian teaching, even when it points to a narrow way.”²

Because theology involves connected areas of study, any change in one area will affect the other areas as well. This is true for all religions and not only for Christianity. For Christianity the doctrine of Christ’s preexistence affects the Christian understanding of God, the Trinity, Christology, creation, salvation and anthropology. This is what makes the modern reevaluation of Christ’s preexistence so significant.

The incarnation remains an essential element of Christianity. Yet without the preexistence of the Son there can be no incarnation. And if the one whom Christians call Savior is God, he must always have been God. Augustine wrote: “Do not imagine any interval or period when the Father was and the Son was not.” The one who was recognized as deity after his resurrection was no less before his incarnation. Christianity has never had room for an apotheosis.

Christ’s preexistence is not “a luxury of theological speculation, which we could set aside in the interest of simplification.”³ It is important because it shows the extent of God’s concern for our need. The doctrine says it was God the Son, possessor of the fullness of deity with the Father from eternity, who took human existence to himself so that we might enjoy eternal life with God. Jean Galot notes that the doctrine situates God’s decision to save us before time, showing that God’s attitude toward a fallen humanity is fundamentally gracious and loving.

Historically most exegetes have agreed that Paul, Hebrews, John, and other NT writings affirm that the Son of God existed prior to his incarnation. Oden reminds us that this affirmation is no optional point in Christian theology. The affirmation even appears in settings that precede Paul’s writings, which themselves date from only 20 to 35 years after Jesus’ death. John Knox emphasizes that these references to Christ’s preexistence appear not in contexts that stress preexistence but instead mention it incidentally in the process of making some other point, as if preexistence were a generally understood and accepted teaching.⁴

¹ It is this functional expression of what is intended as an ontological question that has misled some into thinking that the earliest Christology was functional.

² T. C. Oden, *The Word of Life: Systematic Theology* (San Francisco: Harper, 1989) 2.ix.

³ J. Galot, *Vers une Nouvelle Christologie* (Gembloux: Duculot, 1971) 62–63, as cited and translated by E. L. Mascall, *Theology and the Gospel of Christ: An Essay in Reorientation* (London: SPCK, 1977) 175.

⁴ J. Knox, *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ: A Study of Pattern in Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1967) 10–11.

This doctrine was not the result of early Christianity's encounter with Hellenism. It arose out of the early Church's Jewish roots. Justin Martyr identified the preexistent Christ with the angel of the Lord of the OT, and Novatian concluded that Abraham's visitor on the eve of Sodom's destruction was the same preexistent Christ. This is not to say that Jews of the period would have been comfortable with any really preexistent being sharing any measure of deity with God the Father. After all, the claims Christianity makes in conjunction with this doctrine are what made Christianity a different religion from Judaism.

Study of the background for a preexistent Son of God who became incarnate shows it to be a belief without parallel. Larry Hurtado says, "Although the doctrinal reflections on Christ continued and developed over several centuries, the essential steps in treating the exalted Christ as divine were taken while Christianity was still almost entirely made up of Jews and dominated by Jewish theological categories."⁵ This means Hellenistic religious and philosophical concepts could have played no significant role in developing the early Christian belief in Christ's preexistence.

Christian thinkers at least as early as Paul were driven to belief in Christ's preexistence by their belief about who Jesus of Nazareth was and what he became at his resurrection. A doctrine of incarnation required preexistence. The developing understanding of the NT writers can be seen in the sending statements of the synoptics, the Johannine prologue, 2 Cor 8:6, Gal 4:4, Phil 2:6-11 and Hebrews 1, to list only the most prominent passages. Objections to belief in Christ's preexistence have had in some way to deny the apparent meaning of these texts.

II. MODERN OBJECTIONS TO THE DOCTRINE

Modern scholars have raised several objections to the traditional teaching of Christ's preexistence. These objections overlap, and those theologians who reject preexistence often argue in terms of more than one objection. As are the arguments for preexistence, the arguments against it are mutually supporting and interlocking. Each side represents a basic outlook on the nature of the world we live in.

