‘Christological Monotheism’: A Foundation for Religious Debate

Tim Bertolet

I. Introduction

In today’s pluralistic culture it is not uncommon for claims to be made that all religions are equal, that all people worship the same god or that all paths lead to ‘salvation’. Orthodox Christianity has historically rejected such erroneous views. Even in light of the extensive pluralism in our postmodern culture, we would be naïve to assume that we are the first generation of Christians to be attacked by religious pluralism. Truly, as the writer of Ecclesiastes proclaims, “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.”¹ Monotheism is paramount to Christianity’s confrontation with other religions, which ultimately do not worship the biblical God, YHWH. However, this monotheism must be properly understood within the context of the New Testament revelation that Jesus is God. Paul demonstrates in his own religious confrontations by drawing from the Shema and first-century Jewish monotheism that a ‘Christological Monotheism’ must be foundational to Christianity’s continual confrontation with pluralism and other religions.

II. What is a ‘Christological Monotheism’?

A difficulty that New Testament scholars face, in terms of history-of-religion, is to explain how first-century Christians, particularly Jewish Christians (e.g. Paul), could go from being monotheistic to embracing Jesus the Messiah as Lord, YHWH of the Old Testament, without apparently violating the strict monotheism of first-century Judaism. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that certain Jewish circles rejected not only Christian claims that Jesus is

---

¹ Ecclesiastes 1:9, all Bible quotations in the English will be from the English Standard Version unless otherwise specified.
the Jewish Messiah but that he is at the same time YHWH.² Are we therefore forced conclude that Christianity violated monotheism in the first-century? Pure history-of-religion approaches have been content to argue in ways similar to a Hegelian formula that Jewish monotheism (the thesis) mixed with pagan polytheism (the antithesis) creating something distinct in the Christian concept of God (the synthesis). While this is a simplification of more nuanced argumentation, Geza Vermes’ own conclusions typify such argumentation:

Indeed, it is no exaggeration to contend that the identification of a contemporary historical figure with God would have been inconceivable to a first-century AD Palestinian Jew. It could certainly not have been expressed in public, in the presence of men conditioned by centuries of biblical monotheistic religion.³

Vermes’ goes on to conclude that the Jesus being called the Son of God in the Nicene Creed which offers the definition as “God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God,” ultimately results from a Greco-Roman misunderstanding because of the influence of Hellenism. He suggests the end product is completely alien to ideas of original Jewish Christianity.⁴

Similarly, Karen Armstrong concludes, “Paul never called Jesus ‘God.’”⁵ She attributes this primarily to his Jewish monotheistic heritage, “As a Jew, Paul did not believe that he [Jesus] had been God incarnate.”⁶ For Armstrong, Christianity shifted and developed as it interacted with the Roman world and converts were made of slaves and the lower classes.⁷

These solutions simply will not withstand close scrutiny.⁸ In modern scholarship, these

⁴ Ibid., 213.
⁶ Ibid., 86.
⁷ Ibid., 90-1.
solutions can be traced back to Wilhelm Bousset’s *Kyrios Christos.* He argued that title *Kyrios* [Lord] as applied to Jesus marked a major shift in early Christian thought and arose from Christianity’s Hellenization. Summarizing the evidence against a theory of late development for Christology, Hurtado concludes based on preceding careful examination of relevant sources “a veritable explosion of devotion to Jesus took place so early and was so widespread *by the time* of his [Paul’s] Gentile mission, that in the main christological beliefs and devotional practices that he advocated, Paul was not an innovator but a transmitter of tradition.” In other words, confession of Jesus as divine is not the result of Christianity’s association with Greco-Roman religion. Let us draw attention to three basic failures in the views of those who see high Christology contradicting high monotheism.

First, they fail to grasp the shape of first-century monotheism, which results in a study that pursues the wrong trails of evidence. As Hurtado notes, “these scholars invoke their portrayal of Jewish monotheism as a basis for determining in advance what could or could not have happened christologically among Christians with allegiance to the monotheistic stance of the Jewish tradition.” Monotheism was not monism as we will discuss below in our own treatment of monotheism. First century Jewish monotheism and that of the Old Testament, is not to be equated with later Jewish and Islamic monotheism. This is particularly pertinent since these two religions have had centuries to formulate and articulate their own monotheism in a manner that confronts and rejects Christianity’s Trinitarian monotheism.

Second, the devotion and worship of Jesus arose extremely early and is not the product of

---

Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 2003), Hurtado is to be commended for his comprehensive examination not just of Christology *per se* but Christian devotional patterns in the early church. His goal is to tell the “story” of “the ways that Jesus functions as divine in the religious life of Christian groups of the first two centuries” (4).

11 *Lord Jesus Christ,* 216. Emphasis mine.
12 *Lord Jesus Christ,* 42.
late development as Jewish Christianity was allegedly confuted with pagan polytheism.\(^{13}\) The data does not support this typical revisionist approach.\(^{14}\) Citing Biblical evidence, Richard Bauckham succinctly rejects the notion that worship of Jesus from pagan Greco-Roman sources, “Certainly the view that the transition [to worship of Christ] coincided with the movement of Christianity from a Jewish to a pagan Hellenistic environment...is mistaken.”\(^{15}\) Examination must be thorough including the titles of Christ in the New Testament, OT passages applied to Christ, and the earliest devotional practices of Christians.\(^{16}\) Typically presuppositions that first-century monotheism is entirely incompatible with later Nicene Christology has led scholars to posit patterns of synthesis that developed in the second and third centuries. Again Hurtado is representative of the solid New Testament scholars who reject this notion:

> But the evidence suggests strongly that, well before these later developments [the Nicene Creed], within the first two decades of Christianity, Jewish Christians gathered in Jesus’ name for worship, prayed to him and sang hymns to him, regarded him as exalted to a position of heavenly rule above all angelic orders, appropriated to him titles and Old Testament passages originally referring to God, sought to bring Jews as well as Gentiles to embrace him as the divinely appointed redeemer, and in general redefined their devotion to the God of their fathers so as to include the veneration of Jesus. And apparently they regarded this redefinition not only as legitimate but, indeed, as something demanded of them.”\(^{17}\)

Third, when we focus on Paul, in particular, in his argumentation concerning various topics (including God, Law and Spirit) he is a thoroughly Jewish theologian who has come to understand his world in light of the climactic eschatological activity of God in fulfillment of the Old Testament promises.\(^{18}\) Likewise, Paul’s discussion of Christ, particularly His deity, bears the

---

\(^{13}\) Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 3, Cf. also Hurtado’s *Lord Jesus Christ* particularly as cited in note 9.

\(^{14}\) Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 3,5. Cf. also Hurtado’s *Lord Jesus Christ*.


\(^{16}\) For a discussion of the early Christian worship and its binitarian nature cf. Larry Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1999) along with the two other major works from Hurtado, namely *One God, One Lord* and *Lord Jesus Christ*.

\(^{17}\) *One God, One Lord*, 11. Emphasis mine.

\(^{18}\) This would hold true for non-Pauline texts such as Hebrews 1 where Jesus is clearly YHWH described using language and texts to speak of the Son as one who is truly God.
same Jewish flavor. Yet God’s own eschatological revelation *demanded* (to use Hurtado’s language) on the part of His people a greater understanding of God, the very same YHWH/God revealed progressively in the Old Testament through His history of redemption. The last thing Paul would ever do, as one anchored in the firm belief that the Old Testament has now come to its eschatological fulfillment, is abandon his belief that Israel’s God, YHWH, is the one true God. While the opposing scholars may acknowledge this last point concerning Paul’s Jewishness, they downplay the eschatological-revelatory significance of Christ’s death and resurrection that for Paul was combined with a personal revelation received on the Damascus Road.\(^{19}\) Taking into consideration these events, Paul is quite comfortable in redefining true monotheism in light of and because of the climax of YHWH’s own self-revelation.\(^{20}\) Hence, a number of recent New Testament scholars have proposed the term ‘Christological Monotheism’ as a phrase to describe Paul’s continuity and discontinuity with first-century Jewish monotheism.\(^{21}\) Essentially, Paul, in light of God’s own eschatological self-revelation in Christ,

---

\(^{19}\) Notice that in 1 Cor. 15:1-4, Paul does not see his Damascus road experience as contradiction the teachings of the earliest church as it has been passed on. See also Galatians 1-2. For a discussion of the significance of Paul’s Damascus Road experience see Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul’s Gospel* (rev. ed.; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1984) esp. chapter five; followed by his later work *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 2002) esp. chapters one and five. Peter T. O’Brien, “Was Paul Converted?,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: Volume 2 The Paradoxes of Paul* (ed. D.A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien and Mark A. Seifrid; Grand Rapids, Mi.: Baker Academic, 2004), 361-91. Both conclude that the Damascus Christophany included new elements of Christology and soteriology for Paul’s personal understanding.

