

THE PRE-EXISTENCE OF CHRIST IN SCRIPTURE, PATRISTICS, AND CREED

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Chesterton. Gilbert K.'s exploration of faith and incarnation in Christian doctrine and practice.

8 Chapters

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The Pre-Existence of Christ in Scripture, Patristics, and Creed

Introduction

Our modern world is decidedly confused. On the one hand, the rationalistic, humanistic viewpoint dominates within our public education system. We are now taught to question the validity of anything that can be called "supernatural." The very idea that someone might believe in miracles, revelation, etc., is opened up to direct ridicule. At the same time, in a direct reaction against this kind of dry humanism, many people are fleeing for refuge into every kind of spiritistic group imaginable. "Channeling" (a fancy way of saying a spirit medium) is very popular, and the Eastern ideas of reincarnation and mysticism are drawing converts from every walk of life.

In the midst of all of this confusion we find the Bible, continuing to proclaim the timeless message of Jesus Christ. Yet even the Lord Jesus has come in for modern "updating" in many men's writings. After a century of "searching for the historical Jesus" men (hopefully) have discovered that outside of the inspired writings of the apostles in the New Testament, we will not find much information on who Jesus was. Indeed, unless we see that it is illogical and irrational to reject the Scriptures for what they claim to be [1] we will never have much to say to our world.

Today it is normal for "Christian" theologians to de-emphasize the doctrinal aspects of the Person of Jesus Christ. Since rationalism and naturalism are the modes of the day, it is unpopular to deal with the clear Biblical teaching of the deity of the Lord Jesus and his pre-existence. The person who looks to the Bible, however, has little choice in the matter - the doctrine is clearly stated both in the Gospels as well as the epistles, and indeed it is implicit in most of

the New Testament.

One cannot easily disassociate the doctrine of the pre-existence of Christ from that of his deity, as they are part and parcel of the same teaching. An in-depth discussion of the deity of Christ is outside of the realm of this paper, and it will be assumed that an understanding of the main elements of this doctrine are shared with the reader. [2] This discussion will be limited to the focal passages found in the New Testament that deal with the pre-existence of the Lord Jesus. For our purposes these are as follows: John 1:1-3, Colossians 1:15-17, and Philippians 2:5-7. Each of these passages have much in common, as we shall see in our examination of them, both in an exegetical understanding, as well as in patristic interpretation. It will be relevant to a discussion of the early Church's views to discuss the order of writing of the books which contain our primary data on the pre-existence of Christ. Generally, the Pauline epistles are dated anywhere from the late 40's to the late 60's of the first century. The majority of scholarship sees Paul's writings preceding John's by quite some time, and there is general agreement concerning the order of Paul's letters and their place in history. [3] The question of the exact date of John's gospel, however, is not so easily resolved. Merrill C. Tenney [4] notes that modern estimates range from 45 to beyond 100 A.D. Part of the problem can be found in the fact that during what might be called the "hyper-critical" period of the last century, it became quite popular to deny the Johanine authorship of the Gospel of John, and, due to its high Christology (which the rationalists assumed had to be a mythological invention of the early Church) place it at least into the second century. Modern textual finds (such as the famous P[75]) have demolished any ideas of a second-century date for John, and today the dates normally fall between A.D. 85 and 95. [5] What is very

important to notice about the fact of the early (i.e., non-second century dating) is that the Christology of John is, therefore, no different than that of the early Church as the book was written during the same time period! Indeed, there is no way for there to have been sufficient time for such "myths" to have evolved, and, it is not logical to think that John would have written about certain events that could be proven false by living witnesses! With these facts in mind, we can move on to the actual exegesis of these passages.

[1] 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 2 Peter 1:20-21.

[2] This writer sees the following passages as directly ascribing to Jesus Christ the term God: Isaiah 9:6 (Hebrew: Elohim) John 1:1 (Greek: theos), 1:18, 20:28, Acts 20:28 (depending on text), Romans 9:5, Titus 2:13, Hebrews 1:8, 2 Peter 1:1 and (possibly) 1 John 5:20.

Interestingly, in reference to Titus 2:13 (and 2 Peter 1:1 - both similar syntactical constructions) Chrysostom ("Homily IV on Philippians in The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers volume 13, pg. 207) clearly understood the implications of the syntax of Titus 2:13, and bases part of his polemic against the Arians on the application of theos to Christ. See also A. T. Robertson, The Minister and His Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), pgs. 61-68.