As does so much in the modern world, our survey of the reconsideration of the doctrine of Christ's preexistence begins with the Enlightenment and its legacy. The legacy was twofold: attitudinal and methodological. We of the modern era pride ourselves on being wiser and less naive than were the ancients. We believe ourselves free of superstition and react suspiciously to claims about marvelous and supernatural wonders. Methodologically the Enlightenment exalted human reason to the point where if we cannot explain something scientifically we tend to disbelieve its truth or reality. For modern people the universe has become a closed system. This was the hallmark of deism, but it has also influenced some Christian thinkers. It is obvious that if we live in a closed system the person we know as Jesus of Nazareth could not have preexisted his earthly life in any meaningful sense.

⁵ L. W. Hurtado, "The Origins of the Worship of Christ," *Themelios* 19/2 (January 1994) 5.

As a Romantic child of the Enlightenment, Friedrich Schleiermacher offered an adoptionist understanding of Jesus that rejected preexistence. Jesus was not the eternal Son of God become human, the *Logos* incarnate. For Schleiermacher, what distinguished Jesus from other humans was “the constant potency of his God-consciousness, which was a veritable existence of God in him.”⁶ Recommending belief in inspiration instead of incarnation he presented Jesus as a God-filled man, not the God-man. This Jesus, who differed from us only in having been a better person than we are, can be an example for us to follow. But he cannot be our Savior. Consistent with his rejection of a preexistent Christ, Schleiermacher was uncomfortable with the doctrine of the Trinity and relocated it from the beginning to the end of his dogmatics.

The conviction of the history-of-religions school that Christianity was simply one among many human efforts to understand and approach the ultimate led to the attempt to find parallels between Christianity and contemporary religions and philosophies. This attempt concentrated on supposed Hellenistic parallels. From this came the suggestion that Christ’s preexistence and incarnation were myths intended to give him a stature equal to that of other heroic figures of his day. Thus Jesus’ preexistence resulted from the attempt to push his divine status earlier and earlier in his existence. But, as Knox has noted, there simply was not enough time for such a process to occur. Walter Kasper argues that the direction of influence was probably from Christianity to the other religions, so the proper place to look for sources is the OT and Judaism: “But the New Testament is not simply reducible to such Jewish ideas. It is completely original and represents an unparalleled innovation.”⁷

Another product of the history-of-religions approach was Bultmann’s famous gnostic-redeemer myth, which he identified as the source for the idea of Christ’s preexistence. Chronologically, however, any influence could only have gone in the other direction. James Dunn adds that this was equally true for the myths of the dying and rising gods of ancient paganism.

History-of-religions study does have much to teach us, however. One thing is when parallels and derived beliefs do not exist. Despite some apparent Biblical evidence, adoptionism and apotheosis are pagan rather than Biblical options. Frances Young acknowledges that “there seems to be no exact parallel to the Christian doctrine of incarnation, and certainly not in indisputably pre-Christian material.”⁸ Samuel Sandmel once described the frantic attempt to find parallels in different religious and philosophical set-

⁶ F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) § 97.

⁷ W. Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) 174.

⁸ F. Young, “Two Roots or a Tangled Mass?”, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (ed. J. Hick; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 87. Although Young mentions an incarnation, the concept of incarnation she and her colleagues sought to disprove was that of the preexistent Son of God. Although W. Pannenberg has argued that preexistence and incarnation are incompatible, R. Brown says that denial of the virginal conception (incarnation) “has more often favored an adoptionist christology rather than a pre-existent christology” (*The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* [New York: Paulist, 1973] 43).

tings without regard for context and consistency of internal development as “parallelomania.”⁹