\(^{20}\) We use the term ‘redefine’ in the sense that the name God/Lord now expanded to include the confession that Jesus is Lord (notice for example, the use of Joel 2:32 in Romans 10:13 or the use of Isaiah 45:23 with reference to Jesus Christ). God is now known as Father and Son. This expanded definition is precisely *because* in these eschatological last days YHWH has revealed Himself in Son (Heb. 1:2-3; *ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡµερῶν τούτων ἐλάλησεν ἡµῖν ἐν υἱῷ*), who shares in the very glory of God as Himself uncreated, possessing full glory in eternity past (Heb. 1:3;10-12; John 1:1-3; 17:5; Col. 1:15-17; Rev. 1:17-18). The ‘redefinition’ is not because God has changed but because He has further revealed Himself at the climax of His salvation history. Paul obviously is neither the only Christian nor the first Christian to engage in this redefinition *both* in their theology *and* their worship/devotional practice. (The two are not mutually exclusive as is often thought in this postmodern era).

adapted monotheism to incorporate both God the Father and Jesus the Lord without any violation of Old Testament monotheism. This ‘Christological monotheism’ does not exist without God’s eschatological self-revelation in the person and work of Christ. These appropriations and applications of YHWH-language applied to the person of Jesus serve to express the identity of the Messiah, as human and divine, and did not violate monotheism. The revelation of God expands the definition of the ‘one God’ central to monotheism without contradiction of or infringement upon this truth.

In other words, when first-century monotheism is examined in conjunction with Paul’s own language, he clearly refers to Christ in ways typically reserved only for YHWH yet in a fashion that does not betray true monotheism.22 His ‘Christological monotheism’ centers on the confession that Jesus is Lord. Paul is most unambiguously not compromising to pluralism; in fact, quite to the contrary, on several occasions he uses his own ‘Christological Monotheism’ convictions to confront religious pluralism, typical of the attacks Jewish theologians made from their own monotheistic perspective. Those who posit Christianity as a synthesis of Jewish and pagan practice who be wise to heed the words of B.B Warfield concerning the language of the New Testament writers:

They do not, then, place two new gods by the side of Jehovah as alike with Him to be served and worshipped; they conceive Jehovah as Himself at once Father,

---

22 Again, monotheism is emphatically not monism (as in Islam or contemporary Judaism). In various contexts, Paul can distinguish between Father, Son and Spirit yet still refer to one God/Lord. Furthermore, the thrusts of his argument are undergirded by monotheistic concerns (esp. worship; creation; or unity of God’s people, see below on 1 Cor. 8; but also Phil. 2:6-11; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:4-6; Col. 1:15-20; et al). Interestingly, in Armstrong’s own discussion of Philippians 2:6-11 fails to deal with the complexity of Paul’s articulation. Her interpretation appears more like Gnosticism with a second lesser divine being (History, 88-9). Her interpretation of Paul leaves him violating monotheism at a fundamental level! In Phil. 2:6-11, Paul, quoting Isaiah 45:22-23, identifies Christ as YHWH yet keeps him distinct from God the Father. This quotation from Deutero-Isaiah is significant for two reasons: (1) the eschatological significance in the later half of Isaiah, which informs much of Paul’s own theology as his frequent quotations testify and (2) the extremely profound and unyielding confessions of monotheism made in this section as well as the entire book of Isaiah, which now in Philippians stand as applied to Jesus Christ. These two points could hardly go unmissed let alone violated by Paul. Nor did he simply ‘slip-up’ in applying a YHWH text to a less-than-YHWH exalted figure. It is clearly not as if Paul simply meant to put Jesus on par with the other exalted albeit less-than-YHWH figures, such as of angels or patriarchs, as in Jewish literature contemporary to Paul.
Son and Holy Spirit. In presenting this one Jehovah as Father, Son and Spirit, they do not betray any lurking feeling that they are making innovations. Without apparent misgiving they take over Old Testament passages and apply them to Father, Son and Spirit indifferently. Obviously they understand themselves, and wish to be understood, as setting forth in the Father, Son and Spirit just the one God that the God of the Old Testament revelation is… 

Therefore, Paul’s thought (and Orthodox Christianity as a whole) is not a synthesis of monotheism and polytheism but is consistent with monotheistic thought. Paul’s language referring to Christ reflects a thoroughly ‘high Christology’ and at the same time without tension a thoroughly monotheistic theology, hence a ‘Christological monotheism.’ Before continuing to use this term, ‘Christological monotheism’, it is imperative to highlight that we are in no way suggesting a ‘Christomonism’ where the Trinity is either reduced to only the person of Christ or the sole agent of revelation in the Trinity is limited to Christ. Neither is there any suggestion that the Trinity is not behind our thinking, or a key component to the thought of the New Testament. Before we can examine Paul’s own use of this ‘Christological Monotheism’ to confront pluralism, we shall briefly examine monotheism.

---


24. Yet the focus of this paper is particularly on a ‘Christological monotheism’. This paper will be content to discuss the significance of Paul’s use of both monotheism and Christology at the same time to confront the threat of pluralism. Certainly the ontological Trinity serves as the grounds for all apologetics. Again, we are in no way to denying or minimizing the triune nature of God in the New Testament. See for example 2 Cor. 13:14 or Matt. 28:19. Paul incorporates the Holy Spirit in his discussions of the ‘oneness’ of God (cf. 1 Cor. 12:4-6). Certainly, the Spirit plays a fundamental role of indwelling the people of God (1 Cor. 6:19) and therefore bringing true unity to them, a key concept in monotheism (see below) yet this is beyond the scope of our discussion. In terms of the Trinity, we can remain on solid exegetical grounds and contend that Paul did see three distinct persons (to use the specific language of the Creeds) and yet one God, in a way that never violated monotheism (even if it was slightly redefined). For a significant exegetical discussion of the Spirit, including the His Personhood and unity in the Godhead: cf. Gordon Fee, God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994) and Sinclair Ferguson, The Holy Spirit (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996) who is discusses theological issues in a manner dependant upon redemptive history in his excellent exegetical treatment. Similarly, N.T. Wright concludes, “Within the very stress of unity, Paul manages to suggest that this unity subsists in threefold form, and that these three are Spirit, Lord, and God. But we should not make the mistake of thinking that Spirit and Lord are not, for him, also in some sense ‘God’…The closer we get to his own terms, the more we discover that his view of God is (we have either to use the word or find a direct equivalent) trinitarian. It is emphatically not tritheist; there is only one God, as for Jewish monotheism.” What Saint Paul Really Said (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1997). 73. Wright also notes it is not pantheistic or deistic.
III. The Shema and Monotheism

Paramount to our discussion is the nature of first-century Jewish monotheism. It is easily recognizable that the word monotheism comes from two Greek words monos meaning only, unique or alone and theos meaning God. This definition is seldom probed any further. Monotheism of the first-century is not unitarianism. First-century Jewish monotheism was not a philosophical or metaphysical statement of the inner nature of God, as the Greeks tended to discuss god. Monotheism was not a primarily a discussion of the internal composition of God and how YHWH functioned internally. While first-century Jewish monotheism had room for exalted figures that were in no way divine, it “drew a sharp line between any such figure and the one God in the area of cultic practice, reserving worship for the one God.” The Most High God was distinct and set apart in relation to other beings. One did not mix YHWH language with exalted human or angelic figures.