[3] F. F. Bruce Paul Apostle of the Heart Set Free (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977) p. 475) places the epistles of Paul in the following order: Galatians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Romans, Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus with Galatians at 48 A.D., Colossians and Philippians in 60-62 A.D., and Paul's death in approximately 65 A.D. This is almost identical to A. T. Robertson's ("Paul the Apostle" in The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956) vol. 3:2265-2266) order of writing, with the exception

of Galatians, which Robertson places just before Romans. See also Ralph Martin, "Colossians and Philemon" in The New Century Bible Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, 1983) pg. 30 on the dating of Colossians.

[4] Merrill C. Tenney, "John" in The Expositor's Bible Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981) vol. 9, pp. 9-10.

[5] Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church , (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, 1985) vol. 1:721-724 gives a good argument for Johanine authorship, and dates it before 100 A.D. A. T.

Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1932) vol. 5:1 dates John at A.D. 90. James Iverach, "John the Apostle" in The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, 1956) vol. 3:1721-1722 also dates John at end of first century.

Exegesis of Principal Passages

The Prologue of John (1:1-18) is unique in Biblical literature. It is clear that the main point of John is not the person of God. His emphasis is the identity of the Word. The Logos is the central figure of the work, and the teaching of the passage is that the Logos is intricately involved with the creation of the universe. The pre-existence of the Logos is clearly stated and assumed throughout the prologue.

Much has been said concerning the origin of the term logos. Philo [6] used the term, yet the logos of Philo is simply an impersonal manifestation of the Wisdom of God. John's usage of the term may indeed borrow from Philo (especially if John wrote the Gospel while in Ephesus, as the Greeks would be able to understand the term), but he goes far beyond anything Philo dreamed of. Rather than a pantheistic, impersonal divine emanation, the Logos of John is a personal, eternal being who is not simply a part of creation, but is rather the Creator himself. The first verse itself must be examined to be understood.

Transliterated into Greek the verse reads: En arche en ho logos, kai ho logos en pros ton theon, kai theos en ho logos. The verse breaks down into three clauses, each being vital to the whole. The first thing to notice is the fact that the imperfect form of eimi is used throughout the prologue in reference to the Logos. This tense, attached to the phrase "en arche" is timeless - i.e, as far back as one wishes to push the "beginning" the Word is already in existence. This is seen, for example, in the translation of the New English Bible which renders it, "When all things began, the Word already was." Today's English Version puts it, "Before the world was created, the Word already existed..."

Hence, the first phrase clearly presents the eternity of the Word and hence his pre-existence.

The second phrase presents the inter-personal relationship of the Logos and God. The Greek phrase *pros*, translated "with," refers to the existence of communication and fellowship between the Logos and *theos*.

[7] The word was used to describe being "face to face" with another.

Now, unless John had added the final phrase ("and the Word was God") there would have been a problem here, as the first phrase clearly presents the Logos as eternal, while the second demonstrates his distinct personality. This would create polytheism without the final phrase's emendation. At the same time, this second clause ends any chance of Sabellianism's success.

The final phrase, *kai theos en ho logos*, presents a syntactical arrangement in which the term *theos* is emphasized. At the same time, the sentence is copulative, and the presence of the article with *logos* simply sets it out as the subject of the sentence. Much has been said concerning the lack of the article with *theos* [8] but that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. Basically, the construction 1) avoids modalism (i.e., the Word is not said to be completely co-extensive with *theos*) and 2) teaches that the Word has the same nature as God (a point that Paul will reiterate in Philippians). Verse 3 links the eternity of the Word with creatorship. "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." John here is intent on separating the Logos from the realm of the created - he started in the very first phrase by asserting his timeless existence and continues here by attributing to the Logos all of creation, an item that will reappear in Colossians. The only possible way to interpret these verses is to see the Logos as an eternal being who created all things.

