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## INTRODUCTION

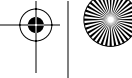
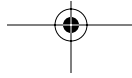
### The Centrality of God in Christ in Paul's Theology



**T**he goal in writing a Pauline theology is to unearth Paul's worldview and to present it to contemporaries. The task is not merely to reproduce Paul's thinking on various topics, but to rightly estimate what is most important in his thinking and to set forth the inner connections between the various themes. Such a task is difficult since Paul's theology is complex and presented in occasional letters written to churches. If scholars debate the nature of John Calvin's theology, even though he wrote an organized summary of his theology in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, how much more challenging is it to discern Paul's theology since we lack a systematic explanation of his thought. It would be naive and pretentious to assert that I have discovered the key to Paul's theology. Nonetheless, I believe that I have detected some themes that are insufficiently appreciated in most standard works on Paul. The goal in this work is not to interact point by point with other scholars who have investigated Pauline thought.<sup>1</sup> Such a task would make this

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<sup>1</sup>For the two most recent and helpful analyses of Paul's thought, see Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph* (Louisville, Ky.: West-





book far too long (and boring!). It should be evident, on the other hand, that this work has not been done in a vacuum and that the contributions of other scholars form the backdrop for what is discussed. The footnotes in each chapter either provide the source for a citation or point to works that should be consulted for further research.

The goal in the present work is to see what Paul says and to see it in the right proportions. Adolf Schlatter has rightly commented that the hardest thing to observe is often right in front of our eyes, for we may think we have understood when we actually only have a superficial acquaintance with reality. He perceptively remarks:

The first task of New Testament theology consists in perceiving the facts of the case, and it would be childish to worry that there is no more work for us to do since countless scholars have been observing the New Testament for a long time now. That would show how little we were aware of the size of the task posed by the formula "observation." What has happened exceeds in its fullness and depth our capacity for seeing, and there is no question of an end being reached even of the first and most simple function of New Testament study; namely, seeing what is there.<sup>2</sup>

Schlatter is correct when he says that the task is so large that no one can claim to have seen all that is present in the documents before us. And yet I hope that I can introduce a fresh vision of Paul to students in a relatively nontechnical way.

### The Center of Paul's Thought

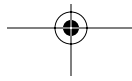
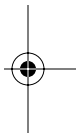
Scholars have been attempting to perceive the central theme in Paul's thought ever since biblical theology became a discipline in its own right.<sup>3</sup>

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minster John Knox, 1994); and James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998). For my review of the latter, see *Trinity Journal* 20 (1999): 95-100. Any reader who compares my work with Witherington and Dunn will see that I differ with them at a number of significant points. For a briefer analysis, see N. T. Wright, *What St. Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997).

<sup>2</sup>Adolf Schlatter, "The Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics," in *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, ed. Robert Morgan, SBT 25 (Naperville, Ill.: SCM Press, 1973), p. 136.

<sup>3</sup>A number of works have been written on the history and nature of New Testament theology. The work edited by Morgan cited in n. 2 above is a useful resource in this regard. The work that is the most helpful in charting one's way in contemporary discussions of New Testament theology is Gerhard Hasel, *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978). Hasel summarizes the history of the movement, major works that have been written and the various methodologies employed, and he discusses the attempt to identify a single center. Interestingly, Hasel maintains that only "God" is a large enough theme to constitute the center of New Testament theology.





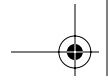
The sheer number of proposals has led some to doubt that any center can be identified at all. The very search for a center is dismissed as an attempt to capture the uncapturable. It smacks of an enlightenment pretension that claims the ability to summarize everything under one main idea. Anything that conflicts with the central theme is swept aside or domesticated. In the process the genuine Paul, the Paul with rough edges and sides, is planed down to fit a prefabricated theory. The danger of imposing an alien center on Paul is a real one, and it may be the case that no single theme embraces the whole of Paul's thought. One of the problems here is with the word *center* itself. If one theme is in the center, then we may form an image or picture in our minds of other teachings in Paul radiating out from that center. If we conceive of the center as a bull's-eye and of other Pauline themes as circles around the center, then we could get the impression that some Pauline teachings are crucial since they are near the center whereas others are peripheral and insignificant since they are far from the center. We may be tempted, therefore, to erect a "canon within the canon" in which the core represents Paul's "real" convictions and in which other themes (which do fit with "our" center) are dismissed as secondary and unimportant. The image of a center could lead to a static conception of Pauline theology where one theme is given hegemony and other themes are slotted in accordingly. No vital connection is established between the various themes, and the whole enterprise appears startlingly subjective.

Some centers proposed, however, have struck a chord with many Pauline scholars. Scholars have sensed that these themes are comprehensive enough to warrant further scrutiny or even to be accepted as "the center." We think of themes like justification, defended by Ernst Käsemann, Peter Stuhlmacher and Karl Kertelge;<sup>4</sup> reconciliation, which has been proposed by Ralph Mar-

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<sup>4</sup>For Ernst Käsemann's understanding of righteousness, see his *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980), and his essay, "God's Righteousness in Paul," *Journal of Theology and Church* 1 (1965): 100-110. For Peter Stuhlmacher, see *Gerechtigkeit Gottes bei Paulus*, FRLANT 87 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), and his essay, "The Apostle Paul's View of Righteousness," in *Reconciliation, Law and Righteousness: Essays in Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), pp. 68-93. Karl Kertelge is a Roman Catholic scholar who has emphasized the centrality of justification. See his *Rechtfertigung bei Paulus: Studien zur Struktur und zum Bedeutungsgehalt des paulinischen Rechtfertigungsbegriffs*, 2nd ed., NTAbh 3 (Münster in Westfalen: Aschendorff, 1967). For a recent defense of the centrality of justification that moves in a different orbit from Käsemann and Stuhlmacher, see Mark A. Seifrid, *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme*, NovTSup 68 (Leiden: Brill, 1992), and his *Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001).





tin;<sup>5</sup> the mystical doctrine of being "in Christ," as it is set forth by Albert Schweitzer, or participation in Christ, as explained by E. P. Sanders;<sup>6</sup> salvation history, supported by Herman Ridderbos and Marvin Pate;<sup>7</sup> or the imminent apocalyptic triumph of God, as defended by J. Christiaan Beker.<sup>8</sup> It is not the intention of this work to discuss the merits and demerits of each of these proposals individually. They would not have exercised such appeal if they were secondary motifs in Paul. Their obvious importance has provoked some scholars to propose, and some to ratify, them as the center. And yet others have, just as emphatically, denied that these various themes serve as the center of Paul's thought, for in each case there are some Pauline themes that sit awkwardly with the proposed center.

