Chris Tilling

Paul's Divine Christology

Foreword by Douglas Campbell


Chris Kugler
University of St. Andrews
St. Andrews, United Kingdom

This is the first Eerdmans edition of Tilling’s 2012 WUNT volume (2/323), which itself was a lightly revised version of his PhD thesis written under the supervision of Max Turner at the London School of Theology. In this stimulating monograph, Tilling argues, in interaction (and basic agreement) with Hurtado, Bauckham, and Fee in particular, that a hitherto unappreciated constellation of features in Paul, and the way in which this constellation relates to the same constellation in ancient Judaism, reflects the most all-embracing and fundamental category of Pauline Christology: the “Christ-relation.” For Tilling, the Pauline “Christ-relation” is the “pattern of … language in Paul [that] is only that which a Jew used to express the relation between Israel/the individual Jew and YHWH” (73, emphasis original).

This edition begins with a stage-setting foreword by Pauline luminary Douglas Campbell (x–xix), followed by two prefaces (xx–xxiii). Beginning in chapter 1 (1–10), Tilling provides clarification of the terms and concepts that he will use throughout, as well as an overview of the shape and concerns of the following argument. The Forschungsgeschichte of chapter 2 (11–34) is especially valuable. The survey begins from the Reformation and works its way to the time of publication. In particular, Tilling rightly notes the two key issues—(1) the nature of Jewish monotheism and (2) Paul’s Christology in relation to
such—and the shift which occurred in the 1970s from seeking a Hellenistic background to Paul’s Christology to seeking a Jewish one (15–21). Tilling contends that all studies, notwithstanding their strengths, unduly focus on “titles” and/or isolated “themes” (22–27), “christological exegesis” (28–29), “Paul’s experience” (29–30), and/or the alleged cultic “worship” of Jesus (30–32). For Tilling, the all-embracing (and much more appropriate) “pattern of Pauline themes relevant to the divine-Christology debate has not yet been sufficiently grasped” (33).

Before we learn what this pattern is, Tilling focuses on three of the most important representatives for an early high Christology: Fee, Hurtado, and Bauckham (34–62). Notwithstanding his appreciation for the positive gains of Fee’s work, Tilling registers major criticisms: Fee’s division of the “person” and “work” of Christ is inappropriate (35–36); his emphasis on preexistence, in reaction to Dunn, is unhelpful (36–37); he fails adequately to deal with the “subordination” texts (39–40); and he lacks conceptual and semantic clarity at certain points (40–41). More generally, Tilling argues that Fee’s decision to structure certain elements of his Pauline Christology according to christological titles is likewise a weakness (43–47). As to Hurtado, along with the appreciative comments, Tilling makes the following criticisms: Hurtado does not “grasp the breadth of Christ devotion in Paul’s letters” (57); (2) Hurtado’s use of the category of “Christ devotion will not suitably cover the range of phenomena necessary to grasp” (57); and his emphasis upon “cultic worship” has ultimately proven indecisive (59–61). Having noted the gains of Bauckham’s work, Tilling’s central criticism, following that of Chester’s, is the fact that figures other than the God of Israel sometimes share in the features of Second Temple Jewish monotheism that Bauckham claims strictly demarcate the unique divine identity (19–21).