The prologue continues by identifying the Logos with the person of Jesus Christ in 1:14. It is interesting to note that John very carefully differentiates between the Word in his absolute nature and all other things. When the eternal Word is in view, John uses *en*. When created things are being discussed (such as John in 1:6), the aorist *egeneto* is found. However, when we come to the time event of 1:14 (i.e., the incarnation), John switches from the timeless *en* to the aorist *egeneto* - the Word became flesh at a point in time in history. Finally, in 1:18, [9] John seals the case by calling Jesus the "only-begotten God," or, more accurately, the "unique God" [10] who reveals the Father, who "exegetes" [11] God to man. These verses with which John begins his gospel are meant, in my opinion, to form an "interpretive window" through which the reader is meant to look at the words that follow. One must constantly keep the Logos in the back of the mind when interpreting the words and actions of Jesus. [12] Much of what Christ says must be understood in this light to even make much sense! His unique relationship with the Father is intelligible only in the light of his eternal pre-existence with him. Equally significant are Jesus' own "I am" sayings found in John 8:24, 8:58, 13:19 and 18:5-6. Though there is some discussion concerning the use of the phrase *ego eimi* in this absolute sense, [13] these passages clearly show an intentional aspect to Christ's words relevant to his identity. In both 8:58 and 18:5-6, John takes pains to make sure the reader understands the impact of Christ's words on his hearers. In 13:19 we find an extremely close parallel to the LXX rendering of Isaiah 43:10, here applied to Christ by himself. One can hardly escape the significance of the Hebrew term *ani hu* as used by Isaiah, and its Greek translation as *ego eimi*. Since Christ purposefully utilized these phrases of himself, it is safe to say that he was claiming for himself

the title of the "I Am" - the eternal one, YHWH. The other two texts fall outside of the realm of the Gospels, though they must reflect very early teaching of the Church, and therefore are just as important as the Johanine passages in determining the Scriptural basis of the doctrine of the pre-existence of Christ. Both Pauline passages are vital, and both come from very different contexts. The first to be examined (Colossians 1:15-17) comes from a book that seems to contain within it a polemic against gnosticism (or, possibly, "proto-gnosticism"), while the second (Philippians 2:5-7) comes from a book that is conspicuous for its lack of polemic. Colossians 1:15-17 is considered by some to be an early Christian hymn. [14] Its structure most definitely resembles the poetic style of a song, and one can find it easy to see how Paul would utilize song to teach doctrine in the churches. The principal verses relevant to our discussion of pre-existence form the first half of this passage - the second discusses the pre-eminence of Christ in redemption and in the Church. In vs. 15 the pre-existent Christ is styled the "eikon tou theou tou aoratou" - the express image of the invisible God. One can easily see the parallel between this and John's description of Christ as the unique God who "exegetes" the Father (1:18). In Christ the invisible God became visible to man. Attendant to this, Paul describes Christ as the prototokos - the firstborn. [15] The main meaning of "firstborn" is the one who has pre-eminence, and indeed, the Hebrew term which prototokos translates in the LXX (bekhor) is not connected with either the ideas of protos or tokos. [16] Hence, the pre-eminence of Christ is the point of prototokos, and, as the following verses will make very clear, there is no temporal idea of generation or creation found in this passage relevant to Christ.

Verses 16 and 17 exhaust the Greek mind in their rush to include all of

creation in the realm of the power of Christ. Nothing is left out by Paul at this point. His use of the phrase *ta panta* is absolute, and to make sure that everyone realizes this, he lists the elements that make up the *panta*. J. B. Lightfoot [17] well comments:

"All the laws and purposes which guide the creation and government of the Universe reside in Him, the Eternal Word, as their meeting-point. The Apostolic doctrine of the Logos teaches us to regard the Eternal Word as holding the same relation to the Universe which the Incarnate Christ holds to the Church. He is the source of its life, the centre of all its developments, the mainspring of all its motions...The Judeo-Alexandrian teachers represented the Logos, which in their view was nothing more than the Divine mind energizing, as the *topos* where the eternal ideas...have their abode...The Apostolic teaching is an enlargement of this conception, inasmuch as the Logos is no longer a philosophical abstraction but a Divine Person..."