Knox says preexistence was an early and natural consequence of belief in Jesus’ resurrection. He has no hesitation in attributing to Paul belief in Christ’s preexistence. Reflection on Jesus’ resurrection and postresurrection status “led immediately and directly to the affirmation of his pre-existence.”¹⁰ Knox says an early concept of Christ’s ideal preexistence led easily to understanding him as a personal, preexisting being: “The affirmation of Jesus’ pre-existence was all but implicit in the affirmation of God’s foreknowledge of him and was bound to have become explicit eventually, whether in a Jewish or a Greek environment.”¹¹ Knox does not believe this preexistence ought to be taken literally, however. It intends to tell us a story. By Christ’s preexistence we are to understand that “God was in Christ—not in the resurrection only, but in the whole of the human career from conception through death.”¹²

Knox rejects a literal doctrine of preexistence because he is convinced it makes Christ less than human:

There is no way of distinguishing Jesus’ humanity from ours which does not deny the reality of his manhood in every sense which makes the affirmation of it significant. But the idea that Jesus’ existence as a man was in some self-conscious way continuous with his earlier existence as a heavenly being—and this is surely what has usually been meant by the “pre-existence”—this idea does distinguish his humanity from ours; and there is no way, however circuitous or ingenious, of escaping that fact or its consequences. . . . *We can have the humanity without the pre-existence or we can have the pre-existence without the humanity. There is absolutely no way of having both.*¹³

In his concern to protect Jesus’ full humanity—even to the point of sinfulness—Knox removes everything else that makes him significant for us.

Knox denies that his rejection of preexistence has any serious impact on other aspects of Christian doctrine, particularly the Trinity. Because there is no ontological connection between the Son of God and Jesus of Nazareth, real preexistence is superfluous. Knox ignores the fact that the Trinity became a theological subject only because people believed Jesus was somehow the Son of God. If this is not true, there is no Trinity.¹⁴ Knox is working with the presupposition that one person cannot be both divine and human. At one point his argument seems to boil down to the idea that if it does not make any sense to him, it cannot be true. For Knox, preexistence is simply a story explaining how the Church came into being.

⁹ S. Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *JBL* 81 (1962) 1–13.

¹⁰ Knox, *Humanity* 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 9–10.

¹² *Ibid.* 107–108.

¹³ *Ibid.* 106 (italics mine).

¹⁴ P. Schoonenberg recognizes this and attempts to compensate for his denial of the personal preexistence of the *Logos* by positing a process doctrine of the Trinity and professing an agnosticism about an eternal Trinity because “the Bible doesn’t speak to it” (*The Christ* [New York: Herder and Herder, 1971] 83, 86 n.).

III. IDEAL PREEXISTENCE

Another reaction to the traditional doctrine, which I have called real preexistence, goes by the name "ideal preexistence." Ideal means that whoever or whatever is deemed preexistent was in the mind and intent of God before it appeared on earth. Ideal preexistence had roots in Judaism, where some of the rabbis taught that seven things existed in the mind of God before they appeared on earth, including Torah and the Messiah. John Macquarrie says, "Jesus Christ pre-existed in the mind and purpose of God, and I doubt if one should look for any other kind of pre-existence."¹⁵ He adds: "I would reject any personal pre-existence as mythological and also as undermining a genuine recognition of the humanity of Jesus."¹⁶ Macquarrie's second objection reflects what should be a concern of all Christians but often is shortchanged by those who affirm Christ's preexistence—that is, Jesus' full humanity.

The problem with ideal preexistence is not that it is untrue but that it is trivial. Ideal preexistence is merely another name for divine foreknowledge. This teaching says nothing about Jesus of Nazareth that it does not say about any other human. It is really a statement about the relationship between God and his creation, not Christology. Romans 8:28–31; Eph 1:4–14 clearly teach what we might call the ideal preexistence of Christian believers. Jeremiah 1:5 states clearly that Jeremiah was in God's mind and intention as a prophet even before his conception.

