

CHAPTER ONE

The Identification of the Early Christian Confessions

That the early Christians used various confessions—including single-statement affirmations and more extended compositions—is suggested by references in the Pauline corpus to (1) “the traditions” that Paul conveyed to his converts (cf. 2 Thess 2:15), (2) the elemental truths about Jesus that Paul received and preached in concert with other early preachers (cf. 1 Cor 15:3, 11), (3) “the form of teaching” to which believers were committed (cf. Rom 6:17), and (4) “the good confession” made by Timothy (cf. 1 Tim 6:12). And that the early Christians cast some of these confessions into poetic form and sang them as hymns seems evident from the reference in 1 Cor 14:26 to the singing of hymns in corporate worship (“When you come together, everyone has a hymn”) and the exhortations of Col 3:16–17 and Eph 5:19–20 to include “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” in the community’s devotions. These poetic portions are to be directed in christocentric fashion (“in the name of the Lord Jesus” and “through him”) to God the Father.

Outside the Pauline corpus, the existence of such confessional materials is suggested by references in Hebrews to confessing Jesus (3:1), confessing the faith (4:14), and confessing one’s Christian hope (10:23), and perhaps also by references in Jude to “the faith” (v. 3) and “the most holy faith” (v. 20). More impor-

tant, however, are the early hymns and prayers within the NT that both reflect various Jewish nuances and express distinctively Christian ideas. The most obvious of these hymnic prayers or prayerful hymns are the canticles of Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon in the infancy narrative of Luke 1–2 and the songs of praise to God and the victorious Lamb in Revelation 4, 5, 7, and 15. These NT hymns are comparable to the hymns of praise directed to God alone in the Jewish Scriptures (cf. the Song of Moses in Exod 15:1–18, which is echoed in the Song of Miriam in Exod 18:21; the Song of Deborah in Judg 5:1–31; and the “hymns” of Psalms 8, 9, 29, 33, 65, 67, 68, 96, 98, 100, 103, 104, 105, 111, 113, 114, 117, 135, 136, 145–50) and in the writings of Second Temple Judaism (cf. *Judith* 16:1–17; *Sirach* 51:1–12; and the hymns found in the Qumran texts, esp. in 1QH, the so-called *Thanksgiving Hymns*).

Granted, not every rhythmic phrase, poetic expression, balanced statement, and stylistic use of language is formulaic or signals an early Christian confession. The Jewish Scriptures, from which the early Christians drew spiritual nourishment, are full of such literary features. Indeed, the writings of Second Temple Judaism and the Talmud show how common many biblical forms of speech and artistic turns of expression had become. And early Christians retained much of this language in their teaching, preaching, and writing.

Yet the early Christians also originated certain distinctive confessional materials, which are set out in formulaic fashion (the form) and highlight the central core of their deepest convictions as believers in Jesus (the content). Not everyone, it is true, agrees on the precise identification of such early Christian confessional portions. Neither is there agreement on their genre or their provenance. Almost all NT scholars, however, agree that the early Christians used confessional material in some form or fashion. Furthermore, most are convinced that we can identify at least some of this material within the NT.

Three types of early Christian confessional materials are commonly identified in the NT: (1) single-statement affirmations; (2) formulaic prose portions, which are often called *homologiai* (transliterating the Greek term for “confessions”); and (3) poetic portions, which are usually called hymns. But while these three

types can be arranged in this somewhat logical, literary order according to form (moving from simple affirmations to more complex literary structures), the history of their identification has proceeded in the reverse order: first hymns, then *homologiai*, and finally single-statement affirmations. This historical order will govern this chapter's treatment of the identification and nature of the confessional materials.