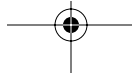
I would like to suggest that each theme fails as the "center" for the same reason. Every proposed center suppresses part of the Pauline gospel. Identifying the center as, say, justification exalts the gift given above the giver. The gift of righteousness is not more important in Paul's thinking than the person who gave the gift. A similar objection could be directed against the idea that reconciliation should have pride of place. Nor does salvation history or apocalyptic fare any better. In these instances the fulfillment of God's promises in the history of redemption is featured. Jesus Christ is acknowledged as the fulcrum of history, but the focus is fixed on salvation history, reconciliation or apocalyptic instead of on God and Jesus Christ. God's unfolding plan in history cannot be more central than the person who generates and sustains the plan. The fulfillment of God's saving promises is of massive importance. It would be a mistake, though, if the promises received more attention than the one who made and fulfilled them. Now some may object that I have already imposed on Paul my own "center." They may think that I have placed a preformed grid over the Pauline materials so that my preferred theme emerges as victorious. We must all beware of preformatting Paul in such a way that his voice is not heard. I can only say at this juncture that I will attempt to demonstrate in this chapter that the centrality of God in Christ is not imposed

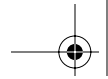
<sup>5</sup>Ralph P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1989).

<sup>6</sup>Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (New York: Henry Holt, 1931); E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

<sup>7</sup>Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975); C. Marvin Pate, *The End of the Age Has Come: The Theology of Paul* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1995).

<sup>8</sup>J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).





from without but is vindicated by an *inductive* study of his letters.

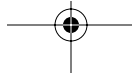
### The Image of a House

The image of a house may help us visualize the heart and soul of Pauline theology. I am not using the illustration of the house in the same way Paul himself does, where the house functions as an illustration of the church. For instance, Paul describes Apollos and himself as workers in God's house, that is, in the church of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 3:5-9). Paul plays the vital role of the one laying the foundation of the house (i.e., the church), and he warns that those who work on the house must be careful to build on the foundation (1 Cor 3:9-15). The foundation of the building is Jesus Christ himself (1 Cor 3:11). Similarly, in Ephesians 2:20-22 Paul also conceives of the church as God's temple, though here the foundation is the apostles and prophets and Jesus Christ is the cornerstone. The illustration of a house is used here because it is suggestive in conceiving of Paul's theology, not because Paul himself supplies such an illustration. No analogy fits perfectly when we try to communicate the Pauline gospel. Visualizing Paul's thought in terms of the building of a house provides an entry point into Paul's thought, a doorway through which we can enter into his worldview.

The foundation of the house is God himself. From him the house takes its shape, and it is utterly dependent on him for its growth. The house in this illustration represents God's saving plan in history, and that plan includes the role of the church in history. God is the foundation for all that occurs, "because from him and through him and for him are all things. May the glory be his forever" (Rom 11:36).<sup>9</sup> The words we wish to highlight here are *from him* (*ex autou*): God is the source of all things—he is the foundation. This verse is not wrenched out of context, for Paul introduces this thought *after* explaining in Romans 9–11 God's *saving plan* by which both Jews and Gentiles will be beneficiaries of God's saving mercy. God has constructed history so as to pour his lavish mercy on both Jews and Gentiles. That God is the origin of all things is confirmed in 1 Corinthians 8:6, "But for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things." One advantage of thinking of God as the foundation is that the other teachings of Paul are not then conceived as concentric circles that are farther and farther from the center. Whether Paul thinks of justification, reconciliation or sin, they are all based on the foundation; they are not separate from the foundation, nor are they far removed

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<sup>9</sup>The Scripture translations throughout this book are my own unless otherwise noted.



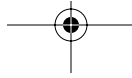


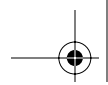
from it. They are themes that frame the house and give it detail, but all these themes depend on the foundation. Since God is the foundation of the house and it depends on him for its survival, he deserves honor for the building of the house. Paul draws this very conclusion in Romans 11:36. Since God is the one *from whom all things come*, he is therefore the one who receives glory.

Such an illustration also highlights the importance of salvation history, what is often called the “already but not yet” dimension of Pauline theology. When we speak of salvation history, we think of the fulfillment of God’s saving plan and promises. The fulfillment of God’s plan in history is announced in the Pauline gospel. The promises made to Israel in the Old Testament have now become a reality in and through the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God’s saving promises are already a reality for the believer in Jesus Christ—in this sense God’s plan is “already” being fulfilled. The gift of the Holy Spirit, for example, demonstrates that God’s covenant promises are now a reality for those who have faith. On the other hand, believers still await the consummation of salvation history; in this sense we do “not yet” enjoy all that God has promised. Believers who have the gift of the Spirit still struggle with sin and await the day when their bodies will be resurrected (Rom 8:18-25). Salvation history, then, could represent the remodeling of the house, for the new covenant fulfills what was promised in the old (Jer 31:31-34; 2 Cor 3:4-18). The image of “remodeling” is misleading if it suggests that God “starts over” with the church. Perhaps we should think of the Old Testament as the framing of the house and think of the fulfillment of salvation history as the completion of the inside of the house. We could also say that the theme of salvation history is the gospel of God (Rom 1:1). Hence, the image of the house nicely captures various dimensions of Paul’s theology—the foundation is God and Christ, salvation history portrays the progress being made on the house, and the theme of the house is the gospel.