IV. JAMES DUNN'S EXAMINATION OF CHRISTOLOGY'S ROOTS

In response to claims made in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, James Dunn undertook a study of the background for and NT claims about the incarnation. The result has been only slightly less controversial than the myth debate itself. Other NT scholars have challenged Dunn's exegesis, especially of passages traditionally held to deal with Christ's preexistence. Dunn concludes that the only NT document to express a belief in Christ's real preexistence is the fourth gospel. He says that the synoptics contain no hint of the belief and that the Pauline letters and Hebrews affirm an ideal preexistence. Many of Dunn's preliminary conclusions are equivocal, but out of these equivocal statements and assessments of probability he reaches conclusions that he offers as firm.

Dunn categorizes Christological texts according to types he finds in Jewish and pagan literature. He identifies much of the Pauline corpus as having an Adam Christology and sees wisdom Christology as influential elsewhere. The background material he presents is helpful in understanding the NT environment, but I cannot help wondering whether the NT writers were as completely in continuity with their background as Dunn presumes. Dunn's citation of Goodenough only increases my concern about his conclusions because he does not appear to be heeding what he cites:

¹⁵ J. Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990) 57.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 145.

The religious point of view of the author of each document which survives from the period must be reconstructed out of the document itself, and its relation to any other document of tradition is the end, not the beginning of our search.¹⁷

The result is exegesis of many passages that appears superficially convincing but leaves the reader with the nagging sense that something has been left out. Philippians 2:6–11 is the best example of this. Elsewhere Dunn writes:

If the contemporary cosmologies of Hellenistic Judaism and Stoicism determined what *words* should be used in describing the cosmic significance of the Christ-event, the *meaning* of these words is determined by the Christ-event itself.¹⁸

Dunn, however, appears to focus on the setting to determine the meaning of the terms, not on the event the words describe.

I agree we need to use words in a reasonable relationship to their usual setting if we hope to communicate. But this raises a serious problem when we consider the matter of preexistence. Dunn says there is no true parallel to the preexistence and incarnation pattern found in John (the only place where he acknowledges real preexistence in the NT). If this is so, we cannot rely on an extra-Christian context to understand the NT at this point. That environment would have had no philosophical or religious basis for belief in preexistence in an incarnational context.

Dunn's extended treatment of the Philippians passage is representative of his approach to the Biblical texts and his predisposition to understand them in a nonincarnational way and thus has no need for a real preexistence. Dunn begins his discussion of the passage by admitting that "Phil. 2.6–11 certainly seems on the face of it to be a straightforward statement contrasting Christ's pre-existent glory and post-crucifixion exaltation with his earthly humiliation."¹⁹ But he argues that this appearance results from presuppositions brought to the text, not from conclusions drawn from the text. The presupposition of preexistence then determines how the disputed terms in the passage are to be understood (i.e. the argument is circular).

Without this presupposition, Dunn seems to think those terms will be understood quite differently. He suggests that the passage is best understood as an expression of Adam Christology. This becomes Dunn's controlling presupposition and determines how he will interpret the passage. I see little if any difference here between Dunn's method and the method he criticizes. It is merely a matter of which presupposition one chooses to begin with, because we cannot begin with none. The key is that we be able to justify the presupposition we choose.

From his suggestion that Adam Christology provides the key to understanding Phil 2:6–11 Dunn constructs a hypothetical interpretation of the

¹⁷ J. D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 341.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 211.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 114.

text in terms of the second Adam. A second-Adam interpretation does not require preexistence. Preexistence actually gets in the way of such an interpretation. Soon, however, the suggested Adam Christology has become the certain Adam Christology.²⁰ Not only has Dunn done what he accuses others of—namely, interpreting the text on the basis of a presupposition about the text—but he has offered a sure conclusion built on successive possibilities and probabilities. Where he does not do this he offers unsubstantiated assertions to make his point.

