



Tilling, Chris.

Paul's Divine Christology

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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Paul's Divine Christology (hereafter *PDC*) is a slightly revised version of Chris Tilling's 2009 Brunel University doctoral dissertation written under Max Turner's supervision at the London School of Theology. Tilling is New Testament Tutor for St Mellitus College and St Paul's Theological Centre in London as well as author of the popular biblioblog *Chrisendom*.

In *PDC* Tilling asks two questions: 1) "How does Paul's Jewish-style faith in God affect our understanding of his Christology?" (6, 63); and 2) "Where, if at all, is there evidence in the Pauline corpus for (or against) a divine-Christology?" (6, 72). By attending to a plethora of data that scholars on both sides of the debate often neglect, namely Paul's emphasis on *relationship* throughout his undisputed letters, Tilling affirms a Pauline divine-Christology.

Tilling's project differs from similar studies in that he offers a holistic reading of Paul, which is paramount for establishing a *pattern* of Christ-language that "corresponds, as a pattern, only to language concerning YHWH in second Temple Judaism" (3), whereas most authors concentrate on relatively few "key" texts in order to argue their theses. In addition to reading Paul *widely*, Tilling also reads him *primarily*. He says:

Some have considered it good methodology to start with Second Temple texts before engaging with Paul. Unfortunately, in terms of the divine-Christology

debate, scholars have combed the dense and complex texts for various intermediary figures before really grasping the significance of Christ in Paul, and the meaning and extent of Paul's interrelated language, and so have necessarily drawn false conclusions (8).

Before turning to his exegesis (chapters 5-8), Tilling surveys the arguments both for and against a divine Christology, while tracing the development of these arguments from pre-1970s scholarship until present (chapter 2). He builds upon the works of Larry Hurtado, Richard Bauckham, and Gordon Fee, but not before examining their contributions and noting their respective strengths and weaknesses (chapter 3).

Fee's undeveloped references to relationality, Bauckham's notion of "divine identity," as well as his underexplored recognition of YHWH's relation to Israel as an indication of the "divine identity," and Hurtado's focus on devotion as a pattern of data (which Tilling argues is part of a larger pattern of data in Paul) is utilized and built upon in highlighting the relational nature of Second Temple Jewish monotheism (and this with reference to the work of OT theologians who regularly highlight the significance of relationship in their works). This answers the first of Tilling's major questions by setting the stage for an examination of Paul's relational language about the risen Christ (chapter 4).

The second question is answered in Tilling's thoroughgoing exegesis of 1 Corinthians 8:1-10-22 (chapter 5) and an examination of Paul's "Christ-shaped aims, goals and motivations" throughout the undisputed letters (chapter 6). Tilling persuasively argues that this Christ-relation was an "existential reality" for Paul and that he would have recognized this data as a pattern, which he brought together in single coherent arguments (chapter 7). Having established these matters Tilling is able to approach 1 Corinthians 16:22 with fresh eyes and attend to the Christ-relation data (e.g., devotion; communication with the Risen Christ; Christ's absence; etc.) that are often overshadowed by the scholarly fascination with analyzing the term *μαρὰνα θά* (chapter 8).

One of the most significant portions of this volume (chapter 9) comes in a thought experiment where Tilling asks the reader to imagine that Paul had access to only three texts (*Sirach* 44-50; *The Life of Adam and Eve*; *The Similitudes of Enoch*) before composing his own material. These texts are often brought to bear on Paul's Christology by those who deny a divine-Christology for the way that they show that other intermediary figures could receive devotion, bear titles, or exercise authority otherwise reserved for YHWH. But in examining these texts Tilling shows that

the closest parallel isn't between the intermediary-figure-language and Paul's Christ-language; but rather the God-language of these texts and Paul's Christ-language!