■ 1. HYMNS (Poetic Portions)

Scholars first became interested in early Christian hymns during the late nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century. Johannes Weiss, in an extended article published in 1897, drew attention to various rhetorical features of Paul's letters and identified some of the more prominent hymnic materials in these letters.¹ Eduard Norden in 1898 surveyed "artistic prose" features described in the ancient rhetorical handbooks (*Theorie*) and used in actual writings (*Praxis*) from the Greek classical period to the Renaissance.² He discussed the use of poetry and hymns by the ancient Greek, Roman, and humanist writers, but also, in an appendix, pointed to the presence of many of these same features in the NT.³ Eduard von der Goltz used a similar approach to study prayer among the earliest Christians;⁴ and Alfred Seeberg attempted to reconstruct the earliest Christian catechism, focusing on what he called the earliest *Glaubensformel*, or "formula of faith," found in the NT letters and the writings of the early Fathers.⁵ Both von der Goltz and Seeberg highlighted various formulaic prose and poetry portions in the NT that contained such features.

It was Norden, however, who contributed the most to the study of the literary features of early Christian prayers and hymns and was the first to formulate criteria for their identification and analysis. In *Die antike Kunstprosa* (1898) he set out basic principles for investigating the early Christian prayers and hymns found in the NT.⁶ In *Agnostos Theos* (1913) he elaborated further on these principles—adding principles for identifying early confessional materials—dealing principally with Rom 11:33–36, Col 1:15–20, 1 Tim 3:16b, 1 Cor 15:3b–5, and Matt

11:25–30.⁷ Thus, in what could be called a *pre-formgeschichtliche* study of the hymnic and confessional materials incorporated within the NT, Norden proposed the following criteria for their identification: (1) the presence of *parallelismus membrorum* (i.e., parallel structures), (2) the use of second- or third-person singular pronouns at the beginning of such portions, (3) the use of participial predications and relative clauses throughout these materials, and (4) an elevated, celebratory style.

Norden's work on early Christian hymns has, of course, undergone extensive refinement during the past century. Nevertheless, Norden's four criteria have served as the basis for all succeeding attempts to isolate and analyze hymnic materials within the NT. Representative of the various scholars who have taken over Norden's approach and adopted, in the main, his conclusions are the following, listed in chronological order:⁸

1921: Josef KROLL, *Die christliche Hymnodik bis zu Clemens von Alexandria*;
1926: Josef KROLL, "Die Hymnendichtung des frühen Christentums" *Antik* 2: 258–81; **1928:** Ernst LOHMEYER, *Kyrios Jesu: Eine Untersuchung zu Phil. 2,5–11*; **1941:** Ethelbert STAUFFER, *Die Theologie des Neuen Testaments*; **1942:** Günther BORNKAMM, "Das Bekenntnis im Hebräerbrief"; **1947:** Lucien CERFAUX, "Hymnes au Christ des lettres de Saint Paul"; **1950:** Ernst KÄSEMANN, "Kritische Analyse von Phil. 2.5–11"; **1951:** Günther BORNKAMM, "Der Lobpreis Gottes: Röm 11,33–36"; **1957:** James M. ROBINSON, "A Formal Analysis of Col 1:15–20" 76: 270–87; **1960:** Stanislas LYONNET, "L'hymne christologique de l'Épître aux Colossiens et la fête juive du Nouvel An" 48: 93–100; Ralph P. MARTIN, *An Early Christian Confession: Philippians II.5–11 in Recent Interpretation*; **1962:** Gottfried SCHILLE, *Frühchristliche Hymnen*; **1963:** Günther BORNKAMM, "Zum Verständnis des Christus-Hymnus Phil. 2,5–11"; **1964:** Günther BORNKAMM, "Lobpreis, Bekenntnis, und Opfer"; Dieter GEORGI, "Der vorpaulinische Hymnus Phil 2,6–11"; Ernst KÄSEMANN, "A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy"; James M. ROBINSON, "Die Hodayot-Formel in Gebet und Hymnus des Frühchristentums"; Georg STRECKER, "Redaktion und Tradition im Christushymnus Phil. 2,6–11"; **1965:** Reginald H. FULLER, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology*; Jack T. SANDERS, "Hymnic Elements in Ephesians 1–3"; J. SCHATTENMANN, *Studien zum neutestamentlichen Prosahymnus* **1967:** Reinhard DEICHGRÄBER, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus in der frühen Christenheit*; N. KEHL, *Der Christushymnus im Kolosserbrief*; Ralph P. MARTIN, *Carmen Christi: Philippians II.5–11*; **1968:** I. Howard MARSHALL, "The Christ Hymn in Philippians 2:5–11"; **1971:** Jack T. SANDERS, *The New Testament Christological Hymns: Their Historical Religious Background*; **1972:** Eduard LOHSE,

