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JESUS CHRIST, “AUTHOR OF LIFE:”

THE PREEXISTENCE OF THE SON OF GOD IN ACTS

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### **Introduction**

Luke’s account of the genesis and early life of Christ’s church in the book of Acts highlights the essential elements of the Christian message, and has shaped the universal church in fundamental ways. Though Acts mostly accounts for the apostles’ actions after the resurrection and ascension of Christ, it is clear that Jesus himself is the main character of the book; Acts “continues the story of Jesus by including the apostles in a postresurrection world.”<sup>1</sup>

Biblical studies scholars have posited different forms of Christology that appear in the NT. Critical scholars especially bring to the fore those aspects of the doctrine of Christ that highlight his humanity and downplay, or ignore, the many proofs within the NT which attest to his divinity. One way in which this sort of manipulation takes place is by consigning the doctrine of Christ’s divinity solely to John’s and Paul’s writing; even then, when these two author’s corpora are analyzed each scholar has his or her own idiosyncratic understanding of which works, or which parts of the works traditionally attributed to those men, are original to John and Paul.<sup>2</sup> This commonly accepted assumption (that is, commonly accepted among critical scholars)

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Cara, “Acts,” *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*, edited by Michael J. Kruger (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016) 137.

<sup>2</sup> John is viewed by some as an unreliable source for accurate information about the “historical Jesus” so many critical scholars have concerned themselves with unearthing. Dunn does not believe that John’s objective “was to paint a portrait of Jesus as he actually was, to record, like a faithful stenographer, what he actually said” (James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*

is clearly false when proper exegetical weight is brought to bear on the topic, as Christ's divinity resounds from nearly every page of the NT.

John expounds on one important aspect of Christ's divinity in his Gospel's prologue. There we read, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:1-4).<sup>3</sup> Here we have what can be considered the *locus classicus* of the doctrine of the preexistence of the Son of God. The preexistence of Christ simply refers to "the life of the Son prior to his birth."<sup>4</sup> Christ's preexistence "clearly implies that originally Christ was not like us; that he came to be like us only by voluntarily sharing our life; that, as the particular individual he was, he existed before creation; and that his existence as a man was continuous with his earlier existence as a heavenly being."<sup>5</sup>

Just as critical scholars have consigned Christ's divinity to the outer fringes of the NT's central meaning, there has been a denial or downplaying of Christ's preexistence, even though there are many clear passages which show forth this wondrous truth. The reasons for this are

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[Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 29). So then John is more concerned with a theological interpretation of Christ's life, rather than a straight-forward historical biography of the earthly life of Christ which Dunn and others, their Post-Enlightenment presuppositions firmly intact, seem to require of him.

In the same vein, Macquarrie is skeptical that Paul truly has preexistence in mind in Phil 2:6-11: in such passages "we are dealing with language that is metaphorical or even mythological" so that "God's metaphorical 'sending' of his metaphorical 'son' can be understood in ways that do not imply pre-existence [sic], once we accept that the language is metaphorical and not literal" (John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* [London: SCM Press, 1992], 56).

<sup>3</sup> Paul's Christological declaration in Phil 2:6-11 also clearly shows an established doctrine of Christ's preexistence, as Christ was "in the form of God" before "taking the form of a servant." The importance of Christ's incarnation for deepening our understanding of his preexistence will be explored further below.

<sup>4</sup> Simon J. Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998), 45.

self-evident; it is extremely difficult to deny Christ's deity if one affirms that he existed as the Son of God before the Incarnation. But the exegetical beams critical scholars have chosen to erect in support of their denial of Christ's preexistence are far too wobbly, and are liable to cause their project to come tumbling down.

While John and Paul are typically seen as proclaiming a preexistent Christ, the Synoptics are much less clear about the topic throughout their accounts of Christ's life. According to Moule, the “dimension of preexistence,” which he admits is in John, “is lacking in the Synoptic tradition.”<sup>6</sup> But this conclusion is not one reached only by critical scholars intent on diminishing the preexistence of Christ within those biblical books. Hurtado is clear that Luke presents a high Christology throughout Acts, but that there is an “absence of reference to Jesus’ ‘pre-existence’ or agency in the creation of the world” in the sequel to his Gospel.<sup>7</sup>

Contra Moule and Hurtado, this study seeks to analyze Peter’s use of the Christological epithet ἀρχηγὸν τῆς ζωῆς (“Author of life” Acts 3:15, ESV) in the middle of his sermon in Acts 3, to show that by using this title Peter (and by extension Luke) is asserting Christ’s ultimate sovereignty over all life. Though the most direct reference in Peter’s sermon is to the eternal life that Christ, by his resurrection, gives to all who call upon his name alone for salvation, the title “Author of life” has a double sense: Christ is the ἀρχηγὸς of both created life and eschatological life. Life in this world and the life of the world to come are both Christ’s domain.