In exegeting the passage, Dunn focuses on the double contrast of form-of-God/form-of-a-slave and equality-with-God/in-likeness-of-men. As exegetes have long recognized, the interpretation of the text hangs on the meaning of “form” (μορφή). Using Genesis 1–3 as his interpretive key, Dunn concludes that μορφή means “image.” Thus “form of God” denotes Adam as he was created (in the image of God), and “form of a slave” was Adam’s status after the fall. Neither use of “form” implies deity or preexistence.²¹ According to Dunn, the second contrast refers to the temptation Adam failed but Jesus passed. Dunn concludes that the passage deals with what Irenaeus called recapitulation. The path Adam unsuccessfully trod Christ walked successfully.

If Dunn is correct, the passage deals only with Christ in his humanity. It says nothing about his deity. Dunn’s argument has some conviction when considered in isolation, but to make his interpretation work he has to reinterpret the rest of the Pauline corpus along the same line. Even then, as Dunn said at the outset, the passage does seem to be a straightforward statement of Christ’s preexistence, incarnation, and return to preincarnate glory. Dunn handles the other NT passages dealing with Christ’s preexistence and incarnation similarly. He fails to see preexistence in these passages not because it is not there but because he does not want it to be there. In 1974 Gerhard Schneider wrote that modern research was almost unanimous in its conclusion that the hymn in Phil 2:6–11 presupposes Christ’s preexistence.²² There have been no new findings regarding this text since Schneider wrote, so the changed conclusions of those scholars who deny that the passage speaks about Christ’s preexistence represent a fundamental predisposition toward the NT rather than new knowledge learned about the text and its background.

Reinterpretations of NT texts in ways denying that these texts teach Christ’s preexistence are often convincing in isolation. When we consider texts apart from their context in the book that includes them and all the writings of its author, these reinterpretations appear convincing. But when

²⁰ Dunn says, “The point to be grasped is that the question [of whether the passage speaks of Christ’s preexistence] cannot be answered without reference to the Adam christology which forms the backbone of the hymn. Since the thought is dominated by the Adam/Christ parallel and contrast, the individual expressions must be understood within the context” (ibid. 119).

²¹ It is probably accurate to say further that in Dunn’s interpretation neither form permits deity or requires preexistence.

²² G. Schneider, “Präexistenz Christi: Der Ursprung einer neutestamentlichen Vorstellung und das Problem ihrer Auslegung,” *Neues Testament und Kirche: Für Rudolf Schnackenberg* (ed. J. Gnllka; Freiburg: Herder, 1974) 405–406.

we look at the big picture of the NT or the Pauline corpus the arguments are less compelling because the sense of the wider literature is much more compatible with the teaching of Christ's preexistence. Modern NT scholarship has too often become so focused on individual trees that it fails to consider any tree's place in the NT forest.

V. CHRIST'S PREEXISTENCE AND WORLD RELIGIONS

A recent reconsideration of Christ's preexistence comes from Karl-Josef Kuschel. From his survey of preexistence in the Bible, Jewish writings, and Christian theology Kuschel concludes that the theme of preexistence comes to the fore in times of distress or danger for the believing community. This should be no surprise. The doctrine of real preexistence has always served not only to say something ontologically about Jesus Christ but also to remind believers that God so loved the world that he sent his only-begotten Son to save the world (John 3:16).

Kuschel's dissatisfaction with the traditional understanding of preexistence is more evident than his alternative, however. It is clear that he does not believe that the NT treats preexistence speculatively and does believe that preexistence can be understood only in the light of Christ's resurrection and exaltation. These are hardly controversial statements, but they do not constitute an adequate explanation for his reconsideration.