Die Einheit des Neuen Testaments, esp.; pp. 276–84; Klaus WENGST, *Christologische Formeln und Lieder des Urchristentums*; **1975**: Morna D. HOOKER, “Philippians 2:6–11”; **1976**: Otfried HOFIUS, *Der Christushymnus Philipper 2,6–11*; **1977**: Werner STENGER, *Der Christushymnus 1 Tim. 3:16: Eine strukturanalytische Untersuchung*; **1978**: Martin HENGEL, “Hymns and Christology”; **1979**: Witmar METZGER, *Der Christushymnus 1 Tim. 3.16*; **1982**: James H. CHARLESWORTH, “A Prolegomenon to a New Study of the Jewish Background of the Hymns and Prayers in the New Testament”; **1984**: William H. GLOER, “Homologies and Hymns in the New Testament”; Stanislav SEGERT, “Semitic Poetic Structures in the New Testament”; **1986**: James H. CHARLESWORTH, “Jewish Hymns, Odes, and Prayers (ca. 167 B.C.E.–35 C.E.)”; **1988**: Joseph A. FITZMYER, “The Aramaic Background of Philippians 2:6–11”; **1990**: Stephen E. FOWL, *The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul: An Analysis of the Function of the Hymnic Material in the Pauline Corpus*; **1992**: Ernest BEST, “The Use of Credal and Liturgical Material in Ephesians”; **1995**: Martin HENGEL, *Studies in Early Christology*; **1996**: Robert J. KARRIS, *A Symphony of New Testament Hymns*.

The length of this list—even though only a representative list—should alert the reader to the mass of scholarship from almost every theological quarter in support of Norden’s basic approach.

Not every NT scholar, of course, has viewed the quest for early Christian hymns within the NT with equal favor. Some have ignored them. A few have even denied their presence. Nonetheless, that such materials exist within the NT remains a firmly entrenched axiom of critical scholarship. And this fact is attested not only by the monographs and articles cited above but also by the many contemporary critical commentaries on the NT—beginning with Ernst Lohmeyer’s *Die Briefe an die Philipper, an die Kolosser, und an Philemon*⁹—that have attempted to deal seriously with these confessional materials.

Scholars have had their own variations and refinements in method. Nonetheless, despite some differences, there is widespread critical agreement on the legitimacy of the following criteria for the identification of early Christian hymns:

1. The presence of parallel structures (*parallelismus membrorum*) that reflect Jewish or Hellenistic poetic conventions;
2. The presence of words and phrases not used elsewhere in an author’s writings (*hapax legomena*), or not with the meaning or in the manner found in his other writings—

which suggests that the material in question was probably composed by someone else;

3. A preference for participles over finite verbs, suggesting an original oral provenance;
4. The frequent use of the relative pronoun ὅς (“who”) to begin passages;
5. Contextual dislocations: poetic material in a prose section or doctrinal material in an ethical section;
6. The continuance of a portion after its content has ceased to be relevant to its immediate context; and
7. The affirmation of a basic Christian conviction, usually concerning the work or person of Jesus Christ.

There has been somewhat less agreement as to which NT portions are to be identified as early Christian hymns. Some scholars have been quite inclusive; others, more restrictive. Reinhard Deichgräber, however, has fairly well established the major portions that have a high degree of probability of being hymns, whether praising God or extolling Christ.¹⁰ Though at some points I may differ as to whether a particular passage is a hymn or a *homologia*, I will, in the main, accept Deichgräber’s identifications.