The findings of the previous chapters are reiterated and brought to bear on the divine Christology debate (chapter 10). By attending to the plethora of relational data in Paul and Second Temple texts Tilling is able to effectively show how he improves upon previous arguments affirming a Pauline divine-Christology (e.g., Hurtado, Fee, Bauckham, Capes), as well as why those denying a Pauline divine-Christology (e.g., Casey, Dunn, McGrath) fail to convince. This excellent study is rounded out with a summary and conclusion (chapter 11), and an appendix about how Paul's Christ-relation contributes to modern theological discourse, as well as helpful back matter (bibliography, ancient source/modern author/subject indices).

There are a number of things to commend in *PDC*. Tilling's methodology is superior to similar studies in the sheer breadth of his reading of Paul. By attending to the entire undisputed corpus Tilling is able to analyze a wide range of data across multiple themes and synthesize his findings into a convincing argument that Paul would have recognized this pattern of Christ-language as a pattern that he deliberately employed. There's no scholarly gymnastics necessary to make Tilling's conclusions fit the data. Of course, those of us who affirm Pauline authorship of the disputed letters would like to see how Tilling's argument stands up when they're taken into account.¹

Likewise, by identifying such a widespread pattern, which includes the various cultic elements of Christ-devotion that Hurtado highlights, but moves beyond them in noting the passionate nature of the devotion, how it extends beyond the cultus, and the way in which Paul contrasts it with various negatives (e.g., "belly serving" or fornication [134]), and examining themes of Christ's presence and activity (cf. Mehrdad Fatehi's *The Spirit's Relation to the Risen Lord in Paul*) as well as his absence, and believers' communication with the risen Lord, and Tilling renders debates over whether or not Christ is called "God" or whether other figures are called by similar names, receive similar honors, or perform similar tasks, ultimately irrelevant, as brilliantly demonstrated in chapter 9.

¹ I'm confident that Tilling's case will stand up when the wider Pauline corpus is examined. See Tilling's "Ephesians and Divine Christology" in *The Spirit and Christ in the New Testament & Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 177-97.

One can also appreciate Tilling's evenhanded assessment of his dialogue partners' work; his deft exegetical hand; and his vast knowledge of both English and German secondary literature. Tilling deserves special recognition for consistently translating quotations from German works into English in both the main text and footnotes. Not only is this helpful to the primary readership of this volume; it also shows his facility with the language.

It is difficult to find fault in a volume that one finds so much agreement with. Nonetheless, one might complain of a recent but widespread tendency of both biblical scholars and theologians to treat "substance metaphysics" as a boogeyman of sorts. Aristotelian ontology may not have been Paul's primary thought category but that doesn't mean that he wasn't in some way affected by it. Tilling makes repeated references to Galatians 4:8 throughout the volume (70, 71, 136, 176, 237, 251), and always to highlight Paul's relational argument, but even he acknowledges the contrast between Paul saying that the Galatians were at one time "enslaved to *beings* that by *nature* are not gods" and then the implication that Christ, who they are now enslaved to, is "by *nature* divine" (176, emphasis mine). It's difficult to avoid the ontological under- (or over-)tones of this passage.

More could have been said about the subordination texts in Paul. Sure, Tilling can argue that an emphasis on relationship does away with the need to focus on these passages in ontological terms; and Paul may not have been overly concerned about them; but what are *we* supposed to do with them? How does subordination work itself out relationally? What are the implications for modern discourse that is beholden to substance metaphysics? This could have been fleshed out a bit more in Tilling's treatment of Jewish monotheistic commitments, which brings me to my final complaint, namely Tilling's lack of interaction with Paul Rainbow's unpublished 1987 doctoral dissertation "Monotheism and Christology in 1 Corinthians 8.4-6." Reference to this work would have only served to strengthen Tilling's project, which admittedly, could have been beefed up in its discussion of monotheism.

But these minor criticisms shouldn't detract from the fact that *PDC* accomplishes as a published monograph exactly what it did as a dissertation in making both a significant and unique contribution that is sure to move its field forward. You really can't ask for more than that from a junior scholar (and we'd all be better if we got it consistently from senior scholars). I enthusiastically recommend *PDC*, which deserves several close readings, to anyone interested in Christology in general and the divine-Christology debate in Paul in particular. Scholars will no longer be able to engage the subject meaningfully without reference to this work.