Kuschel offers a threefold starting point for understanding Christ's preexistence: (1) Jesus himself, (2) the early Church's experience of the exalted Christ, and (3) a genuinely Biblical understanding of God.²³ He adds that it is only Jesus whom we may describe as the "eternal son." This is because in him "the eternal God and Father has revealed himself" and "the person, cause and fate of Jesus Christ belong definitively to the determination of the eternal being of God."²⁴ Nonetheless preexistence remains an "unfortunate theological coinage" because it encourages us to believe that the person of Christ can be split into the two phases of "eternal Son" and "temporal Son." Because we can express the relationship between God and the world only in temporal categories we cannot avoid the concept of preexistence. It is necessary, says Kuschel, to hold together both Jesus' origin in time and his origin in the eternity of God.²⁵ Like his colleague Hans Küng, Kuschel seems to believe that the Christological development of the ecumenical councils was the result of a Hellenistic takeover of the Church. And, as happens too often with Küng, when it becomes necessary to speak clearly and concisely Kuschel is obscure and equivocal.²⁶

²³ K.-J. Kuschel, *Born Before All Time? The Dispute Over Christ's Origin* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 493.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 495.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 497.

²⁶ Kuschel and Küng have worked together for well over a decade, and Küng endorsed Kuschel's book and its position on Christ's preexistence in *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

From this point, however, Kuschel tries to walk a thin line. He recognizes that Christ's preexistence constrains what Christianity can and cannot be, but he does not want this to interfere with his ecumenical interests. After all, if Jesus is the incarnation of the preexistent Son of God Christianity certainly would seem to stand alone as the religion founded by God. He affirms Nicea's location of Christ on the side of the Creator rather than the creature, and this for soteriological reasons. But the preexistence Kuschel is most comfortable with appears to be an ideal preexistence.

John Hick incorporates elements from all these positions.²⁷ The value of his work lies not in its arguments (none of which is new) but because he states clearly his premises, context and purpose. Hick describes himself as standing in the tradition of Schleiermacher, Strauss and Harnack.²⁸ Hick's Jesus was "a human being extraordinarily open to God's influence and thus living to an extraordinary extent as God's agent on earth, 'incarnating' the divine purpose for human life."²⁹ Hick espouses the basic error of liberal Christology: He considers the importance of Christ to lie in his teaching rather than his work. As a result, Christ could not have been unique because most of his teaching is not unique. But if Christ really is our Savior, this is the result of his work, not his words. And that work is unique.

Hick states the premise that controls his Christology at the outset: "If [Jesus] was indeed God incarnate, Christianity is the only religion founded by God in person, and must as such be uniquely superior to all other religions."³⁰ He disbelieves this and sees Jesus as simply one teacher among many. He wants to reconceive Christianity as a religion that is "centered upon the universally relevant religious experience and ethical insights of Jesus *when these are freed from the mass of ecclesiastical dogmas and practices that have developed over the centuries.*"³¹ This requires, says Hick, breaking free of the network of theories about incarnation, the Trinity, and atonement that he says once helped focus Christian thought.

The doctrine of preexistence makes meaningful each of these beliefs Hick wants to abandon. This shows why preexistence has become so objectionable to theologians like Hick. But the doctrine was no easier to accept in the first century than today. Kasper writes: "The message of the exaltation and preexistence of the crucified Jesus was an intolerable scandal to both Jews and Greeks."³² Absolute claims are anathema to postmoderns because they have rejected the very possibility of absolutes. Sincerity has replaced truth as the measure of religious legitimacy.

²⁷ J. Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993). Hick states clearly his rejection of orthodox Christology (which he labels as such) because it has been unable to explain its contents to his satisfaction. Unlike most opponents of orthodoxy, Hick has read the work of his opponents.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 18.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 12.

³⁰ *Ibid.* ix.

³¹ *Ibid.* 13 (italics mine).

³² Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* 174.