After a brief analysis of Peter’s sermon in Acts 3, specific reference will be made to his use of the phrase ἀρχηγὸν τῆς ζωῆς in 3:15. The different possible interpretations of this phrase

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<sup>6</sup> C.F.D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 18. Dunn and Macquarrie, in the works cited above, also deny that the Synoptic authors have any whiff of a doctrine of Christ’s preexistence in their works.

<sup>7</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, “Christology in Acts: Jesus in Early Christian Belief and Practice,” in *Issues in Luke-Acts: Selected Essays*, edited by Sean A. Adams and Michael W. Pahl (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012), 237.

will be established and compared to Luke’s Gospel. The final section will seek to prove that the doctrine of the preexistence of the Son of God is not one that can be strictly cordoned off in John’s and Paul’s works. Acts 3:15 and Peter’s use of ἀρχηγὸν τῆς ζωῆς proves that Jesus Christ is the Creator, and thereby proves his preexistence as the Son of God “begotten of his Father before all worlds.”<sup>8</sup>

### Peter’s Sermon in Acts 3

In order to better appreciate and fully understand the title ascribed to Christ by Peter in Acts 3:15, something must be said about the context surrounding its use. Peter’s sermon, transcribed in Acts 3:11-26 comes on the heels of the Lord’s miraculous work in making whole the crippled man who would beg daily at the “Beautiful Gate.”<sup>9</sup> The aorist passive construction of ἐστερεώθησαν in 3:7 makes it clear that it is not Peter or John who “made strong” the man’s feet and ankles, but the Lord Jesus Christ. This is, of course, the point of Peter’s sermon which follows the man’s miraculous healing and the “wonder and amazement” of the crowd. Verse 12, which begins the actual sermon, sees Peter “answering the question implied by the crowd’s amazement and mistaken supposition regarding the cause of the [crippled man’s] cure.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it was not the apostles, but the covenant Lord who “glorified his servant Jesus,” and showed

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<sup>8</sup> The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom Volume 2: The Greek and Latin Creeds* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 58.

<sup>9</sup> Though it falls outside the purview of this paper, surely divorcing Peter’s sermon from its wider context of the healing of the crippled man misses many of the key points, or at least the general emphasis and impetus, of the sermon. Hamm’s article, though slightly dated, draws attention to the importance of keeping the accounts together, because “Peter’s address is not simply *occasioned* by the healing. Rather, the speech *interprets* the healing story (Dennis Hamm, “Acts 3:12-26: Peter’s Speech and the Healing of the Man Born Lame,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 11 (1984), 199, emphasis original).

<sup>10</sup> C.K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary On the Acts of the Apostles: Volume I* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 192.

Christ to be the true miracle worker. By invoking the covenant name and listing the patriarchs in the way he does here, Peter “takes us back behind the eschatological and messianic prophecies that were the basis of his Pentecost address, linking these with the foundational covenant promises of Scripture.”<sup>11</sup>

Peter shows to his mostly Jewish crowd that “the God of our fathers” sent Jesus to his people, but the crowd rejected and killed him. Instead of accepting the “Holy and Righteous One,” the crowd asked for a murderer to be released, and killed Christ.<sup>12</sup> This sermon is, by definition, a Gospel-centered sermon; Peter clearly, cogently, and quickly highlights the sinfulness of man, the grace and mercy of God in sending his Son to take the place of sinful man, the resurrection of Christ, a call for repentance, and explaining something of the hope that all who call on his name will have.