The most significant statement of monotheism is what it says about YHWH in relationship to the other gods. The reality of YHWH being God and King is that no other ‘gods’ are real. For example, Psalms 96:4-5,9-10 declares the sovereignty of YHWH and His sole right to worship:

For great is the LORD [YHWH], and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the people are worthless idols, but the LORD [YHWH] made the heavens…Worship the LORD [YHWH] in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth! Say among the nations, “The LORD

25 From here on in this section, to save space, I will simple refer to it as monotheism recognizing it as distinct from Islamic or modern Jewish monotheism.
27 Here Bauckham is helpful in noting that, “Some Jewish writers in the later Second Temple period consciously adopted some of the Greek metaphysical language. But even in these writers the dominant conceptual framework of understanding of God is not a definition of divine nature-what divinity is-but a notion of divine identity primarily in ways other than metaphysical attributes” (God Crucified, 8).
28 Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ, 47-48. See also One God, One Lord.
29 See note 22 above and our brief critique of Karen Armstrong’s treatment of Phil. 2:6-11.
[YHWH] reigns…he will judge the peoples with equity.\(^{30}\)

Monotheism is centered on several key tenants.\(^{31}\) First, monotheism is creational monotheism.\(^{32}\) It is YHWH alone who created the universe. This rules out any kind of Platonism, Gnosticism, deism, henotheism, pantheism or paganism.\(^{33}\) It is YHWH who was active in the world in order to create it \textit{ex nihilo}. This strict monotheism does not prohibit various Jewish monotheistic writers (canonical and non-canonical) from speaking of God’s Spirit, Word or Wisdom as being involved in creation.\(^{34}\) At times Spirit, Word or Wisdom are personified in such ways that they appear distinct from YHWH, yet the writers never violate monotheism\(^{35}\) because these are portrayed as “aspects of God’s own identity.”\(^{36}\) To summarize creational monotheism, it is YHWH the God of Israel alone who has made the universe. This is primarily a statement of God’s relationship over and above the world \textit{not} a statement of his internal makeup. Furthermore, God who has created this world has created it with a goal, or \textit{telos}. In the Jewish

\(^{30}\) This bears striking similarity to other passages that center on monotheism. Most notable for our discussion here is the monotheism of Deutero-Isaiah especially such sections as 40:9-31; 42:5-9; 43:10-15; 44:9-28; 52:7 \textit{et al.}

\(^{31}\) Our treatment will follow N.T. Wright’s categories in \textit{New Testament}, 248-59. Along the same lines, Hurtado concludes that “there are two major themes or concerns come through in the \textit{monotheistic rhetoric} of ancient Jews: (1) God’s universal sovereignty as creator and ruler over all, even the evil forces that oppose God; and (2) God’s uniqueness, expressed by contrasting God with the other deities of the religious environment, but also in contrasts or distinctions between God and God’s own heavenly retinue, the angels” (\textit{Lord Jesus Christ}, 36)


\(^{33}\) For a discussion of how these various alternatives are ruled out cf. Ibid. 248-50.

\(^{34}\) Gen. 1:1-3; Ps. 33:6-9; Prov. 8 (esp. 22-30); Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-11:1 (esp. 7:22, 25-6; 8:4; 9:1-4); Sirach 24. In Prov. 8 God used His wisdom to create the world in a way that personifies wisdom yet almost seems distinct from God himself. Yet this is not a proto-gnostic demigod. The author can speak of wisdom as pre-existent before creation and involved in creation without violating monotheism. Hurtado writes, “the personification of Wisdom is the description of her as \textit{God’s chief agent}, where the language of divine agency is used to refer to an attribute of God” (Emphasis original. \textit{One God, One Lord}, 44). While there is debate of the personification of wisdom and potential “wisdom Christologies” in the New Testament, our over all thesis depends neither upon the validation that the personifications of wisdom in various sources serve as an identity within the Godhead nor an acceptance of highly questionable ‘wisdom’ motifs in Paul Christology. There is in fact good exegetical ground for rejecting ‘wisdom Christologies’ in the NT (cf. Karen Jobes, “Sophia Christology: The Way of Wisdom” and Gordon Fee “Wisdom Christology in Paul: A Dissenting View” in \textit{The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke} [ed. J.I. Packer and Sven Soderlund; Grand Rapids, Mi.: Zondervan, 2000] 226-50 and 251-79 respectively).

\(^{35}\) In fact, the author of Wisdom of Solomon proclaims, “For she [wisdom] is a breath of the power of God, a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty…For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God and an image of his goodness.” (7:25-26).

view, from the beginning history, as part of creation, is eschatological not circular.37

Second, monotheism centers on the providence of God.38 While God is separate from His creation, He remains concerned with it. God, being transcendent over creation, is not remote from His creation but remains actively involved in it. There is a clear Creator-creature distinction. Thus, there was absolutely no room for the ‘watchmaker’ mentality of deism in this monotheism. The true God did not create the universe to let it run at its own whim. Anything that happens is not an accident but is because of the activity of YHWH in his creation. Isaiah 45:5-7 proclaims God’s continual involvement in his creation:

I am the LORD [YHWH], and there is not other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things.

Third, monotheism is covenantal. Just as God is one so He also has one people.39 “The creator calls a people through whom, somehow, he will act decisively within his creation, to eliminate evil from it and to restore order, justice and peace.”40 Israel was called to be a kingdom of priests.41 For this purpose, Abraham and his seed were chosen by God.42 YHWH is bound to covenant with His people for His honor and glory alone. The covenant marks YHWH to His people. The saints of Israel can, in their worship, appeal to the one true and living God one the basis of His covenant faithfulness.43 Thus, the covenant is “pervasive and definitional for

37 Christopher J. H. Wright notes that the “forward movement, or eschatological thrust…is a fundamental part of the faith of Israel” (Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992], 7).
39 A theme Paul alludes to in Rom. 3:29-30
41 Ex. 19:6.
42 Likewise this is an important topic Paul picks up to in Gal. 3:7-9,16,29; it is Christ who is the true seed and therefore all who are in Christ are Abraham’s true descendants, the people of God.
Yahweh.”

One key element to this covenant is the Law, Torah. This is the covenant charter God gave to his people to prescribe proper relational living before God within the covenant. A second key feature of this covenental monotheism is the Exodus. It is God and God alone who has brought the people out of Egypt. The Exodus theme appears within the context of the Shema. If God is one and if He has them as a covenant people then de facto it can only be as a result of YHWH’s redemption that Israel was brought out of captivity. Redemption and revelation are intimately tied together in the activity of one true God (the Revealer & Redeemer) towards the people with whom He was entered into a covenant (the receivers of revelation and redemption). He is the Most High suzerain; they are His vice-regent/vassal people. The eschatological direction of the covenant history of redemption anticipates a ‘Day of the Lord’ when all the earth will behold YHWH’s glory.

The guiding structure of this is nevertheless covenant. Thus, the Westminster Confession of Faith conveys the highest Biblical monotheism when, reflecting on the tota of Scriptural revelation, it declares:

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary

---

46 The Shema consists of three passages: Deut. 6:4-9; 11:13-21; and Num. 15:37-41. Within the context of all three is mention of the Exodus: Deut. 6:12, 20; Deut. 11:1-5,10; and Num. 11:41. This is significant for four reasons 1) The curses of the covenant in Deut. 27-32 is captivity/exile which will result in a second Exodus, 2) Deutero-Isaiah picks up on this theme of exile/second Exodus, 3) the word New Testament word for redemption (ajpolutrewsiv) has the background of the slave-market and 4) the (highly debated) belief of continuing exile in the first-century. (For discussion of continuing exile and its significance in New Testament exegesis: cf. N.T. Wright, “Curse and Covenant: Galatians 3.10-14.” Climax of the Covenant, 137-156; Jesus and the Victory of God, [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996] 202-9 et al and New Testament. 268-79 et al.; Craig A. Evans, “Jesus and the Continuing Exile of Israel,” in Jesus and the Restoration of Israel, [ed. Carey C. Newman; Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1999], 77-100.)
47 We could cite for example the second Exodus motif of Isaiah 40-66 or ‘the Day of the Lord’ passages in the prophets, or the eschatological ‘last days’ [<ym!Y’h^ tyr]j&a^B=] or ‘in that day’ also frequent in the prophets.
condescension on God’s part, which He hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.\textsuperscript{48}

These three aspects of monotheism deal less with YHWH’s internal relationship and more with His relationship to the world. They are particularly important in distinguishing Israel and her beliefs from the entire pagan world with conflicting beliefs, such as pantheism, gnosticism and henotheism. In particular, monotheism rules out any kind of dualism. Fallen angels are no competition to the true God. Evil is not a threat. There is no rivalry of gods. It is YHWH who is the universal monarch.\textsuperscript{49} Yet YHWH condescends to His people through the covenant. In his own summation of first-century Jewish monotheism, Hurtado concludes, “First-century Jewish monotheism was, thus, an exclusivist, monarchial view of God, manifested particularly in ‘orthopraxy’ in cultic/liturgical matters.”\textsuperscript{50}

Our brief discussion of monotheism has shown that it was not a metaphysical statement of the internal nature of God. Rather it is a polemical doctrine that takes a fighting stance against the different aspects of pagan worldviews.\textsuperscript{51} The covenantal aspects serve to remind the people of God that they are bound to this one true God, despite the surrounding pluralism. Before we discuss Paul’s adaptation of monotheism, we shall examine the ‘battle-cry’ of first-century Judaic monotheism, the \textit{Shema}.\textsuperscript{52}

Deuteronomy 6:4 proclaims, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” In the first-century world this was a key proclamation in Jewish liturgy. “It declares a confession of

\textsuperscript{48} WCF 7.1. Emphasis mine.