In this divine person all things "hold together" or consist. This divine person is said to be "before *ta panta* - all things." There is no clearer passage in the Bible concerning the fact that Jesus Christ, the eternal Word, created all things. There is no room here for the gnostic *pleroma* in which Christ is but a part - no, here Christ is seen as the Creator Himself who holds the universe together by his own power. The pre-existent Christ shines brightly in Paul's mind, and forms the basis for his teaching of the relationship between Christ and the Church. Note also the harmony between Paul and John on this point. [18] The third passage to be examined comes from Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. It, too, is hymnic in structure, and is set off as such by the New International Version. The major section comprises what is actually a sermon illustration of Paul's in reference to his admonition to the Philippians to act in humility of mind toward one another. To

support this point, Paul points to the person of Jesus Christ as the ultimate example of this attitude. Indeed, it is vital to understand the immediately preceding context when some phrases within the passage are encountered, as we shall see. The first phrase of verse 6 sets the tone for the theological discussion to follow. Paul says that Christ was "existing" (huparchon) in the "form of God" (morphe tou theou). What does this mean? The participle huparchon is again "timeless" in that it does not point to any moment when Jesus "started" to exist in the form of God - Christ has always been in the form of God. And what is the morphe? It is that quality or characteristic which makes something what it is rather than what it is not. God is known by his morphe, and no other being has his form. The NIV picks this up by translating the phrase, "who being in very nature God..."

Paul is here looking back before the incarnation to the pre-existent state of the Lord, and says that in that state the Lord Jesus shared with the Father the form of God. Not only this, but he goes on to say that the Lord had "equality with God" and yet did not regard that equality something to be "grasped." Much has been written on just how to take the term harpagmon. [19] After plowing through a large portion of the material representing various views, the interpretation given by Chrysostom [20] and followed by Lightfoot [21] seems to be the only logical outcome and is the one that best fits the context of the passage. Basically, this view sees the word harpagmon referring to the fact that Christ, though already equal with the Father, did not regard that equality something to be held on to at all cost, but, as the ultimate example of humility, laid his privileges aside for our sakes and "made himself nothing." This fits the context of the passage, that of walking in "humility of mind" for how can it be an example of humility for Christ to not desire equality with God if he did not

already have it? Not trying to become equal with God is not humility - it is simply not committing blasphemy. [22]

We have now seen three passages that clearly present the Lord Jesus as having had a personal, distinct existence before his incarnation and earthly life. This existence is seen to be personal, and to be connected with distinctive acts such as creation and intimate fellowship with the Father. His pre-incarnation life is also seen to have been eternal, and not temporal as that of a creation. Given this fact, how did the early Christian Fathers view this doctrine? To this we now turn.

[6] G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, (London:SPCK, 1952), pp. 124, 141. Ralph Martin, "Colossians and Philemon" in *The New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973) pg. 58.

[7] A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934) pp. 625f. See discussion in A. T. Robertson, *The Divinity of Christ in the Gospel of John* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1976) pp. 34-46.

[8] See F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983) p. 31, or Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971) pg. 77 for a discussion of some of the issues involved in the translation of this phrase. Most notably, the New World Translation of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society mistranslates the phrase as "the Word was a god."

[9] On the text of John 1:18 and the superiority of the reading *theos* over *huios*, see Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975) p. 198, A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 5:17. For citation of

manuscripts, see the UBS text, 3rd ed. corrected, p. 322.

[10] For the true meaning of monogenes see J.H. Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1935) pp. 416-417.

[11] Greek: exegesato, to lead out, bring forth, make known, explain.

[12] For an interesting discussion of the relationship of the Prologue to the rest of John, see John A. T. Robinson, *Twelve More New Testament Studies* (London: SCM Press, 1984) pp. 65-76.

[13] Philip B. Harner, *The I Am Sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John*, (Fortress Press, 1970).

[14] Ralph Martin, "Colossians and Philemon" pp. 55-57; F. F. Bruce, *Paul Apostle of the Heart Set Free* pp. 418ff. For further information on the passage as well as exegesis, see John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* vol. 21:151-152.

[15] See Wilhelm Michaelis, "Protokos" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982) vol. 6:872ff.

[16] See M. Tsevat, "Bekhor" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975) vol. 2:121ff. On protokos see entry in *Walter Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* edited by Gingrich and Danker, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) p. 726.

[17] J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959) pp. 150-151. See also pp. 151-153 on the extent of ta panta.

[18] For other views and discussion on Colossians 1:15-17 in a theological setting, see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Inter-Varsity Press: USA, 1981) pp. 344-352; George Eldon Ladd, *A*

Theology of the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974) pp. 419-421.