The emphasis on the “name” of Jesus grabs the reader’s attention; it is faith in Christ’s name that healed the man.<sup>13</sup> In Acts 3 and 4 the Greek word ὄνομα abounds, occurring “nine times, always with reference to the ὄνομα Ιησοῦ/ Κριστοῦ.”<sup>14</sup> It is significant “that this faith comes through Jesus” as it “probably alludes to events described in Luke’s Gospel, either to

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<sup>11</sup> David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 173. Truly, “it was precisely under this title that God was proclaimed by Jesus in his earthly ministry as ‘the God not of the dead but of the living’ (Luke 20:37-39)” (Hamm, “Acts 3:12-26,” 203).

<sup>12</sup> Christ is the Holy One because he “is worthy through his glorification to be in God’s very presence” (Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007], 170). That he is the Righteous One “points to a title that has roots in Isa. 53:11” which “was a messianic description in Judaism” (Bock, *Acts*, 170-71).

<sup>13</sup> Whether that faith is the man’s or Peter’s and John’s is up for debate. Peterson notes that “faith on the part of the apostles was a necessary factor in this healing,” but also suggests that the crippled man also responded in faith to Peter’s use of Christ’s name in v. 6, even if this was simply a “rudimentary faith” (Peterson, *Acts*, 177).

<sup>14</sup> Austin Busch, “Presence Deferred: The Name of Jesus and Self-Referential Eschatological Prophecy in Acts 3,” *BibInt* 17 (2009), 521.

Jesus's teaching the disciples faith through their experience with him or to the miraculous events of Jesus's ministry and/or exaltation as the basis of their faith.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Jesus Christ, “The Author of Life”**

In the midst of his Christ-exalting sermon, Peter tells his listeners that they “killed the Author of life,” Jesus Christ. What does it mean that Peter calls Christ the ἀρχηγὸν τῆς ζωῆς? The word ἀρχηγὸς is only used four times in the NT; here in Acts 3:15, once more in Acts, in another sermon from Peter in 5:31, and twice in Hebrews (2:10 and 12:2). Though it is not a messianic title when used in the LXX, every NT use applies to Christ. He is the “Author of life,” the “Leader and Savior” (Acts 5:31), the “founder of their salvation” (Heb 2:10), and the “founder and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:2).

According to BAG, ἀρχηγὸς can take the meaning of “leader, ruler, prince,” which is the gloss some English translations prefer here.<sup>16</sup> Another definition BAG gives, “originator, founder,” is a gloss they say could be possible at Acts 3:15.<sup>17</sup> Indeed Jesus is the one who “brings people to life,” and the idea that he is the originator of life is not foreign to Scripture’s assertions about his person and work.<sup>18</sup> Peter’s use of this Christological title serves as a contrast

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<sup>15</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 171.

<sup>16</sup> BAG, ἀρχηγὸς, 112. NASB, KJV, and KNJV all have “Prince of life.”

<sup>17</sup> BAG, ἀρχηγὸς, 112. This would match the meaning of the ESV and NIV (old and new), which have “Author of life.” The older Geneva and Tyndale translations have “Lord of life” for this phrase, and the nuance of that translation is seen here in this second definition.

<sup>18</sup> Silva, NIDNTTE, 418. John 1:3-4, Heb 1:2-3, and Col 1:16, for example, all show that Christ is the creator, the giver of life.

in his sermon. There is a marked difference between the murderer (Barabbas) and the giver of life: “Jesus not only leads to life; he is its source as a result of faith in him.”<sup>19</sup>

The theme of “life” is one to which Luke returns again and again throughout his writings. Bock helpfully highlights this theme in his biblical theological work on Luke and Acts. He writes therein that life in Luke is seen as a “key benefit of salvation.”<sup>20</sup> Bock draws our attention to Jesus’s teachings in Luke 10 and 18 to show that “the ultimate point of where the kingdom is designed to take people” is “into a genuine love relationship with God fueled by the faith and gratitude of experiencing God’s forgiveness with the response of a life that seeks to love God and one’s neighbor, meeting needs as one is able.”<sup>21</sup>

God is the “Lord and giver of Life,” and as such all of humanity depends on him for our very being, and those who call upon the name of Christ depend on God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) for that salvific life we receive because of Christ’s resurrection from the dead. Indeed, throughout Acts “life is viewed as the result of resurrection,”<sup>22</sup> but not that only; Paul tells the crowds gathered at the Areopagus that God “gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (Acts 17:25). So then, Jesus Christ gives eternal life to his particular people through his resurrection, but he also gives life to all people in general by nature of his being the eternal Creator.