\textsuperscript{52} Ibid. Cf. also Herbert Wolf, \textit{An Introduction to the Old Testament Pentateuch} (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 216-8.
faith and an ultimate acceptance of God’s kingship.”\textsuperscript{53} The three key passages for the \textit{Shema} are Deut. 6:4-9, Deut. 11:13-21 and Num. 15:37-41.\textsuperscript{54} The \textit{Shema} was to be prayed twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening.\textsuperscript{55} This confession was the fundamental encapsulating statement of first-century Jewish monotheism.\textsuperscript{56} Israel is to give exclusive worship and recognition to YHWH as the sole Sovereign Lord.\textsuperscript{57} Michael Horton points out that “it is the Shema not pantheistic Stoicism that emphasizes the sole lordship of YHWH as king.”\textsuperscript{58} Since YHWH is Lord, covenant fidelity is central to this confession of monotheism because Israel is to love her God alone since in reality He is the only God and the one who has called out His people. Thus, we can confirm with Payne, this passage itself is not primarily a statement of God’s internal makeup:

> The teaching of this passage does not primarily concern a divine unity of simplicity: that God constitutes a unity within himself, in contrast for example, with Baal, who was so splintered up so as to exist separately in countless individual plots of ground…It concerns rather the divine unity of singularity; that God constitutes the sole deity, as opposed to others.\textsuperscript{59}

God’s \textit{oneness} is distinct from His existence in \textit{three persons}. On a more popular level, James Montgomery Boice has clearly articulated that the ‘oneness’ described in Deuteronomy 6:4 does not exclude the Trinity because “in this very verse the word for ‘one’ is \textit{echad} which means not one in isolation but one in unity. In fact, the word is never used in the Hebrew Bible of a stark singular entity. It is a word used in speaking of one bunch of grapes, for example, or in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{54} Emil Schürer, \textit{The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ} (Revised & Ed. Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar and Matthew Black; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979), Vol ii. 454-5.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 454.
\item \textsuperscript{56} We could also note the Jesus alludes to the \textit{Shema} in his own confrontation with Satan. Jesus proclaims that one must worship God alone (referencing Deut. 6:13). Elsewhere He shows that it is a summation of the Law, Mark 12:28-31, Luke 10:27-28, \textit{et al}.
\item \textsuperscript{58} \textit{Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology} [Louisville, Ken.: Westminster John Knox, 2005], 25.
\item \textsuperscript{59} J. Barton Payne, \textit{The Theology of the Older Testament} (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Zondervan, 1962), 126.
\end{itemize}
saying that the people of Israel responded as one people” or in referring to Adam and Eve as one flesh.\textsuperscript{60} As Orthodox Christianity has always recognized, the Shema does not contradict the later revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

When we examine monotheism and its central confession we can conclude, “the doctrine of the deity of Christ is not at all incompatible with the highest form of monotheism.”\textsuperscript{61} Therefore, if it can be shown that Paul adapts this statement in his discussion of Christ, then he is showing his continuity with monotheism even if, at points, he distinguishes two persons (God the Father and Christ the Lord) within this monotheism.\textsuperscript{62} Below, we shall show that Paul accepts and adapts this ‘battle-cry’ in his own confrontation with pluralism without violating it. In short, contrary to those such as Vermes and Armstrong, Paul does speak of Jesus as YHWH without violating his monotheistic beliefs. There are certainly a plethora of passages in which we can show that Jesus is YHWH (ex. Rom 10:9-13; Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20).\textsuperscript{63} In our next section we will focus on two key passages that bring a Christological monotheism to bear against pluralism.

IV. Paul and Monotheism: His Confrontations with Religious Pluralism.

Paul was not the first to confront religious pluralism.\textsuperscript{64} However, there is much to be learned from Paul’s own confrontation with pluralism. There are two occasions that Paul confronted pluralism that are important for our discussion here. First, in 1 Corinthians 8:4-6 Paul

\textsuperscript{60} Foundations of the Christian Faith [Revised in one volume; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1986], 111.
\textsuperscript{61} Ronald Youngblood, The Heart of the Old Testament: A Survey of Key Theological Themes (2nd Ed.; Grand Rapids, Mi.: Baker, 1998), 16. He goes on, “In fact, hints pointing to a plurality within the personality of God are to be found already in the Old Testament itself.” Progressive revelation is key here as we have noted concerning God’s eschatological self-revelation.
\textsuperscript{62} Other times he clearly has in view the full Trinitarian understanding of the Godhead and is monotheistic at the same time (cf. 1 Cor. 12:1-11; Gal. 4:1-7).
\textsuperscript{63} We are certainly not limited to these either (or to Paul for that matter). However, I simply make mention of these three because in the first two Paul quotes monotheistic passages from the Old Testament and uses them to refer to Christ. In the Colossians, Paul ascribes creation to Jesus, which we mentioned above as something attributed to YHWH alone.
\textsuperscript{64} We might cite Isaiah who in Isaiah 40-66 constantly confronts idolatry and pluralism seeking to vindicate YHWH as the only true and living God.
modifies the *Shema* into a ‘Christological monotheism’ in order to confront tendencies towards more libertarian lifestyles in the church. Second, in Acts 17:22-31 Paul introduces the people in Athens at the Areopagus to these two key elements of the Christian worldview as a means of introducing them to the gospel. While it must be acknowledged that Acts 17:22-31 does not contain a complete Christology, upon closure examination of the text the two elements of monotheism and Christology are more intertwined than they may first appear.

First, 1 Corinthians 8:4-6 is important because Paul uses the *Shema* as a boundary marker in distinguishing proper Christian living. The Corinthians apparently were asserting that in light of their own new knowledge (\(\text{gnw}3\varsigma\text{siV}\)) of God there was no threat to themselves if they entered into the temples of idols and ate the food sacrificed before idols. It seems evident, to Paul, that such knowledge did not enhance the Corinthians’ “spirituality” but instead was leading them to become arrogant and puffed up (8:1: \(\text{fusioi}\)) As Paul argues this is not the true attitude of the believer. In fact, Paul refutes this, arguing that such self-perceptions indicate that they do not understand what kind of attitude is required (8:2). In verse 3 when he says, “But if anyone loves God, he is known by God” (\(\varepsilon\iota \delta\varepsilon \tau\iota\varsigma \\text{\'agap}e\upsilon\ \tau\omicron\nu \\theta\varepsilon\omicron\omicron, \omicron\upsilon\tau\omicron\omicron\varsigma \varepsilon\gamma\nu\omega\sigma\tau\alpha\upsilon\ \upsilon\varphi\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\omicron\)), Paul is setting up his argument to discuss the *Shema*.

Concerning 8:3, diffusing the Corinthians’ inflated view of knowledge Paul asserts that it is the person who loves God who is known by God not the person with knowledge (v.3). N.T. Wright is correct to point out this verse’s significance because, “Paul’s references to humans loving God, as opposed to vice versa, are few and far between, and in this case at least…the reason for the reference is that he wishes to allude, or echo, the Jewish confession of monotheistic faith.”\(^65\) It is clear in v. 7-13 that this love is demonstrated by taking care not to

\(^{65}\text{Climax, 127.}\)
become a stumbling block to weaker brother and sin against Christ. Fee summarizes, “The problem with conduct predicated on knowledge is that it results in greater sinfulness.”

The standard summation of the Law as the first commandment to love God, followed by second greatest commandment as loving your neighbor (Matt. 22:36-40; Luke 10:27; Mark 12:29-31), seem to be influencing Paul’s use of the Shema. Paul has already shown these as foundational to his ethics up to this point in 1 Corinthians. The first summation that one should love God is explicit (v.3), yet with the way Paul develops his argumentation the second commandment is clearly behind his thinking. As his argument against idols concludes this becomes more explicit in 10:24. The believer must seek the good of his neighbor rather than his own personal good, i.e. love his neighbor as himself. These summative commandments are not simply early versions of the golden rule but are the heart of a true Biblical monotheistic faith and its correlating ethical implications.

In 1 Corinthians 8:4, Paul affirms in a manner consistent with Jewish monotheism that any idol poses no threat to the Christian. Paul sets up two parallel clauses confirming what both Paul and the Corinthians know:

- (a) o%ti ou)de\n ei&dwlon e)n ko/smw|, kai\n- (b) o%ti ou)de\n qeo$ ei) mh\ ei $.

The text is a monotheistic confession. Paul continues in v. 5, “For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords.’”