### God and Christ

God is not only the *foundation* of the house; he and his Son, Jesus the Messiah, are the *means* by which the house is built. They are the architects, the contractors and the workers who build the house. Saying that God is the one who builds the house does not deny the role of human beings in the house’s construction. It has already been noted that Paul lays the foundation of the house (i.e., the church) and others build on the foundation (1 Cor 3:9-15). But the work accomplished by Paul and others is ultimately ascribed to God (1 Cor 3:5). One plants and another waters, “but God is the

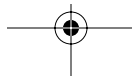
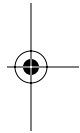




one who gives the growth" (1 Cor 3:7). And the foundation laid for the house is none other than Jesus Christ (1 Cor 3:11).

One should not conceive of God (or Christ) merely as a static foundation of the house; he is actively building the house now. Once again, both Romans 11:36 and 1 Corinthians 8:6 are germane. The house is not only from God but also "through him" (Rom 11:36). Paul often describes Jesus Christ as God's agent. In 1 Corinthians 8:6 he says that there "is one Lord, Jesus the Messiah, through whom are all things and we exist through him." Jesus is the agent through which all things, without exception, exist. A similar theme is sounded in Colossians. Everything in the universe is created "in Christ," whether earthly or heavenly beings. In other words, "all things have been created through him and for him" (Col 1:16). Nothing exists in the universe apart from the mediating, creative work of Christ. Nor is it right to think of Christ's work in the past only, as if he brought the world into being and then it continues on its own power. Colossians 1:17 clarifies that "all things in him hold together." The natural world endures and continues because of the dynamic work of the Son who continually sustains and preserves it. Suffice it to say that there is ample evidence that the building, whether it is conceived of as the people of God or the universe, would not remain without the sustaining and preserving work of the Father and the Son.

To continue the illustration, what is the ultimate goal of the building of the house? The goal is not the building itself, whether it is conceived in terms of God's righteousness, reconciliation, salvation history or apocalyptic. All of these themes constitute the house, but they are not the end for which the house was made. Fulfilling salvation history cannot itself be the goal of salvation history, for that would be redundant. Instead God has built the house to bring honor and praise to himself. Romans 11:36 again surfaces as a crucial text: "Because from him and through him and for him are all things. May the glory be his forever." Not only do all things have their source and agency in God, he is also the one "for whom" (*eis auton*) all things exist. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 8:6, after Paul says that all things are from the Father, he reaches a climax by saying that "we exist for him" (*hymeis eis auton*). Nor is such language restricted to the Father, for not only were all things created by means of the Son's agency, but also "all things were created for him" (Col 1:16). The ultimate reason for the creation of the world and for the fulfillment of salvation history (see Rom 11:36) was for the sake of the Father and the Son. Doubtless the metaphor of the house is imperfect since, for example, the Father is both the foundation of the house and the reason the house was made. But it conveys the





dynamic interaction of the various themes better than the term *center*, and it also provides a visual image by which the various Pauline themes are laid on the superstructure of the ultimate foundation, that is, God himself. He is the source, the means and the goal of all things. Thus, to return to the image of the center, God is the center of Pauline theology. But to say that God is the center of Pauline theology is not to diminish the centrality of Christ, for, as we shall see, the exaltation of Jesus the Messiah brings glory and praise to God. Perhaps we can say that *God in Christ* is the foundation of Pauline theology.

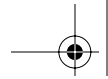
When we want to assess what is foundational for a writer, we can learn by paying attention to what surfaces as he discusses a variety of subjects. In Paul's case the priority of God and Christ emerge again and again as that which dominates his thinking. We might be tempted, for example, to think that the gospel is Paul's foundational motif.<sup>10</sup> After all, Paul was called as an apostle for the sake of the gospel (Rom 1:1). He devoted the bulk of his life to preaching the gospel and planting churches, and he is filled with joy when his converts stay true to the gospel (1 Thess 3) and deeply grieved when they abandon it (Gal 1:6-9). The gospel, however, is "the gospel of God" (Rom 1:1), indicating that the gospel cannot be prized over the God who makes it a reality. The gospel is good news because it proclaims the saving message *about God and from God*, and this gospel centers on God's Son, who fulfills the ancient prophecies (Rom 1:2-3). We note how easily Paul glides from the gospel of "God" to the gospel "concerning the Son," since in his mind the centrality of Christ and the centrality of God are of a piece. As noted earlier, the gospel can be conceived of as the theme of the house, while the glory of God and Christ constitute its foundation.

### The Gospel of God in Christ

The centrality of Christ is evident in the letter to the Galatians. The reason Paul is so deeply distressed about the Galatians' defection from the gospel is that it undermines the person and work of Jesus Christ. They have forsaken the "grace of Christ for another gospel" (Gal 1:6). The Torah, according to Paul's adversaries, is the determinative issue for one's salvation. But, if the Torah is so crucial, then faith in Jesus Christ becomes secondary (Gal 2:16-21). The essence of Christian living is "faith in the Son of God" (Gal 2:20), but this is undermined if the Torah is the gateway into the people of God. Indeed, those who lobbied so fiercely for circumcision turned the clock back in salva-

<sup>10</sup>Joseph A. Fitzmyer (*Paul and His Theology: A Brief Sketch* [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989], pp. 37-38) says that christology and the gospel are the center of Paul's theology, and hence his center is quite close to my own.

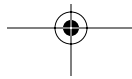




tion history. In effect, they installed the law as the climax of salvation history instead of seeing that the Messiah, Jesus, was the fulfillment of Abraham's promise and is the fulfillment of God's saving promises (Gal 3:15—4:7). The centrality of Christ emerges because he is the *only* seed of Abraham (Gal 3:16), and thus entrance into Abraham's family is only through him. The law was a temporary expedient until the coming of Christ (Gal 3:24). Now all people, both Jews and Gentiles, can be part of the family of Abraham in Christ Jesus through faith (Gal 3:26). The issue is not whether one has had a physical operation on a part of one's body; the issue is whether one has been clothed with Christ and immersed into Christ.