Here in Acts 3:15 Peter’s use of ἀρχηγὸς, “has a double nuance, meaning either leader/pioneer or author/originator. In this passage either meaning could be applied. Christ is

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<sup>19</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 171.

<sup>20</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke’s Gospel and Acts: Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 269.

<sup>21</sup> Bock, *Theology of Luke’s Gospel and Acts*, 270.

<sup>22</sup> Bock, *Theology of Luke’s Gospel and Acts*, 271.

either the author, the originator and source of life, or he is the leader in the resurrection-life, the firstborn from the dead.”<sup>23</sup> Polhill is correct; either use of ἀρχηγὸς can be in view here. However, it is not necessary to draw a firm line in the sand between Christ’s role as giver of earthly life and eschatological life. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, is the author, leader, pioneer, prince, and originator of both; he breathes life into all people as Creator and sends his life-giving Spirit to breathe life into all God’s elect. Chrysostom’s insight into this phrase is a reminder that Christ truly is the author of life: “For the author of evil would be the one who gave birth to evil, the author of murder, the one who gave birth to murder, and likewise the author of life must be the one who has life from himself.”<sup>24</sup> Christ, being the eternal, preexistent, Son of God, has life in and from himself.

### **The Preexistent Son of God**

There exists, of course, a mutually beneficial and essential relationship between the exegesis of Scripture and the formulation of dogmatic assertions. Indeed, the relationship between exegetical analysis and systematic theology is symbiotic, where each is required for the proper use of the other. Without proper exegesis of Scripture, systematic theology would have nothing upon which to base its assertions about the study of “God the Holy Trinity and all other things relative to God,” which is its *telos*.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, without systematic theology, the exegetical insights gleaned from in-depth scriptural study would be nebulous, existing somewhere in the ether with nothing to tether them to the ground. Therefore, we cannot hope to fully understand a

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<sup>23</sup> John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 132.

<sup>24</sup> John Chrysostom, quoted in *New Testament V: Acts*, ed. Francis Martin, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 43.

<sup>25</sup> John B. Webster, “What Makes Theology Theological?” *Journal of Analytic Theology* 3 (2015), 17.

passage like Acts 3:15, and Peter's use of the phrase ἀρχηγὸν τῆς ζωῆς, without understanding the doctrine of Christ and how theologians through the centuries have articulated his person and work.<sup>26</sup>

A properly ordered Christology will inevitably rely heavily upon the exegetical insights of past theologians who sought to bring out the Bible's teaching on Christ. When seen in light of the faithful exegesis of the OT and NT, Christ's preexistence is inextricably linked to his incarnation, as the Son of God did not lose his Godhead, but rather took on human flesh, becoming one of us, "for us and for our salvation." To speak of Christ's incarnation is to tacitly assume a doctrine of preexistence, for, "the incarnation means that he who never began to be in his specific identity as the Son of God, *began* to be what he eternally was not."<sup>27</sup> Therefore, denying the preexistence of Christ is to do away with his deity altogether, and make Christ to be that which is counter to who he has revealed himself to be, both God and man, forever united in one person.

In Christ's incarnation we see that "the pre-existent [*sic*] Son of God assumes human nature and takes to Himself human flesh and blood, a miracle that passes our limited

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<sup>26</sup> Failure to properly account for theological concerns, and the warranted and necessary development that doctrine undergoes when contemplated by faithful Christians, leads to the conclusion of Dunn that "we must attempt the exceedingly difficult task of shutting out the voice of early Fathers, Councils and dogmaticians down the centuries" in order to fully understand the books of the NT as they, presumably, were intended to be understood (Dunn, *Christology*, 13).

Dunn's prioritization of exegesis over theology tips the balance of the scales, bringing his interpretations into serious question. And indeed, throughout his *Christology in the Making* one cannot help but wonder what marked improvement a stronger emphasis on Chalcedonian Christology would make on his work. Also, Dunn's "chronological snobbery," as C.S. Lewis put it, is on full display, as he implicitly (and at times explicitly!) sees himself as superior to those who came before simply because he is working from a later point in time.