Of the early Christian hymns in praise of God, the most obvious are Rom 11:33–36 and Rev 15:3b–4. With these words of adoration the hymn of Rom 11:33–36 concludes Paul’s discussion of God’s dealings with Israel:

Oh, the depth of the riches, the wisdom and the knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!
“Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his advisor [quoting Isa 40:13]?”
“Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay him [quoting Job 41:11]?”
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen.

The hymn of Rev 15:3b–4 is that of the victorious saints in heaven. Some interpreters have taken it to be christological, but more likely it should be read as praise directed to God:

Great and marvelous are your deeds,
 Lord God Almighty.
 Just and true are your ways,
 King of the ages.
 Who will not fear you, O Lord,
 and bring glory to your name?
 For you alone are holy.
 All nations will come and worship before you,
 for your righteous acts have been revealed.

Deichgräber also notes the presence of hymn fragments in 2 Cor 1:3–4, Eph 1:3–14, Col 1:12–14, and 1 Pet 1:3–5. Likewise, a number of hymnic portions may be scattered throughout the Johannine Apocalypse, though Deichgräber considers the presence of such materials in the Apocalypse too large and involved a subject for inclusion in his treatment.

Of the early Christian hymns extolling Christ, the most commonly accepted are Phil 2:6–11, 1 Tim 3:16b, and 1 Pet 2:22–23. Of these, the one that has seemed the most obvious to most biblical scholars is Phil 2:6–11:

Who, being in very nature God,
 did not consider equality with God something to be grasped.
 But he made himself nothing,
 taking the very nature of a servant,
 being made in human likeness.
 And being found in appearance in human form,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the extent of death
 —even death on a cross!
 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
 and gave him the name that is above every name.
 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father.

First Timothy 3:16b has also long been seen as an early Christian hymn in praise of Christ:

Who appeared in a body,
 was vindicated by the Spirit;
 was seen by angels,
 was preached among the nations;

was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.

And 1 Pet 2:22–23, with its double use of the relative pronoun ὅς (“who”) to begin each of its two parts, has been taken to be an early christological hymn:

“Who committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth [quoting Isa 53:9].”
Who when they hurled their insults at him,
did not retaliate;
when he suffered,
he made no threats [alluding to Isa 53:7].

The material in Col 1:15–20 is also considered an early christological hymn by most NT scholars. It could, however, just as well be seen as a *homologia*, or formulaic confessional portion, for its lyrical quality and strophic structure are not readily identifiable. This is how Heb 1:3, 4:12–13, and 5:7–9 should probably be understood as well—that is, as formulaic confessional materials that speak of Jesus “the Son,” and not as portions extracted from earlier hymns. And Deichgräber is probably right to note that various early christological hymn fragments are incorporated within the ascriptions of Eph 2:14–18 and Col 2:9–15.

■ 2. *HOMOLOGIAI* (Formulaic Prose Portions)

It has not always been easy for scholars to separate their form-critical studies of early Christian hymns from their form-critical studies of early Christian *homologiai*. There is a great deal of overlap between the two categories, and some scholars have tended to blend them. Yet there have been studies that have focused more on the *homologiai* than on the hymns, making use of the hymnic materials only when they contained confessional features that paralleled other confessional features found elsewhere.

Alfred Seeberg’s *Katechismus der Urchristenheit* (1903) was probably the first investigation to focus mainly on the confessional aspect of traditional materials in the NT. For while Seeberg was interested in several types of material used in the proclamation, worship, and instruction of the early church (including hymnic

material), he was principally concerned with distilling the *Glaubensformel* that underlay all of these forms—and which, he argued, served as the basic catechism for all of the NT writers. C. H. Dodd's *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (1936) also focused on confessional features. But Dodd was primarily concerned with isolating the primitive *kerygma* (“preaching”) from Paul's letters (esp. 1 Cor 15:3b–5) and from the sermons of Acts, and so he gave less attention to their form and provenance. Likewise, A. M. Hunter's *Paul and His Predecessors* (1940)¹¹ surveyed several kinds of early Christian traditional materials in the NT. Much of his discussion is relevant to the study of early Christian *homologiai*. But, like Dodd, Hunter had other interests than the analysis of the confessions themselves, for he mainly wanted to demonstrate that there existed numerous conceptual and theological links between Paul and his Christian predecessors.