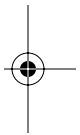
Indeed, if one's eternal destiny turns on the acceptance or rejection of circumcision (Gal 5:2-6), then Christ died for nothing (Gal 2:21). If those who agitate for circumcision are on target, then Christ's death is not the pathway for entrance into the people of God. In Galatians circumcision and the cross of Christ are polar: one lives under the banner of either the one or the other. If one adopts circumcision, then Christ cannot profit for salvation (Gal 5:2). Those who desire to be righteous before God by virtue of the law are cut off from Christ and have fallen from grace (Gal 5:4). Either people receive the marks of circumcision, or—like Paul—they bear on their body the marks of Christ's death (Gal 6:17) by accepting the suffering that comes when one forsakes circumcision and trusts Christ for eschatological salvation. Christ's death (not circumcision) delivers people from the evil age (Gal 1:4). His death is evacuated of all meaning if righteousness is available through the law (Gal 2:21; cf. Gal 3:1). Apparently, the Galatians, by succumbing to circumcision, believe that the curse of the law can be removed by keeping the law (Gal 3:10-12), but Paul counters that it can only be removed through the curse-bearing work of Christ on the cross (Gal 3:13). Liberation from the power of the law and sin is due to Christ's redeeming work (Gal 4:4-5). If circumcision is accepted as salvific, the scandal of the cross is nullified (Gal 5:11). And those who subscribe to circumcision do so to avoid the persecution of the cross (Gal 6:12-13), for only through the cross of Christ is allegiance to the old world order severed (Gal 6:14-15), and that old world order includes circumcision!

The priority of Christ manifests itself in another situation that is remarkably different from what happened in Galatia. In 1 Corinthians 1—4 we see that the church is plagued with divisions over ministers. The long discussion on wisdom (1 Cor 1:18—2:16) suggests that the quarreling over ministers (Paul, Apollos, Peter, etc.) centered on the Corinthians' estimation of the wisdom of the various ministers. Many suggestions have been advanced to





explain the nature of the divisions in Corinth, and we can hardly resolve the debate here. The most likely theory is that the debate over the wisdom of the ministers was not an argument over the theology of the various leaders. Rhetorical skills, not false teaching, fomented the debate. Duane Litfin and Bruce Winter argue this thesis persuasively.<sup>11</sup> The Greco-Roman world highly prized rhetoric, and speakers were estimated in accordance with their ability to dazzle audiences with their artistry, skill and persuasive power. What is striking about Paul's response is his conclusion that, if the Corinthians are entranced by the rhetorical ability of the various ministers, then they have misunderstood the cross of Christ. Devotion to human rhetoric and skill panders to human pride, and anything that exalts human wisdom undercuts the cross of Christ, for the preaching of the cross underscores the truth that believers are utterly dependent on God for everything. Human wisdom is not the path to life (1 Cor 1:18-25), nor does God call those who are wise, strong and residents of the upper class (1 Cor 1:26-31). Paul renounces rhetorical artistry in preaching the gospel so that faith depends on God instead of the strength and wisdom of human beings (1 Cor 2:1-5). What troubles Paul is that devotion to various human ministers nullifies the cross of Christ, the very center of the gospel. The Corinthians are transfixed by either Paul or Apollos, and they have forgotten that *God* is the one who gives the growth (1 Cor 3:7). The underlying problem in promoting the various human ministers is pride (1 Cor 1:29, 31; 3:21; 4:6-7). By exalting human ministers the Corin-



<sup>11</sup>Scholars continue to debate the nature of the divisions present in 1 Cor 1—4. F. C. Baur inaugurated critical study of the text with his distinction between the Petrine and Pauline factions. See his *Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ: His Life and Work, His Epistles and His Teachings. A Contribution to a Critical History of Primitive Christianity*, 2 vols. (London: Williams & Norgate, 1873). Baur's view is no longer in favor today, though his ghost still exerts an influence on New Testament studies. Many other proposals have since been advanced, but they will not be examined here. For a summary of the various proposals in the history of scholarship, it is useful to consult Duane Litfin's *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation: 1 Corinthians 1-4 and Greco-Roman Rhetoric*, SNTSMS 79 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). In my estimation, Litfin is correct when he argues that the divisions cannot be traced to theological differences between Peter, Paul and Apollos. The divisions among the Corinthians stemmed from their estimation of the "wisdom" of the various ministers, and they assessed the "wisdom" of Paul and Apollos on the basis of their rhetorical ability. Some of the Corinthians criticized Paul and sided with Apollos because they deemed Paul's rhetorical ability to be inferior. I do not believe, however, that Litfin is convincing when he says that Paul's rhetorical style is unique in the sense that he surrendered all attempts to persuade others. Paul endeavored to persuade others of the legitimacy of his view, but he did not rely on the artifices of rhetoric and human eloquence in order to do so. For a confirmation and development of Litfin's view, see Bruce W. Winter, *Philo and Paul Among the Sophists*, SNTSMS 96 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).





thians have forgotten God! The Corinthians are satisfied with too little, for they boast in human ministers and have forgotten that they have something greater—namely, God and Christ. In having God and Christ they have all things, including human ministers (1 Cor 3:21-23). The reason Paul brings in the cross as a counter to human wisdom is so people will boast in God and keep him central (1 Cor 1:29, 31). When Paul learns of divisions in the church, he perceives that the church has abandoned the core of its message: the cross of Christ and the centrality of God in all things. This in turn suggests that such themes were the foundation of Paul’s preaching.