<sup>27</sup> John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray Volume II: Select Lecture in Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2001), 132, emphasis original.

understanding. It clearly shows that the infinite can and does enter into finite relationship, and that the supernatural can in some way enter the historical life of the world.”<sup>28</sup>

Luke’s Gospel is not silent on the fact of Christ’s incarnation. From the very conception of Christ by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, Luke clearly proclaims the deity of Christ. Though a full picture of the incarnation of the Son of God is not present in the early chapters of Luke, the seeds of that doctrine are there. This is evident in Luke’s use of the title “Son of God” for Jesus of Nazareth, a variation of which is used twice in Luke 1. In verse 32 Christ is called the “Son of the Most High” and in verse 35 he is the “Son of God.” Though it is never a title Jesus applies to himself in Luke (with the possible exception of 22:70), throughout the Gospel many different people and groups call Jesus the Son of God. Luke’s use of the title is intricately linked to Christ’s kingly office, as it “implies that there is more here than an earthly king” such that

Luke has heightened Jewish conceptual use of being born of God by tying it to a virgin conception. Jesus is from God in a unique way. His kingship is not only the reflection of a covenant relationship with God; it is rooted in God’s direct act leading to incarnation. In this way, Luke is saying more than that Jesus is an earthly king, but the details are to be worked out in what Luke does in the rest of his narrative.<sup>29</sup>

The Nicene Creed ascribes to the Holy Spirit the title “Lord and giver of life.” The Spirit is the agent by which the Father makes sinners alive again in Christ Jesus, and thus the title does indeed faithfully describe his work. However, though this appellation is given to the Holy Spirit in the Nicene Creed, we must always remember the theological maxim, *opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*.<sup>30</sup> One cannot rip apart our undivided Triune God and attempt to divorce one person

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<sup>28</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 333.

<sup>29</sup> Bock, *Theology of Luke’s Gospel and Acts*, 152.

<sup>30</sup> “The *ad extra* (or external) works of the Trinity are undivided” (Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017], 246). Indeed, the works of the Father, Son, and Spirit, “are undivided in their operations, acting

of the Trinity from the works of the others. Though Scripture often ascribes a specific act to one person of the Trinity, clearly all three act together, and the attributes and properties of one person can (and often should) be applied to the other two. This holds true even when we see that the Spirit is “the Lord and Giver of Life;” the Father and Son are the same Lord and Giver of Life as the Spirit, as God’s external works are undivided. Therefore, Jesus Christ is truly the one who gives “life and breath and everything” to a sinful humanity which can do nothing on its own, whether that be physical life or eschatological, resurrection life.

Indeed, Christ’s preexistence is a fact about which the Bible is certainly not silent. Taking the whole of that doctrine into consideration, we can see its roots even in Acts 3:15 in the Christological title ἀρχηγὸν τῆς ζωῆς.

### Conclusion

Jesus Christ is the creator of all that is, he is the holy and righteous Son of God who was with the Father and the Holy Spirit from before the beginning of space and time. Indeed, Christ is the very “Author of life,” the one from whom and through whom all of creation has its being and existence. Contrary to the opinions of critical scholars skeptical of Christ’s divinity, and especially his preexistence, the books written by Luke assert the truth of this vital doctrine. In his sermon after the Lord heals the lame man, Peter tells the Jewish crowd gathered around him that Jesus Christ is the very ἀρχηγὸν τῆς ζωῆς, through whom all things were created.

Though it is unwise to hang an entire doctrine on a divine title used only once in a sermon in Acts, as has been shown Peter is not saying anything different from or contrary to the

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all by the same will, the same wisdom, the same power. Every person, therefore, is the author of every work of God, because each person is God, and the divine nature is the same undivided principle of all divine operations; and this ariseth from the unity of the persons in the same essence” (John Owen, *The Works of John Owen: Volume 3*, ed. William H. Goold [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965], 93).

witness of the rest of the NT. Therefore, we cannot say that Luke has no conception of Jesus's preexistence in his writings, but must affirm that he too, like Paul and John, sees Christ as the eternal Son of God. While Christ certainly gives new life to those who call upon his name because of his resurrection, he is also the Creator of life, who, along with the Father and Holy Spirit, breathed life into Adam and, as the "one who was, and who is, and who is to come" (Rev 1:8), gives life to all that was, all that is, and all that will be.