---

67 Notice that Jesus combines the Shema with the greatest commandment of the Law in Mark 12:29-30.
68 Brian Rosner has shown the key role that the Old Testament Scriptures played in Paul’s ethical exhortations and reprimands in 1 Corinthians 5-7 in his study: *Paul, Scripture, and Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5-7* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Baker, 1994). Important here is Rosner’s discussion of the covenant motif in 1 Corinthians 5 (68-70). Since the covenant is influential to Paul’s ethical prescription we should not be surprised in the least to find a clear allusion to the Shema as Paul develops his argumentation in the course of his epistle.
69 It is probably no coincidence that Paul uses oi[damen and not ginwvskw. Paul has said that ‘γνῶσις’ puffs up but then goes on to proclaim ‘we know’ (οἴδα\n). This is not to make theological points from simple word usage only to highlight the subtleties that can go unnoticed in English.
70 a) “that an idol has no real existence and” b) “that there is no God but one”
means that any idol, or religion, offers no threat to Christianity. For any other gods are not real gods and anyone who claims to worship another god does not. Other religions are not options because they do not worship real gods, which seems to be central to the Corinthians asserting their liberty. Ultimately, as Paul develops, abusing such knowledge, as the Corinthians were, is an offensive against Christ (v.11) if a weaker brother is caused to stumble. They were not demonstrating true love towards the weaker Christians and ultimately showed a lack of true love towards God in their lifestyle, which the Shema and summations of the Law demanded. The Shema is central to the argument, not to prove the Corinthians’ “knowledge” might be correct but to show their conduct ultimately did not demonstrate love for God, which is a sign that one is known by God. As N.T. Wright notes the issue at stake, “is not simply a matter of behaviour. It is about the definition of the people of God: and, for Paul, that definition can be stated in Deuteronomistic terms, by means of the Shema.” In due course, Paul’s longer argument comes in chapter ten (esp. 12-21). While the Corinthians were free in Christ, they were in danger of religious compromise before a watching world. Paul’s ‘Christological monotheism’ was a boundary against internal compromise towards the pluralism that threatened.

In 1 Corinthians 8:6 Paul takes the Shema and expands his definition of the one God. When we compare Paul’s writing with the Deut. 6:4 in the Septuagint we cannot help but notice the parallel structure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deut. 6:4</th>
<th>1 Corinthians 8:6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ἀκοιε Ἰσραήλ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>κυβρίος ο Θεός ἡμών</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>κυβρίος εἰς εἰς ejstin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ἀγλ’ Ἰησοῦς Χριστός;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ἐκ τα ἐπνευμένα και</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>και Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

71 This lack of love as well as Paul’s argument in chapter twelve against their lack of unity is why Paul must offer a diatribe on love in chapter thirteen.

72 Climax, 127.
Paul is not talking about two gods. He is offering a Christian commentary on the Shema. There is one God, yet there is God the Father and there is the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul has put Jesus Christ our Lord in the middle of the most monotheistic confession in the Bible. In the confession Lord is a reference to YHWH. He further affirms monotheism is at the heart here by adding two clauses pronouncing both the Father and the Son’s role in creation. Concerning the Father: ‘ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡµεῖς εἰς αὐτόν’. Concerning the Son: ‘δι ὧν τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡµεῖς δι αὐτοῦ’. This same language is used in Paul’s great doxology in Romans 11:36 where God is praised ‘ὅτι ἐξ αὐτοῦ καὶ δι αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν τὰ πάντα· αὐτῷ ἡ δόξα εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, ἀµήν’. In our passage, this doxology is unpacked as it applies to the Father and the Son.

Ultimately all creation is for God’s glory. Paul’s covenant theology might even be seen in the language ‘ἡµεῖς εἰς αὐτόν’ in reference to the Father and ‘ἡµεῖς δι αὐτοῦ’ in reference to the Son where ‘ἡµεῖς’ certainly refers to those believers in union with Christ. Either way, with the expansion of the Shema and the references to act of creation, it is evident that Paul has struck at the heart of monotheism. Yet it is equally a Christological monotheism.

Little is gained by suggesting that Paul has replaced ‘Divine-Wisdom’ with the person of Christ for nothing in the passage inherently suggests a wisdom-Christology is in view. The focus is on the position of Jesus Christ within the divine identity. This inclusion stands against the pagan context of ‘many gods and many lords’ that threatened the community.

For Paul, loving God and fulfilling the Shema is redefined by loving Christ as well.

---

74 Jesus Christ’s role in creation is important for Paul’s monotheistic argument in the Colossian hymn (1:15-20) Cf. N.T. Wright, Climax, 99-119. Fee, Wisdom, 254.
75 Fee, Wisdom, 255. Contra Hurtado, One God, One Lord, 97-98. Anthony Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians NIGTC (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 2003) 634.
Hence in the light of temptations the Corinthians faced to shift back towards pluralistic living because they had “knowledge” that no other gods are real gods, Paul inserts his ‘Christological monotheism’ as a way to refocusing the Corinthians’ understanding of loving God, later imploring them not to sin against Christ (v.12). Giving way to pagan practices no matter how unreal the rival ‘gods’ does not mark a believer’s love for God. While the ‘strong’ Corinthians ‘knew’ that these gods were not gods, practically speaking they were in danger of compromising their lifestyle especially if they ate idol meat in the idol’s temple. This is particularly true as it causes weaker brothers to stumble and brings one to violate loving his brother in Christ.

1 Cor. 10:1-33 (esp. 19-21 and 25-29) is important to Paul’s further conclusions regarding idol meat. Worshipping pagan idols is to worship demons. True monotheism does not allow such pluralistic compromises. Even if meat is just meat, there are occasions where eating idol meat is forbidden (10:28) precisely because eating would bring the appearance of pluralism before the watching world, which had no qualms about recognizing and worshipping a pantheon of deities. This high monotheistic standard taken by Christians would have been offensive to the pagan world (Acts 19:23-41).

The confession of ‘Christological monotheism’ functions as a way to “mark out the people of God against their neighbors…The confession of ‘one God, one Lord’ marked the community out sociologically as well as theologically.”\textsuperscript{76} Christianity cannot participate with demons (10:20-22). The eschatological people of God cannot fall into the same trap as idolatrous Israel who serve to instruct those of us “on whom the end of the ages had come” (10:11).\textsuperscript{77} Since we have One God the Father, and One Lord Jesus Christ we must “flee idolatry” (10:14). The

\textsuperscript{76} N.T. Wright, \textit{Climax}, 132.

\textsuperscript{77} Behind this thought is the notion of God’s one covenant people but with a pre-eschatological experience in the Old Testament and an inaugurated experience in the present age. It remains fundamental to monotheism: One God, one people of God.
confession serves Paul as a foundation for confrontation with religious pluralism in a context where the church is capitulating.

Important to our discussion here, Paul’s ‘Christological monotheism’ allows him to affirm that other ‘religious options’ are not options. It functions as a boundary for the Christian community both practically and theology. The two are not mutually exclusive. Not only is a ‘Christological monotheism’ a point of religious debate, if we truly believe the confession it should function as an anchor for us, a nonnegotiable to our faith. Hurtado remarks that 1 Cor. 8:5-6 “summarizes the distinct nature of early Christian devotion…insisting that for Christians there can be only “one God”…This rather strict monotheistic stand—indeed, offensively strict in the eyes of virtually all pagans of that time—was nothing but the common position taken by Judaism,”78 The question needs to be asked our ourselves: As we consider our own confrontations with pluralism, how ‘offensively strict’ are we with respect to our monotheism?

Second, in Acts 17:22-31 Paul uses the two elements of monotheism and Christology as a means of introductory proclamation, which leads to a full gospel presentation. Paul engages in a sort of pre-evangelism as a means to open the door for further discussion of the gospel (Acts 17:32). Contrary to the way many share the gospel today, Paul did not enter the Areopagus proclaiming, “God loves you and has a wonderful plain for your life” or even “You need salvation.” Wisely, Paul begins the discussion at a much more fundamental level.79 His presentation functions around two key points: monotheism and an introduction to Christology.

Paul’s assertion of monotheism is important because for him it lays the foundation of his Biblical worldview. Before he can present the God who offered His Son, he must introduce this

78 One God, One Lord, 1.
79 The application here speaks for itself. In an age of increasing pluralism we must begin at a more fundamental point in the Biblical narrative, that there is only one true God. This truth is the building-block for any discussion of Jesus Christ, his deity, his humanity and the substitutionary nature of his atonement.
God into the environment of religious pluralism that he had entered. Upon encountering an altar to the ‘unknown god’, Paul uses it as an opportunity to share the true nature of the one God. Paul engages in what can be described as a defense of monotheism.