### Unity and Living for Christ

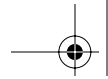
When we turn to Philippians we again find indications of tensions in the community.<sup>12</sup> Euodia and Syntyche are at odds (Phil 4:2-3), and the long summons to unity (Phil 1:27—2:30) suggests that disharmony plagued the church. Paul calls the church back to the gospel of Christ as its uniting cause. Paul himself was harassed by fellow believers who preached the gospel of Christ but had a personal animus against him (Phil 1:12-18). Their message was in accord with the truth, but their personal motives were self-seeking and injurious. Presenting himself as a model to the Philippians, Paul informs them how he reacts to his envious detractors. He rejoices in the message preached—even though the motive of the messengers is flawed—because “Christ is preached” by his competitors (Phil 1:18). The way to triumph over petty squabbles, Paul informs the Philippians, is to keep the missionary mandate firmly before one’s eyes. Since Paul’s greatest joy was in Jesus Christ, he could overlook the antagonists who wanted to bring him grief. Paul informs the Philippians (Phil 1:19-26) that his goal, whether he lives or dies, is for “Christ to be magnified in his body” (Phil 1:20). The Christ-saturated vision of Paul is expressed in his famous statement, “For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21). Thus, he is willing, as Christ’s slave (cf. Phil 1:1), to die now and be with him or to have his life extended so that he can minister to others. In either instance, Jesus Christ and the mission to proclaim his gospel are the animating principles that drive Paul.

When he exhorts the church to be united, it is not a call to unity “for the sake of unity” (Phil 1:27—2:4). They are to live “worthily of the gospel,” to

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<sup>12</sup>The idea that the Philippians were fractured by disunity has been argued by a number of scholars recently. Davorin Peterlin (*Paul’s Letter to the Philippians in Light of Disunity in the Church*, NovTSup 79 [Leiden: Brill, 1995]) makes a sustained case for this theory, though he overstates his case at a number of places.

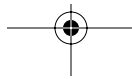


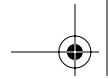


stand united "for the faith of the gospel" (Phil 1:27). The cause of the gospel of Christ and its extension in the world are the reasons unity is prized. He appeals here to the example of Christ Jesus himself (Phil 2:5-11), who did not take advantage of his equality with God but endured a humiliating death on a cross because God had called him to do so. In response to Jesus' obedience God exalted him as the universal Lord who is to be confessed as such by all beings. The centrality of Christ emerges in his death, resurrection and exaltation. Does the exaltation of Jesus Christ threaten the supremacy of the Father? By no means, for Christ's humiliation, resurrection and exaltation were "for the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:11). The Father's glory is not diminished but enhanced by the work of Christ on the cross.

This fits with 2 Corinthians as well. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of salvation history, for all "the promises of God are yes in him" (2 Cor 1:20). But Paul specifically proceeds to say that the fulfillment of the promises in Christ brings glory to God (2 Cor 1:20). The new covenant is superior to the old, for the glory of Christ outshines the glory of Moses (2 Cor 3:10-11). The gospel is nothing less than "the glory of Christ" (2 Cor 4:4). But the stunning radiance of Christ's glory does not diminish the glory of God the Father, for the glory of Christ is not in conflict with the glory of God. God "has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). We observe here that the glory of God is revealed in "the face of Christ." It is not the case that the splendor of Christ blinds our vision to God's glory or that his glory is dimmed by Christ's glory. God's glory is enhanced and manifested when his Son is glorified.

The Christ-exalting passion of Timothy and Epaphroditus is the primary reason Paul commends them (Phil 2:19-30). People live for many things, but Timothy stands out because he is worried about the faith of the Philippians (Phil 2:20). Others seek their own interests, but Timothy seeks "the things of Jesus Christ" (Phil 2:21). Timothy's joy is fulfilled in Christ, and in turn he wants to share that joy with others. Epaphroditus, similarly, is so devoted to the work of Christ that he risked his life on behalf of the cause of the gospel (Phil 2:25-30). And we see in chapter 3, once again, why Paul reacted so vehemently to those who demanded circumcision. Instead of boasting in Christ, they were boasting in the flesh (Phil 3:3). Adherence to circumcision robs Christ of his glory and ascribes it to the person submitting to the rite. For Paul the heart of his new faith is personal devotion to Christ (Phil 3:7-11). He counted his past religious accomplishments as worthless and meaningless compared to the supreme joy of knowing the Messiah Jesus as his Lord. The

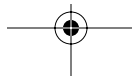
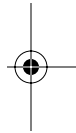


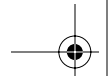


goal of his life is to know him better, to have his righteousness, to participate in his sufferings and to obtain the resurrection of the dead. Even though he has not yet attained perfection (Phil 3:12-16), he exerts his energy to reach the prize of perfection, which awaits him at the eschaton. Thus, those who oppose the message of the gospel are to be avoided as enemies, while those who live like Paul are to be imitated as coworkers and friends (Phil 3:17—4:1). In a sense, Paul's message in Philippians can be summarized in the words, "Rejoice in the Lord" (Phil 4:4). One's greatest joy lies in one's greatest treasure, and Paul's treasure was the Lord.

### **The Preeminence of Christ**

The preeminence of Christ breathes through all of Colossians. Apparently, the church was influenced by certain teachers who contended for a different path to divine fullness. We need not determine here the precise contours of what is often called "the Colossian heresy." The details are obscure, but the main picture is reasonably clear. The teachers advocated divine fullness through asceticism and devotion to angels (Col 2:8-23). Paul emphatically repudiates this teaching because it robs Christ of his supremacy. The magnificent hymn of Colossians 1:15-20 emphasizes the person of Christ. He is the image of God, the firstborn, the agent of creation and the purpose of creation. The created order is sustained and preserved by him, and he is "before all things" (Col 1:17). Not only is he the ruler of creation, but he is also the ruler of the church (Col 1:18). He was resurrected "in order that he should be preeminent in all things" (Col 1:18). The divine fullness is in him, and reconciliation of all things is via his cross (Col 1:19-20). The rival teachers may claim to have the "mystery" that is the secret to vitality and growth, but they should be summarily dismissed. The "mystery" is "Christ in you" (Col 1:27), God's mystery is "Christ" (Col 2:2), and "in him are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden" (Col 2:3). Seeking to find wisdom through any other source than Christ is folly. The philosophy offered by the teachers is deficient because "it is not according to Christ" (Col 2:8). Growth in the Christian life comes by walking in him (Col 2:6-7), not by following some ascetic regime where certain foods are forbidden and special festival days are observed (Col 2:16-17, 21-23). These things are "shadows," and the substance is Christ (Col 2:17). Nor will people discover fullness by pandering to angels or worshipping them (Col 2:10, 15, 18). The angels are subordinated to Christ because he created them (Col 1:16), defeated them at the cross (Col 2:15) and reigns over them (Col 2:10). Since all of God's fullness



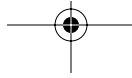


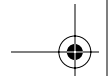
resides in Christ, believers will experience fullness only in him (Col 2:9-10). Believers should hold fast to the head, who is Christ himself (Col 2:19), and realize that in him they have all they need: their sins are forgiven (Col 2:11-14), they have died to the elements of the world (Col 2:20), and they have been raised up with Christ (Col 3:1). "Christ is your life" (Col 3:4), and believers await future glory with him.