VI. EVALUATION

The strongest reconsiderations of Christ's preexistence remind us that we must take Jesus' full humanity seriously. Much traditional Christianity has tended to conclude from his preexistence that his deity is more important than his humanity. The weakness of these reconsiderations, however, is that they minimize or even deny his deity. By taking us back from Nicea and Chalcedon to the NT these reconsiderations also remind us that the doctrine of Christ's preexistence is not a product of philosophical speculation. Unfortunately these reconsiderations appear driven by reasons other than Biblical exegesis. There seems to be a presuppositional disposition to disbelieve any real preexistence and any Biblical claim to such outside the fourth gospel (and some even interpret John 1 to exclude preexistence). Seen as the end of a long process of development, the fourth gospel becomes suspect as evidence for beliefs of Jesus and his disciples. Paul, writing just over twenty years after Jesus' death, cannot be dismissed so readily.

My first concern with the reconsideration of the doctrine of Christ's preexistence is its unacknowledged—perhaps unconscious—denial that God can enter into creation and its history. The natural consequence of this presupposition is inability to see divine activity in history, the conclusion then being that it does not happen. It is far more scientific to leave this conclusion open until we have considered the evidence.³³ This presupposition is the product of Enlightenment skepticism, not Biblical exegesis. It is part of the same family of beliefs that Paul says consider the cross a scandal—namely, the belief that God just would not (or could not) act this way. Remember that real preexistence and incarnation were not more palatable in the first century than they are today. This reminds us that the issue is not new. It also suggests that we might even learn from our predecessors in the early Church—even if we choose not to echo their language or philosophy.

My second concern is that the Biblical evidence is stronger than those who would reconsider the doctrine are willing to admit. This is evident in both Knox and Dunn. In fact one of the frustrations of reading them is watching them minimize the evidence they themselves present in order to justify a sharply different conclusion. Dunn does this by forcing passages traditionally held to deal with Christ's real preexistence into possible different interpretations until he finally finds himself unable to do so with the Johannine prologue. Only then does he admit that the NT teaches Christ's real preexistence. Knox says the NT taught real preexistence early and necessarily, but he tries to explain it away as mythical language. It is characteristic of a certain type of historical criticism to claim that Jesus' contemporaries expressed their religious ideas in the form of myth or mythological language. But, as C. S. Lewis has pointed out, the gospels just do not sound like myth.

³³ Perhaps those who operate with this antisupernaturalistic presupposition should be required to warn their readers at the beginning that this is a controlling presupposition for their work. The closed-universe position results from a misunderstanding of modern science that transforms methodology into metaphysics.

Early Christians viewed as precursors or preparations what some of their modern counterparts have called extra-Biblical parallels. Given the absence of incarnational parallels that Dunn and others have reported, Christian theologians might want to reexamine this idea of Jewish and Hellenistic precursors for the Christian understanding of Christ's preexistence and incarnation. By finding similar types of themes in our culture, theologians today might use these as points of contact to explain the doctrine of preexistence to our skeptical contemporaries much as the early Church did to its.

My third concern is that the various aspects of theology have a logical and necessary relationship. A change in one area must affect other areas. Denial of real preexistence, even in favor of ideal preexistence, fundamentally alters the whole of Christology. It also affects our understanding of God (his ability to act in the world, his willingness to care about the world, his existence as Trinity), of what it means to be human (and created in the divine image), and of the nature and possibility of salvation.

That is my fourth concern. The early Church fought fierce battles in Christology not for speculative reasons but because it required a Jesus Christ who is able to save us. Very early it determined such a Jesus must be divine, human, and one. No other situation would suffice. Preexistence was the linchpin holding this together. Now if Jesus cannot save, there is no justification for Christianity. At least some of the resistance to the doctrine of Christ's preexistence results from what it implies for human salvation. Preexistence underlines the Christian teaching that God had to take the initiative in human salvation because humans are unable to do so as a consequence of our sin. It also says God's initiative took the form of Jesus Christ and him alone. This is unpalatable to those who argue in the name of religious pluralism that Christianity is but one valid way of human salvation among many.