Ethelbert Stauffer's *Die Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (1941)¹² is also important here. For in his study of the creeds of the early church he devoted attention to (1) the credal formulas in the NT (e.g., how they came about, how they appeared in the life of the early church, and how they were adopted) and (2) the christological formulas of the NT (their origin, content, and nature).

Closest to being a purely confessional investigation, however, and probably the most significant of all these studies, is Oscar Cullmann's *Les premières confessions de foi chrétiennes* (1943).¹³ Cullmann focused on an analysis of the confessional materials themselves, asking questions about their form, provenance, and content. In Cullmann's form-critical analysis, an important conclusion was his insistence on the diverse and complex circumstances that gave rise to these materials. In his content analysis, his most significant claims were (1) that a twofold acclamation of Christ as the divine Son of God and as exalted Lord underlies all of these portions and (2) that more primitive than even this twofold acclamation was the single confession κύριος Χριστός, “Christ is Lord.” Following along the lines of Cullmann's investigations, but correcting his unitary focus on the lordship of Christ, was Vernon H. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (1963).¹⁴ Much of Cullmann's argument, as corrected by Neufeld, has appeared in various recent commentaries and NT theologies.

New Testament scholars today tend to view early Christian hymns and early Christian *homologiai* as parallel, though somewhat distinguishable, phenomena—or, to use a biological metaphor, as different species within the same family, with similar characteristics but also a number of differing features. The distinction between hymns and *homologiai* was highlighted by Deichgräber, who took pains to show that the *homologia* of 1 Cor 15:3b–5 is formally different from the hymn of Phil 2:6–11.¹⁵ And that distinction has been carried on in most of the succeeding scholarly treatments—as witness, for example, the titles of two relatively recent writings on the subject: Klaus Wengst’s *Christologische Formeln und Lieder des Urchristentums* (1972) and William H. Gloer’s “Homologies and Hymns in the New Testament: Form, Content, and Criteria for Identification” (1984).¹⁶

Many of the form-critical criteria used to identify hymns in the NT are also used to identify early formulaic, but nonpoetic, confessional materials:

1. The presence of *parallelismus membrorum*, even though the material is not poetry;
2. The presence of *hapax legomena*;
3. A preference for participles over finite verbs; and
4. An affirmation regarding the work or person of Jesus Christ.

Added to this list have been such other linguistic indicators as

5. The noun ὁμολογία (“confession”) to signal the content of such early Christian material, either expressed or implied;
6. The verb ὁμολογέω (“confess”) with a double accusative or an infinitive to introduce a direct or an indirect quotation;
7. The word ὅτι (the *hoti recitativum*) to introduce a direct or an indirect quotation;
8. Verbs for preaching (εὐαγγελίζω, κηρύσσω, or καταγγέλλω), teaching (διδάσκω), or witnessing (μαρτυρέω or μαρτύρομαι) to introduce the confessional material; and

9. A participial construction or a relative clause to introduce the material in question.

The most obvious of these early *homologiai* is that found in 1 Cor 15:3b–5. For what Paul “delivers” or “passes on” (παρέδωκα) to his readers in these verses he explicitly says he “received” (παρέλαβον) and other Christian preachers before him have proclaimed (see vv. 3a and 11). Furthermore, the material is introduced by a fourfold use of the *hoti recitativum*, and the two crucial points of death and resurrection are highlighted by the repetition of the *hapax legomenon* expression “according to the Scriptures”:

[That] Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures;
 [that] he was buried;
 [that] he was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures;
 [that] he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve.

Colossians 1:15–20 also seems to be one of these *homologia* portions. The passage is set off by the use of the relative pronoun ὅς at the beginning of each of its two main sections (vv. 15 and 18b). Likewise, it is replete with *hapax legomena* (i.e., words or phrases not used elsewhere in an author’s writings, or not with the meanings or in the manner of his other writings)—such as the expressions “image” (εἰκῶν), “firstborn” (πρωτότοκος, used twice), “before all things” (πρὸ πάντων), “the head” (ἡ κεφαλή), “the beginning” (ἀρχή), and “the fullness” (τὸ πλήρωμα). Furthermore, it evidences a carefully constructed and balanced structure, or what is called *parallelismus membrorum*.