Paul makes four key points that are central tenants of monotheism. First, in verses 24 and 25, he asserts a creational monotheism. It is God who has made everything and is over all. He does not need a temple made by man or human service because he gives life to all men. Thus, God is not to be identified with creation nor is He contained within creation (Isa. 66:1-2).

Second, God has made the nations from one man, i.e. Adam. YHWH is not one of many gods each with their respective nation but YHWH is thee God who possesses the whole earth. The reason any nation exists is because of God’s common grace and ongoing procreation of Adam’s descendants (Gen. 11). In 27a, these nations should seek Him precisely because the other gods are not gods.

Behind this preaching is a Biblical worldview. We might also note that there may be incipient thoughts of Paul’s two-Adam Christology behind his expressed thoughts: (1) the nations created from one man [Adam]; (2) ‘he [God] has fixed a day on which he [God] will judge the world in righteousness by a man who he [God] has appointed [i.e. the eschatos Adam]. This second aspect is particularly crystallized when we consider the sizeable amount of Paul’s teaching on the resurrection of the dead in 1 Cor. 15 that is directly elucidated by means

---

80 Given the context of the Areopagus, the inscription could be translated “to an unknown god”. Jerome says that the altar read: “To the gods of Asia, Europe, and Africa, to unknown foreign gods” qtd. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (revised; Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1988), 335.

81 Paul did not see them as truly worshiping the God of the Bible through this altar. He used it as an opportunity to share about the God who they did not know.

82 To highlight how monotheistic this is we might appropriate the thoughts of Christopher Wright used in a slightly different context: “At Mount Sinai, for example, at the very point where God is impressing on Israel their unique identity and role in the midst of the nations, he leaves no doubt that he is far from being a minor local deity or even your average national god. The scope of his concern and his sovereignty is universal: ‘the whole earth is mine’ (Ex. 19:5).” (*Knowing Jesus*, 36). Horton makes similar comments noting that Genesis’ context is polemical as God asserts “his sovereignty over and against the gods of the nations as Israel’s suzerain. It is Israel’s God who created all that exists.” He ends the paragraph quoting Acts 17:24-25 (*Lord and Servant*, 71).

83 Paul’s two-Adam Christology is clearly articulated in Rom. 5:12-21 and 1 Cor. 15 esp. vv. 20-28 and 42-49.
of his two-Adam Christology. The core of the resurrection teaching in this chapter hinges upon a
two-Adam Christology. The point concerning Acts and monotheism remains: as sovereign
creator and Lord over all YHWH will, through His anointed one, exercise judgment over the
nations (Acts 17:31). 84

Third, contrary to the deist conception of god the true God remains active in his creation.
Paul is even comfortable quoting from a poem from Epimenides the Cretan and the fifth line
Phainomena by Aratus. 85 While both of these poems in their original context refer to Zeus, Paul
uses them in his context to refer to the true God showing some small level continuity between
the views expressed in the poems and what they are saying. They are contemporary illustrations
that his audience would have been familiar with but Paul has reclaimed their truth 86 reasserting it
under the proper rubric of Biblical monotheism. By way of his illustrations, Paul’s audience
should recognize his understanding of monotheism is not totally alien to them, even if they
radically differ in other key areas.

Fourth, in v. 29 Paul contradicts their understanding that a god can be represented in an
idol. It would be insulting for Paul to think the true God could be represented by an idol. This is
consistent with a first-century Jewish monotheistic worldview that was revealed in the Old
Testament, especially the second commandment (Ex. 20:4; Dt. 5:8). In this short section of the
text, Paul has outlined four key points that are fundamentally an apologetic for monotheism.

Paul then incorporates two Christological key points into this monotheism. It is important
to note that while these may not appear at first glance to be ‘Christological’ points in the sense
that a Nicene definition of Christ is explicitly spelled out, they are nevertheless Christological.

---

84 For the OT background we see this in Israelite royal theology esp. Ps. 2, 8, 110, 2 Sam. 7; 22 and numerous other
passages; but also in Rev. 19 and 1 Cor. 15:20-28. We might also note the NT uses of Ps 2, 8, 110 used in the same
contexts.
86 I am thinking here of Cornelius Van Til’s notion of ‘borrowed capital’.
Paul’s eschatology and Christology are so intertwined that they can be designated a “Christ-eschatology”. Ridderbos comments are prove seminal for our thesis that Acts 17 does contain a Christological monotheism:

This interdependence between the “eschatological” and the “christological” ground motif of Paul’s preaching is of the highest importance for the understanding of both...This [preaching] has in principle a redemptive-historical, eschatological content. It is decisively defined by what has taken place in Christ, by the acts of God that he wrought in him for the fulfillment of his redemptive plan and of which the death and resurrection of Christ constitute the all-controlling center. *Paul’s Christology is a Christology of redemptive facts.* Here lies the ground of the whole of his preaching...This historical-eschatological character of Paul’s Christology also places it in organic relationship with the revelation of the Old Testament. What has taken place in Christ forms the termination and fulfillment of the great series of divine redemptive acts in the history of Israel and the presupposition of the progress and consummation of the history of the world.

First, this God will judge the world by a man, Jesus Christ, whom He has appointed. In the Old Testament, as well as the first-century Jewish worldview, it was understood that only God as sovereign monarch would judge the world. The authority was His alone. Yet He would authorize His vice-regent to enact this judgment. This would mark the end of the present evil age and the beginning of the age to come. For Paul, as we noted above, Christ is the agent through whom God will judge the world in the future. This is in fulfillment of the eschatological hope of the Old Testament. This eschatological reality as dawning at least initially in Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. Christ, the anointed one, in exercising judgment as exalted vice-

---

87 Ridderbos, *Paul*, 49.
89 Ps. 96:10,13; 98:9; Isa. 33:22; 66:15,16.
90 E.G. 4 Ezra 7:113 “The Day of Judgment shall be the end of this age and the beginning of the eternal age to come.”
91 Christ’s resurrection is the firstfruits of the one eschatological resurrection (1 Cor. 15:20). Thus, the eschatological day of the LORD had dawning in the death and resurrection of Christ (Dale Allison Jr., *The End of the Ages Has Come* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985], esp. 170-1). The eschatological character of Christ’s death and resurrection is readily acknowledge by numerous scholars from various Christian traditions but particularly by Reformed scholars who have followed the redemptive historical sensitivities of Geerhardus Vos and Herman Ridderbos. Cf. also the work of Ridderbos and Vos esp. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1975)
regent ultimately would do what was reserved for God alone. Christ’s appointment to judge is nothing less than the truth that Christ must reign until all enemies have been put under His feet (1 Cor. 15:26). Christ’s resurrection guarantees He will execute judgment defeating God’s enemies and raise those who are united to Him in the culmination eschatological Day of the Lord (1 Cor. 15:26-28). Paul’s point that Christ is appointed judge is a Christological statement.

Second, God assured this appointment to the world by means of Christ’s resurrection. The resurrection appoints Jesus as the Son of God in power (Rom.1:4). The resurrection was fundamental to Paul’s understanding of inaugurated eschatology. Elsewhere for Paul the resurrection is important as the firstfruits for those who are in Christ and as securing their justification. It guarantees God’s vindication of His people. The introduction of the resurrection is important because as Richard Gaffin has shown, “the resurrection of Christ is the pivotal factor in the whole of the apostle’s soteriological teaching.” In this passage, while reference to the judgment is without specifics, Paul certainly has in mind condemnation for those who do not believe and salvation for those who do believe. This is evident with appeal passionate appeal that this God (YHWH) “commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30).

Christ’s own resurrection assures both condemnation in eschatological judgment for unbelievers and forgiveness, justification, or eschatological vindication for those who repent and through faith being united to Him. Wrath has been poured out on Christ for His people in the form of the eschatological judgment with subsequent vindication in His resurrection, thus the completion of this ‘Day of the Lord’ is fixed since the firstfruits of it have been experienced.

---


93 1 Cor. 15 and Rom. 4:25

Suffering the curse of sin, Christ was judged but unable to be held by death. The day of the LORD has dawned and those who are in union with Christ will receive justification now, instead of condemnation at the consummation of the age. In this Day of the LORD, none other than YHWH Himself has appeared to His people in the person of the eternal Son of God. It is nothing less than the resurrection of Jesus that serves as proof of this truth. The resurrection as the climax of redemptive history is the display of what we may call a ‘high Christology’. As eschatological it is equally revelatory of God’s person and the climactic salvation promised in the OT.