### **Righteous Living and the Priority of God in Christ**

Thus far the supremacy of God and Christ has been traced in particular Pauline letters. If we cast the net thematically, similar conclusions emerge. In Colossians, for instance, the recipients are exhorted to put off sin and be clothed with righteousness (Col 3:5-17). The exhortations are punctuated with the words, "And everything, whatever you do, whether in speech or work, do all things in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col 3:17). We could scarcely claim, therefore, that ethics can be sundered from the preeminence of Christ, for everything done by believers is to be done in the name of Jesus and for his honor. There is no conception here of doing what is right simply because it is the right thing to do, or of duty for duty's sake. A similar statement comes near the end of Paul's discussion of food offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8—10. He sums up by saying, "Whether then you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all things for the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31). In Colossians the animating motive is the name of Jesus; here it is the glory of God. These two are not in conflict but are compatible for Paul. We simply observe here that there is no activity in life, no realm of existence that is outside the sphere of God's rule. Even the ordinary actions of eating and drinking should be done to honor God. That honoring God should be the goal of ethics is unsurprising once we grasp that dishonoring him is the root of all sin. The wrath of God is visited on the world (Rom 1:18-25) because people have rejected him. They know he is God but they refuse "to glorify him as God or give thanks" (Rom 1:21). They abandon the glory of God and turn to the worship of idols (Rom 1:23). They "worshiped the creature rather than the creator" (Rom 1:25). Because God has been rejected as God, he hands human beings over to all the other sins that blight human existence (Rom 1:24, 26, 28). The fundamental sin, however—which is the root of all others—is the failure to honor, praise and glorify the one and only true God. It is fitting, then, that a life pleasing to God is marked by doing all things in his name, by the desire to honor him in all things.

Once we grasp that the origin of all sin is failure to serve and worship



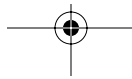


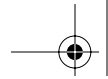
God, we also understand why “whatever is not of faith is sin” (Rom 14:23). Most commentators argue against applying this text universally to all situations, but I have argued in my Romans commentary that such exegesis is mistaken.<sup>13</sup> Paul does conceive of ordinary actions like eating and drinking being done for God’s glory! Conversely, he says that anything that is not animated by faith is sin. The best commentary on this is the depiction of Abraham’s faith in Romans 4. Abraham was asked to believe the impossible, that he and his wife—though beyond the age of bearing children—would indeed have a child. Abraham was keenly aware of the inadequacy of both Sarah and himself (Rom 4:19); his faith did not consist in his denying the facts of life. His faith was directed to God’s promise, for he “was fully assured that he was able to do what he had promised” (Rom 4:21). Despite the impossibility of the situation, “he grew strong in faith, giving glory to God” (Rom 4:20). The essence of faith, then, is that it grants glory to God. God is glorified in faith because he is honored as the all-sufficient one who can meet every need. He is conceived of as the one who can raise the dead and create out of nothing (Rom 4:17). Thus, trust and honor are inevitably intertwined. The one who is trusted is also the one whom we honor as trustworthy. That which is done outside the realm of faith is sin because such actions are done outside the realm of God’s lordship.

Paul’s call to honor God in our everyday existence is not restricted to the few texts cited above. Though Paul uses various terms, the notion that God and Christ are the center and circumference of the ethical life permeates Paul’s writings. A few examples will suffice. Paul warns the Corinthians about the dangers of sexual immorality, employing a number of arguments against sexual license (1 Cor 6:12-20). He concludes, though, by reminding the Corinthians that their lives are not their own. They have been purchased with the price of Christ’s blood. He draws the final conclusion in verse 20, “Therefore glorify God with your body.” The fundamental reason for sexual purity is that such a life honors God, showing that the person who lives chastely trusts that following God’s will is the path to joy. The Corinthians are exhorted to give generously so that thanksgiving might be rendered to God (2 Cor 9:11-12) and so that he will be honored and glorified (2 Cor 9:13). Similarly, Paul thanks the Philippians for their generosity to the gospel cause in Philippians 4:10-20. Paul is exceedingly careful here, for he does not want the Philippians to think that they put God in their debt, and yet at the same

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<sup>13</sup>See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1998), pp. 738-39.

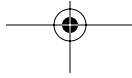


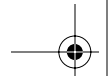


time he is genuinely grateful for their assistance. He reminds them that God will supply all their needs, and thus “to our God and Father belongs the glory for all the ages, amen” (Phil 4:20). The ultimate source of every gift is the one who is to be praised for his lavish generosity.

The centrality of God and Christ in the warp and woof of life is woven into the fabric of Pauline ethics. Believers are to live worthily of the Lord (Col 1:10) and give thanks to the Father for their liberation from sin (Col 1:12). They should avoid the vain and licentious behavior of Gentiles, for they did not learn of Jesus in such a way (Eph 4:20). Tensions surfaced between the weak and strong in Rome (Rom 14:1—15:6). Paul calls on them to accept one another and wants them to worship in harmony instead of being rent by mutual recriminations. The reason he wants them to accept each other is that such acceptance brings glory to God (Rom 15:7).