[19] Donald Guthrie, New Testament Theology pp. 342-352; George Eldon Ladd, A Theology of the New Testament pp. 419-421; Henry Alford, New Testament for English Readers, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983) pp. 1262-1264; Kenneth Wuest, "Philippians" in Word Studies in the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981) pp. 62-65; J. B. Lightfoot, St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1953) p. 137.

[20] See discussion under patristic interpretation.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Both the Authorized Version and the New International Version see that the term kenosis is always used metaphorically by Paul - hence, the translation "to make of no repute" or to "make himself nothing." It is never used by Paul of a literal "emptying."

Patristic Interpretation

As we have seen, the doctrine of the pre-existence of Christ is explicitly stated in the New Testament documents, and is implicit in much of the story of Jesus as well as the teaching of the Church about his person. J.N.D. Kelly [23] notes this, and given all of this data, it seems incredible that anyone today could still maintain that the doctrine is based on the reflection of the Church. Such "mythologizing" takes more time than the documents now allow.

The Apostolic Fathers do not give us a great deal of information on Christology proper. Hence, the information to be found on this particular aspect of the doctrine of Christ will also be scant. There are still, however, some interesting facts. Ignatius gives us one of the most eloquent statements concerning the early Church's view of Christ in his letter to the Ephesians, 7:2:

"There is one only physician, of flesh and of spirit, generate and ingenerate (gennetos kai agennetos) God in man (en anthropo theos), true Life in death, Son of Mary and Son of God, first passible and then impassible, Jesus Christ our Lord."

The duality of the Lord's nature (God/man) is clearly seen in Ignatius, and is repeated in his letter to Polycarp, 3:2:

"Await Him that is above every season, the Eternal, the Invisible, who became visible for our sake, the Impalpable, the Impassible, who suffered for our sake, who endured in all ways for our sake."

Pre-existence is not just implied but clearly stated in this passage, attributing to Christ eternity, and seeing the incarnation as the point in time at which God broke into human history for the sake of man. It is significant that Ignatius calls Jesus Christ "God" 14 times

in his letters.

Discussion of John 1, Colossians 1 and Philippians 2 was fairly limited in the early Fathers' writings, most probably due to the fact that the Arian controversy was still future, and the church's main enemy at that time was gnosticism and docetism, neither of which would require a strong statement of the pre-existence of Christ, at least by itself.

Paul is attacking gnostic ideas in Colossians, but even the gnostics believed in some kind of pre-existence for Christ. Irenaeus exegeted John 1:1 against the gnostics in Book V of Against Heresies, chapter 18, [24] and did as Paul did and pointed out that Jesus is the Creator not a part of the creation.

The introduction of Arianism drew the attention of the Church back to the Person of Christ and his relationship with the Father. Origen's synthesis of Greek philosophy and its idea of the Divine Wisdom with Christian doctrine had laid the groundwork for Arius' denial of the absolute deity of Christ and, thereby, the denial of the eternal pre-existence of the Lord Jesus. John's filling of the eternal Logos with personality was reversed somewhat, and the timeless en of John 1:1 seemingly was lost in the shuffle.

It is no surprise, then, that the Church Fathers after Nicea spend much more time on John 1:1, Colossians 1:15-17, and Philippians 2:5-7. The Nicene Creed had clearly stated the Deity of Christ as well as his pre-existence. [25] The six decades that followed saw a resurgence of Arianism and, after great struggle, the victory of the Nicene faith.

During that time the great Athanasius wrote volumes in defense of the deity of the Son. Chalcedon reaffirmed Nicea and went farther in attempting to answer the questions concerning the relationship of the divine and the human in Christ. [26]

The body of writing of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers is large

indeed. The series edited by Schaff takes up 28 large volumes alone. Hence, to overview all of this literature would be far beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, the three main exegetes of the century after Nicea - Chrysostom, Athanasius, and Augustine - will be examined, briefly, to determine how they understood the focal passages listed above.

Chrysostom:

Of the three Fathers I have chosen to look at, Chrysostom (345- 407) expressed the clearest if not the most in-depth understanding of the doctrine of the pre-existence of Christ. Chrysostom was called the "golden-mouthed," and this passage [27] on John 1:1 should explain why: "For the intellect, having ascended to `the beginning,' enquires what `beginning': and then finding the `was' always outstripping its imagination, has no point at which to stay its thought; but looking intently onwards, and being unable to cease at any point, it becomes wearied out, and turns back to things below. For this, `was in the beginning,' is nothing else than expressive of ever being and being infinitely."