We might point out one final crucial connection between this monotheism and Christology. According to Acts 17:29, all men owe their existence to God (γένος οὖν ύπάρχοντες τοῦ θεοῦ, ‘therefore being God’s offspring’), clearly suggesting that man is God’s image. Man is not to ‘think of the divine being as gold or silver’ (οὐκ ὁφείλει οὖν νομίζειν χρυσῷ ἢ ἀργύρῳ ἢ λίθῳ), in other words the image of God cannot be represented by idolatry since God has created His own image in man, who was made to be YHWH’s vice-regent (Gen. 1:26-28). Adam’s creation as the image is creation in sonship to the high suzerain. In Genesis 1 and 2, God created His image to represent Him. God cannot be represented by an image, mark or impress made by man himself (χαράγματι τέχνης καὶ ἐνθυμήσεως ἄνθρωπου lit. an image of art and a thought of man). The dative ‘χαράγματι’ is most likely stands in apposition to the datives ‘χρυσῷ ἢ ἀργύρῳ ἢ λίθῳ’. Gold and silver is not a true image/impress of God. But what concerns us is this: why is it so crucial that now God no longer overlooks pluralistic ignorance?

This is not to suggest that idolatry was not a culpable offense for the nations in the Old Testament. Rather prior to the dawning eschaton, there was not extensive proclamation that anticipated the inbringing of Gentiles. Man is still judged for perverting and suppressing the knowledge of God He had as God’s creatures (Rom. 1:18-32). But God’s Law (and the Shema)
was given as a light to Israel, which made her more culpable to keep it (Rom. 2:12). This same level of culpability did not apply to Gentiles, yet *now* in light of the eschatological death and resurrection of Christ, this idolatry can no longer be “overlooked” by God. But the question remains: why is it so crucial that *now* God no longer overlooks pluralistic ignorance?

The turning point of Paul’s argument is that Christ is judge and this is displayed to *all men* in His resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus Christ reveals Him to be the image of the invisible God, the true image or display of glory that cannot be represented by any kind of impress or form. The display of God’s image is not the created image of God but the eternal image of God, the eternal Son of God (Col. 1:15-18; 2 Cor. 4:4,6). Image, glory, sonship, and vice-regency are all terms and concepts that serve as near synonyms in Biblical revelation. Notice a near synonym to ‘χαράγματα’ used of idols in Acts 17:29 appears in Hebrews 1:3 ὃς ἀπαύγασε τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ’ used to describe the eternal glory of Christ. Idols cannot represent God whose true image is Christ.

The resurrection is Jesus’ appointment as the Son of God *in power* (Rom. 1:4). This redemptive historical event as eschatological serves as clear proof to all men. The resurrection is Christ’s glorification as his human nature enters an exalted status (Acts 2:32-36; 3:13; Phil. 2:9-11; Col. 1:15,18; Heb. 2:9; 1 Pet. 1:21 cf. also 2 Cor. 4:4,6). Yet it is a display of the glory that Christ had eternally with the Father (John 17:5; 13:31-32). In resurrecting and exalting Christ to glory, God the Father has revealed to all men His own true image, the one who is clearly the eternal Son of God manifest through the very climax of redemptive history. Truly Christ is the glory of God is the very image of God, who is now seen.

Pluralism and rival images are ruled out precisely because *now* thee image of God has appeared, the true Son who is exalted to ruling judge. God has displayed His glory in His Son at
the event of His death and His resurrection. Worship of idols and rival deities as images of God is no longer overlooked since the true image of God is clearly displayed in the person of Christ at the event of His resurrection. Of course, the resurrection has always been essential to the Christian proclamation that Jesus is Lord (Acts 2:36), our ‘Christological monotheism.’

Yet Paul does not appeal to the evidences for the resurrection, rather the resurrection is itself the proof. This event is only properly understood within Biblical monotheism and God’s redemptive historical revelation. The glory of God is displayed in the person of the Son at the center of redemptive history. God’s image has been revealed in the resurrection of the Son.95 “In calling Christ the Image of God, he [Paul] thus identifies Christ’s glory with that of God himself.”96 God is clearly revealed in the resurrection. Not only is Christ the second Adam exalted over all in the resurrection, He is the eternal Son of God revealed in the resurrection:

Thus Christ’s exaltation as the second Adam refers back to the very beginning of things, makes him known as the one who from the very outset, in a much more glorious sense than the first Adam, was the Image of God and the Firstborn of every creature. So the fundamental structures and implications of Paul’s eschatological preaching of Christ are exposed to view. The new creation that has broken through with Christ’s resurrection takes the place of the first creation which Adam was the representative. It is, however, much more glorious than the first as the second man, both in virtue of his origin and of his destiny, was superior to first.97

While the argument in Acts 17:22-31 does not contain a full-blown discussion of Christology, Christ and the resurrection plays a pivotal role. Our exegesis has, however, suggested there is in this event of Paul’s preaching a deeper Christology than typically acknowledged. We have attempted to show that Paul could not speak of Christ’s exaltation to

---

95 Taking our queue from Calvin, we use the resurrection as synecdochic of the whole event of cross, resurrection and exaltation, Institutes of the Christian Religion, II.xvi.13. John’s gospel in particular places the cross as the event of Jesus’ glorification.
96 Ridderbos, Paul, 70.
97 Ridderbos, Paul, 85-6.
judge and Christ’s resurrection without having the eternal glory of Christ far from view.98

Furthermore, Paul’s monotheistic argument is driven by eschatology which itself centers on the person and work of Christ. There is no absence, exclusion, denial or rejection of a high Christology in Paul’s confrontation with pluralism. Rather, we have what we have called a ‘Christological monotheism’. Ridderbos is again insightful for “it is characteristic of Paul that he speaks of Christ’s divine Sonship in no other way than in direct connection with his redemptive work.”99 Thus, presentation of the Christ-eschatology we see in Acts 17, namely that Christ has been appointed judge and has been resurrected to prove it, points us in the direction of Paul’s own high Christology albeit a Christology further articulated elsewhere in its fullness.

Not only does Paul’s Christology distinguish Paul from a Jewish monotheist both in defining God and in defining already-not yet nature of the ‘age to come’, it opens the door for further opportunities. Paul’s discourse centering in monotheism and Christ-eschatology further challenges both Epicurean agnosticism and the denial of an afterlife since God has both revealed Himself and displayed the coming resurrection life in Christ. Paul is articulating some key points to the gospel with a foundation of ‘Christological monotheism.’ While we have stressed Acts 17:22-31 does not articulate a full-blown discussion of Christ’s deity, upon closer examination the concept of a ‘Christological monotheism’ is unmistakably prominent in Paul’s preaching, forming ground for his religious debate in Athens. In climax to the narrative, some of the hearers offered dispute regarding the resurrection while others believed. Acts 17:34 this belief occurs after some asked to here more about what Paul had said (v.32).

Paul clearly articulates that there is one God in standard monotheistic polemic that includes the keys of creational monotheism and providential monotheism. There may even be an

98 This is also supported when we consider Peter’s teaching in Acts 2.
99 Ridderbos, Paul, 77. He continues, “His whole ‘Christology’ rests upon the manner in which he has learned to understand Christ in his cross and resurrection as the Sent One of the Father” (77-8).
allusion to the category of ‘covenantal monotheism’ behind his assertions in v.29 and 30. We should be clear that Paul’s point is not that God has an exclusive new covenant relationship with only the Jewish people\textsuperscript{100} or that God has an all-inclusive relationship where all are saved, as a universalist might argue. The point is that all are commanded to believe, from both Jew and Gentile. From those who believer, the one God is making one people who are in Christ—the eschatos Adam. As Paul articulates elsewhere it is those who believe who are the ‘sons of Abraham’, are in covenant relationship with God and are truly God’s chosen people as they are in union with Christ.\textsuperscript{101} The danger is that we cannot misapply the covenantal aspects of monotheism in Acts 17 and thus fail to see that fulfillment YHWH’s redemptive historical program involves the inclusion of Gentiles into the one [covenant] people of God (Luke 24:47; Acts 28:28). While in the OT, God’s covenant people was ethnically restricted, Israel as a nation was only the firstfruits of God’s harvest of the nations (Jer. 2:3), a harvest that has now dawned in the inaugurated eschaton that is itself driving Paul’s preaching.\textsuperscript{102} The conclusion remains that Paul’s argumentation and foundation for religious debate is a ‘Christological monotheism.’ Paul moves through his argument by first giving an apologetic for monotheism followed by two Christological points which are elsewhere shown to be foundational for his theology and proclamation. These Christological points are dependant upon the in breaking of God’s eschatological self-revelation in the history of redemption.