In the concrete circumstances of life, the particulars that constitute everyday existence, Paul directs his readers' minds Godward. The household code in Ephesians 5:21—6:9 is a case in point. Husbands and wives (Eph 5:22-33) are not merely to follow social conventions, though the extent to which social conventions are reflected is debated. Wives are to submit to husbands “as to the Lord” (Eph 5:22). They are to submit in the same way the church subordinates itself to Christ her Lord (Eph 5:24). Some commentators detect the parallels in Paul's advice to other secular writers of his day, but, amazingly, they often give short shrift to what is distinctive in the exhortations. The wife is not to subordinate herself to the husband, finally and ultimately, because of social convention or because society will run smoothly. She is to do so in honor of her Lord, Jesus the Messiah. Similarly, and perhaps even more radically, husbands are summoned to love their wives “as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it” (Eph 5:25). Surely Paul could have exhorted husbands to treat their wives with kindness and affection and to look out for their wives' interests. There was no need to invest his exhortation with the great themes of Christ's redemptive work. Nonetheless, when he calls on husbands to love their wives, he summons them to reflect on Christ's redemptive work for the church and to model it in their treatment of their wives. Even if Paul appropriates the cultural ethic of his day, he does not appropriate it without transmuting it through the refinery of the gospel. We will return in due course to what Paul says about slavery. Here it should simply be observed that the obedience rendered by slaves is suffused with the Christ-centered vision of Paul. Slaves should render their service to please the Lord and not to receive commendation from their human masters (Eph



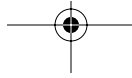


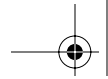
6:5-8; Col 3:22-25). The primary issue for slaves is how their earthly lives relate to their Lord Christ. The estimation of human masters is secondary.

### **The Centrality of God in Christ in History**

When human beings reflect on their lives, the fundamental issue, according to Paul, is not their social status but whether they are in Adam or in Christ. For Paul these two persons (Rom 5:12-19) are the key individuals in human history. If people are in Adam, then they are under the reign of sin and death. If they are in Christ, they have been freed from these tyrannical powers. The “old person” (*palaios anthrōpos*) “has been crucified with” Christ (Rom 6:6). That is, the old Adam has been slain for those who are baptized into Christ. In the midst of Paul’s exhortations in Colossians 3:5-11, he reminds believers that they have put off the old person and put on the new (Col 3:9-10). The new Adam is none other than Christ himself, for he represents the new humanity, and all those who are in him are incorporated into the people of God. Thus, Paul can say that “where” (*hopou*) the new Adam exists—namely, Christ—social distinctions are irrelevant (Col 3:11). Whether one is Greek or Jewish, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian or Scythian, slave or free is immaterial because ethnic identity constitutes no advantage relative to salvation. Christ alone is sufficient for salvation, and in that sense Christ is all. The centrality of Christ and the new humanity formed in him signifies that all other human classes, organizations and distinctions are outmoded.

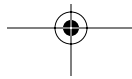
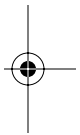
During the present evil age believers face suffering, pressures and afflictions. Such sufferings, however, are designed to bring thanksgiving to God who so powerfully rescues his people in and through the painful circumstances of life (2 Cor 1:3-11). Being led to death in suffering is a means by which the fragrance of the gospel of Christ is wafted into the world (2 Cor 2:14-16). The treasure of the gospel is encapsulated in weak and suffering vessels so that all will see that the power comes from God and not Paul (2 Cor 4:7). Paul does not preach himself, after all, but Jesus Christ as Lord (2 Cor 4:5). The life of Jesus is manifested most powerfully when his servants are suffering (2 Cor 4:10-11). His power shines in Paul’s weakness (2 Cor 12:9). If Paul and the others who proclaimed the gospel were glorious and strong, then they would be praised for their wisdom and strength. The advance of the gospel would be attributed to the quality of the messengers. When the gospel advances through weak and suffering messengers, however, people are provoked to thank God for its advance and triumph and thus the glory goes to him rather than those who proclaim the message (2 Cor 4:15).





When the Corinthians are asked to reflect on their calling (1 Cor 1:26), it becomes evident that their ranks are not composed of intellectuals, the mighty and the ruling class. Those whom "God has chosen" (1 Cor 1:27-28) are deemed as foolish, weak and of ill-repute in the world. God has selected the insignificant in the world "so that no flesh should boast in his presence" (1 Cor 1:29). Indeed, God's saving work is from start to finish a miracle of grace: "Because of him [ex hou] you are in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor 1:30). And Jesus is the wisdom from God on behalf of believers. Indeed, righteousness, sanctification and redemption are all his work (1 Cor 1:30). Ascribing ultimacy to God's saving righteousness, sanctification or redemption would be a massive mistake, for verse 31 indicates the purpose (*hina*) for the bestowal of these gifts. God has lavished his grace on believers "so that the one who boasts should boast in the Lord" (1 Cor 1:31). God's ultimate goal, according to Paul, is not redemption, righteousness or sanctification. He grants these saving gifts to his people so that they will exult in him and praise his name. We are reminded of Romans 5:1-11, where Paul proclaims the tremendous hope that is ours because of God's saving righteousness. The climax of the paragraph is reached with the words, "And not only this, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have now received reconciliation" (Rom 5:11). The capstone of the experience of believers is not reconciliation or the gift of righteousness (Rom 5:9); it is the exultation in God that becomes ours *through Jesus the Christ*. We also see that boasting in God is inseparable from boasting in Jesus Christ the Lord.