Chrysostom's point is the same as made previously on the basis of the imperfect en in 1:1 - it is timeless. A little later he adds, "... (the) first `was,' applied to `the Word,' is only indicative of His eternal Being..." In the same manner, he keys on the term pros as well, saying "For he does not say, was `in God,' but was `with God': declaring to us His eternity as to person. Then, as he advances, he has more clearly revealed it, by adding, that this `Word' also `was God.'" [28] The eternity of the Word was one of Chrysostom's main ideas in his exegesis of John 1, and he repeatedly stressed the concept. [29] Nor did Colossians 1:15-17 escape Chrysostom's notice. Keying on verses 16-17, he attacked the gnostic concept of the creation and its duality by pressing the list of things created by Christ, claiming that obviously Paul was including all of creation under the Son's reign. "...the subsistence of all things depends on Him. Not only did He Himself bring them out of nothing into being, but Himself sustains them

now, so that were they dissevered from His Providence, they were at once undone and destroyed." [30]

Most importantly, Chrysostom contributed greatly to the understanding of Philippians 2:5-11. He wrote:

"What does Paul wish to establish by this example? Surely, to lead the Philippians to humility. To what purpose then did he bring forward this example? For no one who would exhort to humility speaks thus; 'Be thou humble, and think less of thyself than of thine equals in honor, for such an one who is a slave has not risen against his master; do thou imitate him.' This, any one would say, is not humility, but arrogance!...If he were exhorting servants to obey the free, to what purpose could he bring forward the subjection of a servant to a master? of a lesser to a greater?" [31]

The point has already been made (in the exegesis section) that the understanding of Paul's exhortation to humility is, in this writer's opinion, the key to understanding the passage, and here Chrysostom makes this point quite well.

[27] John Chrysostom, "Homilies on St. John" in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Philip Schaff, ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980) vol. 14:8.

[28] Chrysostom, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 14:12.

[29] Chrysostom, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 14:18. His entire exegesis found in pages 10-19 is excellent.

[30] Chrysostom, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 13:271.

[31] Chrysostom, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 13:207-208.

Athanasius:

Rightly called the great defender of the Nicene faith, Athanasius possessed a keen insight into the central doctrines of Christianity. Like Augustine after him, Athanasius saw Philippians 2:5-7 in close connection with John 1:1. In his "Four Discourses Against the Arians", Discourse II, [32] he ties John 1:1, 14 together with Philippians 2:6 as his main Scriptural support of the deity of Christ. To Athanasius, John's eternal Word existing "with" God and being God is the same as Paul's pre-existent Christ eternally existing in God's form and being equal with him.

Similarly, Athanasius quotes all of the Carmen Christi and then says, "Can anything be plainer than this? He was not from a lower state promoted; but rather, existing as God, He took the form of a servant, and in taking it, was not promoted but humbled Himself." [33] This view of the eternally existing Christ is found also in his "Statement of Faith" [34] in which he says,

"All things to wit were made through the Son; but He Himself is not a creature, as Paul says of the Lord: `In Him were all things created, and He is before All' (Col. 1:16). Now He says not, `was created' before all things, but `is' before all things. To be created, namely, is applicable to all things, but `is before all' applies to the Son only."

One final quote from Athanasius should be sufficient to represent his interpretation of this doctrine:

"Therefore if the Word be creature, He would not be first or beginning of the rest; yet if He be before all, as indeed He is, and is Himself alone First and Son, it does not follow that He is beginning of all

things as to His Essence, for what is the beginning of all is in the number of all. And if He is not such a beginning, then neither is He a creature, but it is very plain that He differs in essence and nature from the creatures, and is other than they, and is Likeness and Image of the sole and true God, being Himself sole also. Hence He is not classed with creatures in Scripture..." [35]

[32] Athanasius, "Four Discourses Against the Arians" in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (series II)* ed. by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980) vol. 5:409.

[33] Athanasius, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4:329.

[34] Athanasius, "Statement of Faith" in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5:85.

[35] Athanasius, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5:375. See also 5:382.