Belief in human sinfulness has been called the one empirically verifiable Christian doctrine. The need to overcome this problem has driven Christology. Making Jesus like us in every way means he is part of the problem, not the solution. The radical and pervasive nature of human sin, quite evident in the morning newspaper, requires a radical, divine inbreaking to remedy it. Only the real preexistence of Christ makes this possible. It is impossible for the other options, especially as presented by Knox. Karl Barth has stated the issue clearly: "If in Christ—even in the humiliated Christ born in a manger at Bethlehem and crucified on the cross of Golgotha—God is not unchanged and wholly God, then everything that we may say about the reconciliation of the world made by God in this humiliated one is left hanging in the air."³⁴ The incarnation thus presupposes and requires Christ's preexistence.

Finally, the concern Knox, Macquarrie and others express about preserving Jesus' humanity presumes they know clearly what it means to be human. Yet in every relevant field of study the nature of being human is still

³⁴ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956) 183.

a subject of discussion, not a settled conclusion. According to Christian theology it is not we, but Jesus Christ, who is the measure of true humanity. To measure Jesus by our humanity, then, is to get it backwards. It falls short because none of us has ever realized our human potential as God intended for us. When we realize this, the charge that the doctrine of preexistence robs Christ of real humanity becomes questionable.

VII. CONCLUSION

Although I consider the reconsideration of Christ's preexistence to be a failed enterprise, we must learn from and respond to the objections to traditional doctrine. The early Church worked to explain its beliefs in terms comprehensible to its audience without compromising those beliefs. This was the reason it borrowed Hellenistic philosophical terms to explain its faith in Jesus. We, too, need to be ready to restate and clarify the doctrine of Christ's preexistence while respecting limits to our ability to deal with matters involving God. Restating and clarifying does not, however, mean reformulating doctrine. Frances Young has stated this well:

There are issues of truth and identity which matter and which belong to the whole corporate life of the Christian community through history, and which cannot appropriately be decided by discrete free-thinking individuals. It must therefore be the case that rejection or replacement of the traditional forms of creed and patterns of doctrine is improper, even though there is an unavoidable responsibility to interpret and reinterpret as culture and language changes.³⁵

In saying that some issues matter too much to leave to individual decision, Young reinforces the importance of taking historic Christian doctrine seriously. The preexistence of Christ is not one of the flashy doctrines of Christianity that provide the centerpiece of anyone's Christology, but it is a teaching that we reject or replace at our peril. It explains who Jesus Christ is, where he came from, and what it means to call him Savior.

This in no way removes our obligation to express historic doctrine in modern language and thought forms, nor does it relieve us of the need to draw from other fields when this will help us explain and clarify Christian teaching for people unfamiliar with it. But these expressions, explanations and clarifications must be consistent with Christian revelation and tradition lest we distort Christianity itself and mislead our hearers.

The historic teaching of Christ's preexistence remains essential to Christian faith. It reminds us that Jesus was not merely a good person who merited God's approval. He was God himself come to redeem and restore his creation. The doctrine of Christ's preexistence prevents us from transforming Christianity into a religion of human achievement. To a world that asks whether God cares about us or whether he even exists, the doctrine of Christ's preexistence reminds us that God loves his creatures so much that he did not send a representative to help us. He came himself. From the NT

³⁵ F. Young, *The Making of the Creeds* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1993) 103.

it is clear that Jesus was a human being, and fully human at that. That is why the doctrine of preexistence must lead to that of the incarnation. But the incarnation makes sense only if it is the incarnation of one who existed prior to his earthly appearance. The doctrine validates the Christian claim that it is only in Jesus that we can truly know God. It also underlies our salvation because, as teachers of the Church from at least the fourth century have affirmed, our Savior must stand on both sides of the great divide that separates humans from God. As God the Son become human, Jesus alone meets the requirement. So the doctrine of Christ's preexistence tells us about Jesus, God, and our salvation. It prevents us from reformulating Christian doctrine in ways that may be compatible with our human pride but that would be devastating to Christian truth and the efficacy of Christ's salvific work.