A text with a similar theme is Ephesians 1:3-14. Paul recounts the spiritual blessings that belong to believers in Christ. They are chosen to be holy and blameless before the foundation of the world and are predestined to be adopted as his sons (Eph 1:4-5). Why has God lavished such blessings on his people? He did so "for the praise of the glory of his grace" (Eph 1:6). Through Christ believers are redeemed and forgiven of their sins (Eph 1:7). They know the mystery of his will, which centers on Jesus Christ himself (Eph 1:9-10). They have received the predestined inheritance (Eph 1:11). Why are these gifts ours? "So that we who have previously hoped in Christ might be to the praise of his glory" (Eph 1:12). Believers have been sealed with the Spirit who is the promised down payment of the eschatological inheritance (Eph 1:13-14). They are guaranteed that their body will be redeemed on the day of the Lord. God grants these blessings "for the praise of his glory" (Eph 1:14). It could scarcely be clearer that redemption is penultimate and the praise of God is ultimate. Three times Paul clarifies the reason God lavishes his merci-



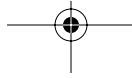


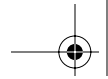
ful grace on his children. Indeed, the same theme heads up the paragraph as Paul exclaims, "Blessed be the God and Father our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph 1:3). Paul begins the paragraph by praising God for his inestimable blessings, and then he explains three times that his saving gifts were given so that we would praise his grace.

Nor is it the case that God is exalted and Christ is diminished. Paul emphasizes repeatedly that all these blessings are ours "in Christ." Indeed, on eleven occasions in Ephesians 1:3-14 God's gracious work is said to have been bestowed on us either in or through Christ. The work of Christ cannot be relegated to a sidebar or an excursus. The mystery of God's will (Eph 1:9; cf. the discussion of Colossians above) centers on Jesus Christ and God's decision to sum up (*anakephalaiōsasthai*) all of human history in him. "The fullness of times" (Eph 1:10), that is, the completion of salvation history, does not occur apart from Jesus Christ. God planned that history would only reach its consummated goal in and through him. Thereby, he honors his Son by showing that the fulfillment of all things cannot occur apart from him.

The centrality of Christ permeates the letter to the Ephesians. God has enthroned Christ above all spiritual powers and names, and the sovereignty that has been given to Christ will be his not only in this age but also in the age to come (Eph 1:20-21). Everything has been put under the feet of Jesus the Messiah, and he also reigns as head over the church (Eph 1:22). In chapter 2 Paul returns again to the salvation that was accomplished for believers. They were dead in sins, under the dominion of the ruler of the air and enslaved by the social patterns of their society (Eph 2:1-3). God in his merciful love awakened his people out of their slumber; he breathed his life into them and granted them life with Christ; and he raised them with him and seated them with him in the heavenlies (Eph 2:4-6). Why did he do all this? Ephesians 2:7 communicates the answer in a purpose clause (*hina*), "so that he could show in the coming ages the surpassing riches of his grace in kindness upon us in Christ Jesus." Once again we see that the salvific work of God's grace on our behalf is not God's ultimate concern, though, of course, the latter theme should not be minimized as insignificant. God's supreme aim is to display for the coming ages the stunning nature of his grace.

The centrality of Christ is preserved in accomplishing this aim because the unity of Jews and Gentiles in God's plan only occurs through his work on the cross (Eph 2:11-22). The Gentiles did not become the people of God apart from the cross. The cross is the means by which God extended peace to those who were both far and near. The mystery that was veiled from previous gen-



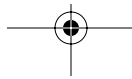


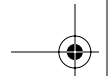
erations was the coparticipation and coequality of Jews and Gentiles in the people of God (Eph 3:5-6). The mystery has become a reality only through the gospel, and the very center of the gospel is the atoning work of Christ by which both Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to God. The summing up of all things in Christ (Eph 1:10) embraces the inclusion of the Gentiles *at this juncture of history* into the people of God. Since Gentiles participate in covenant membership only through Christ, Christ is honored as the one through whom God's promises are realized. God's plan is such "that he has now made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenlies through the church the multifaceted wisdom of God" (Eph 3:10). The rulers and authorities here probably refer to both good and evil angels. The existence of the church and the revelation of the mystery, namely, the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the church, redound to the wisdom of God. His saving plan is featured in a climactic way in the church of Christ Jesus. The purpose of the church's existence, in the final analysis, is to bring glory to God. Paul's prayer at the conclusion of Ephesians 3 bears this out: "To him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus for all the generations of the ages of ages, amen" (Eph 3:21). God instituted the church to bring glory to his name forever.

Paul also prays that the church, which has received such mercy and grace, would experience the boundless greatness of Christ's love "so that you would be filled to all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:19). "The fullness of God" is another way of designating the God-permeated vision of Paul. Being filled with God's fullness is the climactic experience for believers, and this occurs when his love seizes and grasps them. The fullness of God becomes a reality in the world through the work of Christ. His incarnation and ascension were designed "so that he might fill all things" (Eph 4:10). The church is to be the "perfect man" (*andra teleion*), and this "perfect man" is nothing less than "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13). He is the head to which the body grows (Eph 4:15). We have already seen that he is the new Adam (Eph 4:24) with which believers are to adorn themselves.

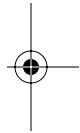
### Conclusion

When Paul prays for Christians to grow strong in the faith, he does so "for the glory and praise of God" (Phil 1:9-11). When he thinks of the coming of the Lord, he says that "he will be glorified among his holy ones and be marveled at among all those who have believed" (2 Thess 1:10). When he considers God's merciful grace in calling him as the chief of sinners to salvation (1 Tim 1:12-16), he breaks into praise, saying, "Now to the king of the ages,





incorruptible, invisible, to the only God, be honor and glory for the ages of ages, amen" (1 Tim 1:17).<sup>14</sup> When he considers his call to bring about the obedience of faith among the nations, he says that this is done "for the sake of his name" (Rom 1:5). When he concludes his greatest letter and returns to the theme of bringing about the obedience of faith among the nations (Rom 16:25-26), he again breaks into prayer: "To the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to him be the glory for the ages, amen" (Rom 16:27). The passion of Paul's life, the foundation and capstone of his vision, and the animating motive of his mission was the supremacy of God in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>15</sup>




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<sup>14</sup>For the centrality of God in the Pastorals, see Greg A. Couser, "God and Christian Existence in the Pastoral Epistles: Toward *Theological Method and Meaning*," *NovT* 42 (2000): 262-83.

<sup>15</sup>I am indebted to John Piper for my understanding of Paul and of biblical theology as a whole. Readers should consult his many books.