Augustine:

Augustine wrote a great deal on John 1:1 and Philippians 2:5-7, but very little on Colossians 1:15-17. Quite frequently the two passages are quoted together. Augustine's "Homilies on the Gospel of John" provides plenty of information on his views of the pre-existence of Christ as revealed in John 1. [36] However, we will look more at the doctrinal sections of Augustine's writings. In his "Enchiridion" he wrote: [37]

"Wherefore Christ Jesus, the Son of God, is both God and man; God before all worlds; man in our world: God, because the Word of God (for the Word was God'); and man, because in His one person the Word was joined with a body and a rational soul. Wherefore, so far as He is God, He and the Father are one; so far as He is man, the Father is greater than He. For when He was the only Son of God, not by grace, but by nature, that He might be full of grace, He became the Son of man; and He Himself unites both natures in His own identity, and both natures constitute on Christ; because, 'being in the form of God, He thought it not robbery to be,' what He was by nature, 'equal with God.' But He made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Himself the form of a servant, not losing or lessening the form of God. And, accordingly, He was both made less and remained equal, being both in one, as has been said: but He was one of these as Word, and the other as man. As Word, He is equal with the Father; as man, less than the Father. One Son of God, and at the same time Son of man; one Son of man, and at the same time Son of God; not two Sons of God, God and man, but one Son of God; God without beginning; man with a beginning, our Lord Jesus Christ."

This passage is one of many [38] that could be cited, but it admirably sums up Augustine's view-point for our purposes.

A Modern Viewpoint: The Westminster Confession The Westminster Confession is hailed by many as the greatest theological creed since the Reformation era, and so it is. A lengthy discussion need not be put forth to demonstrate the harmony between Westminster and the Scriptures, creeds, and Fathers already cited. The Confession itself, Chapter VIII "Of Christ the Mediator," sections I-III should be sufficient to demonstrate the acceptance of the doctrine:

"I. It pleased God, in his eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, his only-begotten Son, to be the Mediator between God and man, the Prophet, Priest, and King; the Head and Saviour of his Church, the Heir of all things, and Judge of the world; unto whom he did, from all eternity, give a people to be his seed, and to be by him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified. "II. The Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance, and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man's nature, with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin: being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the Virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only mediator between God and man. III. The Lord Jesus, in his human nature thus united to the divine, was sanctified and anointed with the Holy Spirit above measure; having in him all the treasure of wisdom and knowledge, in whom it pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell;..." [39]

The greatest of the Protestant creeds clearly bases its high view of

the Lord Jesus Christ on the fact of the Scriptural revelation of his eternal pre-existence with the Father, in the very form of God. This writer sees any movement away from the clear stance of Westminster (reflecting Biblical teaching) as a move away from truth.

[36] Augustine, "Homilies on the Gospel of John" in The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers series I, edited by Philip Schaff, vol. 7:7-13.

Augustine also connected the idea of pre-existence with the absolute usage of *ego eimi* at John 8:21-25; in vol. 7:218-219.

[37] Augustine, "Enchiridion," in The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers vol. 3:249.

[38] See also Augustine, "On Faith and Creed" in The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers vol 3:322-323, 329.

[39] Philip Schaff, The Creeds of Christendom, vol. 3:619-620.

[23] J.N.D. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines (New York: Longman Inc., 1981) pp. 87, 91..cw 9

[24] Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, ed., The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981) vol. 1:546.

[25] For the text of the Nicene Creed, see J.N.D. Kelly, Early Christian Creeds, (New York: Longman Inc., 1981), pp. 215-216 and Philip Schaff, The Creeds of Christendom, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985) vol. 1:27-28.

[26] Schaff, Creeds of Christendom vol 1:30.

Conclusion

We have seen above that the New Testament writers John and Paul both clearly presented the fact of the pre-existence of the Lord Jesus Christ. Not only did Christ exist before his birth in Bethlehem, but he existed eternally *pros ton theon* (with God) and in the very nature of God (*morphe tou theou*). These are high words and concepts, to be sure; but no less true. We have seen that the early church fathers understood this concept (Ignatius) and made it a part of their teaching. The council of Nicea reaffirmed the faith of the Apostles, and the great Church fathers Chrysostom, Athanasius and Augustine were in harmony with those who came before. Finally, we saw that the great creed of the Protestant faith, Westminster, continues the millenia-old understanding of Christians everywhere that the Lord of Glory, Jesus Christ, has eternally been God.

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