As to Tilling’s thorough treatment of Hurtado and Bauckham, one should note the following points. (1) Hurtado has never written a Pauline Christology; therefore, Tilling’s claim that Hurtado has not attended to all of the Pauline evidence is somewhat beside the point. (2) Hurtado’s contention that, by and large, “cultic worship” is the most important indicator of divinity in the ancient world remains convincing. (3) Likewise, Bauckham’s claim that certain features of ancient Jewish monotheism demarcate the unique divine identity remains convincing. The fact that certain figures sometimes “trespass” this territory does not prove that the territory does not exist but rather that certain Jewish texts intend to indicate that certain figures temporarily participate in the unique divine identity without themselves being inextricably identified with it. Tilling rightly argues that none of these figures provides a full precedent for Pauline Christology (196–233), but this hardly makes them totally irrelevant to an appreciation of such.
In chapter 4 (63–74) Tilling helpfully disambiguates the debates about Second Temple Jewish monotheism (63–72), arguing in particular that “biblical faith in the one God is fundamentally about the exclusive relational allegiance of Israel to this one God” (67, emphasis original). This conception obtained both for later Second Temple Jews and for Paul (67–72). Importantly, this emphasis upon the relational (one might have expected the word covenantal more often) nature of Pauline (and Second Temple) monotheism provides a fresh angle from which to observe Paul’s Christology: “this pattern of Christ-relation language in Paul is only that which a Jew used to express the relation between Israel/an individual Jew and YHWH” (73, emphasis original).

Tilling then launches into a major exegesis of his foundational text (ch. 5: 75–104), 1 Cor 8:1–10:22. In particular, and in a way that is representative of his entire thesis, he argues that “Paul, having opened his argument in a way which expresses true faith in the one God as the relational commitment of believers to this one God over against idolatry, goes on to speak explicitly and continually of the relation between risen Lord and believers over against idolatry. Furthermore, he details this Christ-relation with the terms and categories drawn from complex of themes and concepts that, in the Jewish scriptures, describe the relation between Israel and YHWH over against idolatry” (76, emphasis original). Amidst impressive grammatical and text-critical arguments (77–81), discussions of Paul’s intertexts (81–85), the text’s historical exigency (87–89) and innumerable incisive judgments of exegetical detail, Tilling convinces.

Moving to the rest of the undisputed Pauline material (105–80), Tilling contends that the Pauline letters reflect the Christ-relation pattern at point after point. From Paul’s “goals,” “motivations,” and “passionate affections” to sundry other features of his christological rhetoric, the Christ-relation pattern corresponds to the Jewish God-relation pattern.

Chapter 7 (181–87) argues that the pattern of data that Tilling calls the Christ-relation is a pattern that Paul would have recognized and of which he made conscious use. Following chapter 8 (188–95), in which Tilling assesses 1 Cor 16:22 from the perspective of the Christ-relation, he considers the import of three Second Temple Jewish texts: Sir 44–50, the Similitudes, and Life of Adam and Eve (196–233). To summarize a complex argument, Tilling contends that these three texts, far from challenging his case for a Pauline divine Christology, actually support it. The Christ-relation pattern in Paul corresponds far more closely to the God-relation pattern in these texts than to the exalted conception of the high priest (Sir 50), the Son of Man (Similitudes) and/or Adam (LAE).

Chapters 10 (234–52) and 11 (253–57) gather together the conclusions of the foregoing arguments in a helpful summary. In the final appendix (258–72), Tilling provides a very
thoughtful discussion of the potential bridges that his focus on the Christ-relation might build between the worlds of biblical studies and systematic theology.

In sum, the book is stimulating and at times stunning, thorough and detailed, attentive to exegetical minutiae and to larger historical and theological movements. Its central contentions, moreover, convince. As to the points of criticism, however, the following should be said. One wonders whether the absence of any discussion of messiahship was deliberate. Likewise, the reader will find no discussion of Adam and/or image Christology, which is a considerable lacuna. One wonders whether Tilling omitted such discussions because he does not see how they might relate to—or perhaps he thinks that they are simply incompatible with—his emphasis on the Christ-relation. I, however, think these features are perfectly compatible. This also relates to Tilling’s discussion of “intermediary figures” (196–233). The presupposition seems to be that, if one wants to argue for a fully divine Christology, such a person needs to distance Paul’s Christology from associations with such figures. This reflects, I suggest, a misunderstanding. In ancient Judaism, not least because of a widespread, high theological anthropology, figures other than God sometimes participated in the unique divine identity. One need not diminish the force of these texts in order (rightly) to contend that Paul’s Jesus is far more thoroughly and inextricably identified with the unique divine identity than any of these figures ever were.