While we can discuss other Pauline passages on Christology and the nature of God, these two passages are enough to show that one’s understanding of God and Christ affects the way one

\textsuperscript{100} As we might see in Jewish monotheism of the time (e.g. 1 Maccabees 1,2)
\textsuperscript{101} Rom. 3:29-30; Gal. 3:7-9,16,29.
\textsuperscript{102} Of course, in any age it is only through faith that one is a true seed of Abraham. However, we cannot minimize the fact that in the OT this was by and large Israelite restrictive. Even those non-Jews who came to faith were to embrace the Sinaitic covenant and join the people of God. Cf. Christopher Wright, Knowing Jesus, ch. 1 “Jesus and the Old Testament Story” where he writes for the Old Testament time “only in Israel did God work within the terms of a covenant of redemption…” (p. 39).
approaches other religions, especially in pluralistic cultures. The fundamental Christian creed that “Jesus is LORD” is not merely an abstraction of dogma but defines the way one engages the culture. For Paul, in 1 Cor. 8:4-6 and Acts 17:22-31 his understanding of a ‘Christological monotheism’ [i.e that Jesus is LORD] informs his understanding of the nature of God, shapes his ethical exhortations to a church facing pluralism, forces him to assert that other gods are nothing and is foundational to his own engagement with the religions around him. The Christological monotheism retains the ‘battle-cry’ of Old Testament monotheism while the cry is expanded to include the person of Jesus Christ.

V. ‘Christological Monotheism’: A Foundation for Religious Debate.

The nature of Old Testament monotheism should be rediscovered in our own setting. As discussed above, monotheism was a polemical doctrine. It asserted that any other gods are in reality not gods. It is our contention that the contemporary Christian community must rediscover this aspect of monotheism as foundational for its understanding of God.

Today, the pluralism we face is not so much whole pantheons of other gods but other ways to god, which are deemed equally valid. As John 14:6 proclaims, this methodology is contradictory to Christianity at a fundamental level. Yet many within so-called ‘evangelicalism’ would seek to ‘Corinthianize’. Many today would even seek to incorporate aspects pagan worship into our worship of the Triune Christian God. This is analogous to the possible Corinthian assertions that they ‘knew the true god’ and thus eating idol meat was fully acceptable since they did not really worship the non-existent idol gods. However, Paul confronts and rejects this ‘pluralism’ and ‘tolerance’ standing on a thoroughly monotheistic and Christological foundation. Furthermore, Paul’s apologetics with pagan philosophers resides on wholly Biblical, monotheistic and Christological presuppositions for argument and
confrontation. Within our Christian communities, we must adapt this ‘Christological monotheism’ that forced Paul to affirm that any other god is not a god at all. We must echo his statement and affirm that all other gods or ways to god are nothing. There can be only one God and one way to God. We must recover the ‘warp and woof’ of monotheism so that it is not simply believing that God is one but it is the ground for our actions, particularly in apologetics and religious debate. Ultimately, this is nothing new because Christianity’s central confession has always been ‘Jesus is Lord’ forming the center of our doctrine, ethics, and religious confrontations.

This foundation should not leave us with a closed door to religious debate. Quite to the contrary, we must engage our culture. We are called to preach ‘Christ crucified’ in a sea of religious pluralism. Yet as Luther questioned, “Do you, I wonder, take preaching Christ crucified to be just a matter of calling out ‘Christ was crucified,’ and nothing more?”103 True preaching of ‘Christ crucified’ unquestionably brings in other key doctrines.104 We cannot simply pretend we are preaching ‘Christ crucified’ because we call people to believe when we have not engaged, questioned and ultimately shown all their current worldviews to be found wanting. We cannot pretend we have preached ‘Christ crucified’ when we have not proclaimed the monotheistic confession ‘Jesus is LORD’, as if we can accept the former without the latter.

If we preach the gospel as merely an option, we do not show it to be truth. God, Himself, commands that all people repent since Christ is LORD. We must be clear to incorporate monotheism, humanity’s total depravity, the deity of Christ, the crucifixion, the resurrection and the judgment into our evangelistic preaching and our religious debate, emphasizing certain aspects as the situation demands and depending upon the audiences’ familiarity with

104 Ibid., 107-8.
Christianity. If we limit the gospel to a proclamation that takes simply care of needs only on an individualistic level we have not shown the full power of our glorious God nor have we distinguished it from other religions that for the here-and-now often appear as viable roads to self-fulfillment. While the gospel does change lives, religious debate cannot center on experience.\textsuperscript{105} We must call men to abandon their false gods for the Triune God of the Bible who has revealed Himself in the death and resurrection of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, 1 Thes. 1:9-10.

A ‘Christological monotheism’ not only sets a firm boundary against compromising our worldview, it provides a launching point for religious debate.\textsuperscript{106} Numerous religions embrace a god or gods. A smaller amount of religions preach one god yet do not embrace Christ. Still fewer religions appear to embrace Christ but they cannot embrace him as Lord, YHWH. Our modern context of ‘toleration’ seeks to illuminate debate and equalize all religion in some form of a lowest common denominator.\textsuperscript{107} Michael Horton succinctly writes:

While political toleration is a benefit for democratic culture, YHWH ranks religious pluralism enemy number one in his stipulations for his covenant people, as enshrined in the Decalogue. The sole lordship of YHWH, as we have seen, is the presupposition of biblical faith, and it is carried forward into fuller revelation of YHWH’s identity as applied to Jesus Christ…God is jealous for his own name and for the people who call on his name and are called by his name. God will not give his glory to another.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{105} Proof can be mustered for and against all religions if the foundation for debate is experience. We can say this without denying that a Christian must live the lifestyle before a watching world. A failure to do so can only hinder our religious debate. At the same time, we will not deny that many are often attracted to Christianity by the faithful lifestyle of some of its dearest saints.

\textsuperscript{106} What I am suggesting is consistent with the Reformed understanding that God is essential foundation of all (principium essendi) and thus His revelation is the ground of all knowledge (principium cognoscendi). For theology and apologetics, we need the Word of God (principium cognoscendi externum) and the internal work of the Holy Spirit (principium cognoscendi internum). It was however beyond the scope of the paper to make these arguments. I hope it is evident to the reader that these aspects of Reformed theology are grounded upon the ontological Trinity and His self-condescension by the means of covenant (WCF 7.1). We could argue that Reformed tradition has then best understood this precisely because it arises from monotheism and the Creator-creature distinction.

\textsuperscript{107} Usually the existential activity of ‘faith’ itself, however vaguely defined. This is of course anti-truth, anti-God, anti-Christianity. Following God’s authoritative Word, Christianity has always placed the utmost importance in the object of faith rather than the subjective activity of faith. While the latter is essential it is nevertheless meaningless without the former.

\textsuperscript{108} Horton, Lord and Servant, 63. In our ellipsis, we have omitted Horton’s quotations of John 14:6; Philippians 2:9-10 and Acts 4:12.
VI. Conclusion.

We have examined monotheism from the Old Testament. We have examined the appropriation of monotheism and a ‘Christological monotheism’ in two key places in Paul’s thought as he confronts the pluralism of his day. We, too, must have this same ‘Christological monotheism’ in our present day. A ‘Christological monotheism’ preaches God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit who are distinct persons of the one God. It stands in stark contrast to the monotheism of modern Judaism and Islam. It rejects Buddhism, Hinduism, and any other religion or philosophy.

Ultimately, upon the consideration of the whole of Scripture, Christianity is Trinitarian and preaches the triune God of the Bible. Central to orthodox Christianity’s Trinitarian confession is the statement that “Jesus Christ is Lord,” the ‘Christological Monotheism’ presented here. Only a Christian can proclaim ‘Jesus is Lord.’ It forms a boundary both practically and theologically. Properly understood a ‘Christological monotheism’ guards Christian doctrine and shapes a Christian ethic.

A ‘Christological monotheism’ draws a line in the sand in fighting pluralism in the same way Old Testament monotheism opposed the various pantheons. It provides the platform needed for religious debate, confrontation, and resistance. A failure to recognize the monotheistic implications and boundary markers inherent within this confession that ‘Jesus is Lord’ will produce [and in many places has produced] disastrous consequences in subsequent generations within the ‘Christian’ community. Among other things, we will be/are no longer a city set upon a hill, a light to the nations, a kingdom of priests rather we will/have become a people living in the plains of Sodom and Gomorrah. Soli Deo Gloria.

---

109 1 Cor. 12:3. We could highlight the work of the Trinity from other Scriptures as the Holy Spirit regenerates enabling faith, i.e. confession that ‘Jesus is Lord’, in those whom the Father has called to Himself.