Yet this passage does not appear to be set out in poetic fashion; at least, scholars have found it extremely difficult to reconstruct its strophes. Probably, therefore, it should be viewed as a formulaic prose composition of the early church that proclaims (1) the supremacy of Christ’s person, both in the cosmos and in the church (vv. 15–18a), and (2) the supremacy of Christ’s work, both before God and in the religious experience of his people (vv. 18b–20). Perhaps, judging by the nuances that many of these *hapax legomena* carried in the ancient world, it should also be seen as having been formulated within, or in opposition to, some type

of ascetic-mystical piety or gnostic speculation that tended to deemphasize the importance of the person and work of Christ.

But whatever may be postulated as to the earliest provenance of Col 1:15–20, the passage was used christologically by early Christians and Paul to proclaim:

He [“Who”] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church.

He [“Who”] is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Likewise, the following portions in the letters of the NT have also often been seen as early Christian *homologiai*, whether in whole or in part:

Rom 1:3b–4, which sets out an elemental “two-stage” Christology:

The one born of the seed of David,
according to the flesh;
the one declared to be the Son of God with power,
according to his spirit [or “the Spirit”] of holiness,
by the resurrection of the dead.

Rom 3:24–26, which some argue starts at verse 25 and ends somewhere in verse 26, but probably should be seen to begin at verse 24 and to include all of verse 26:

[We are] being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood. He did this in order to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had let the sins committed beforehand go unpunished. He did this to demonstrate his justice at the present time. So as to be just and the one who justifies the person who depends on the faith/faithfulness of Jesus [or “who has faith in Jesus”].

Rom 4:25, which forms a fitting conclusion to the first four chapters of Paul's letter to the Romans, summarizing, in effect, the central affirmations of 3:21–31 with the repetition of a confessional formula in the form of an antithetical parallelism:

Who was delivered over to death for our sins,
and was raised to life for our justification.

1 Cor 1:17–18, 23; 2:2, which appear to incorporate various formulaic uses of the expressions “the cross of Christ” and “Christ crucified,” with three verbs referring to preaching used to introduce these expressions.

2 Cor 5:19a, which, in context, also appears to be a confessional portion introduced by a *hōti recitativum*. This confession is the linchpin, or central and cohesive feature, in Paul's exposition in verses 18–20 regarding God's initiative in reconciliation, Christ's work of reconciliation, and the Christian's status of being reconciled to God:

[That] God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself,
not counting people's sins against them.

Gal 1:4, which is set in juxtaposition to the mention of “the Lord Jesus Christ”:

The one who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.

Gal 3:13, which affirms one aspect of the work of Christ:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree [quoting Deut 21:23].”

Gal 3:26–28, which combines what appears to be an early Christian saying (v. 26) with an early Christian confessional portion (vv. 27–28):

You are all children [“sons”] of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Gal 4:4–5, which is seen by many to incorporate not only themes of eschatology, true humanity, relation to the law, obedience, and redemption, but also an early “sending formula” of the first Christians:

When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption as God’s children [or “the adoption”; “the full rights of sons”].

1 Thess 4:14a, which by its form, wording, and usage appears to be an early Christian confessional saying:

[That] Jesus died and rose again.

Heb 1:3, which serves to buttress the author’s central thesis of 1:1–2 and to set up all of his following discussion regarding the superiority of “the Son”:

He [“Who”] is the radiance [or “effulgence”] of God’s glory and the exact representation [or “imprint”] of his person, sustaining all things by his powerful word. And after he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Heb 5:7–9, which seems to be made up of two confessional portions (v. 7 and vv. 8–9) that speak of Christ’s earthly obedience:

Who in the days of his flesh offered up prayers and petitions with a loud cry and tears to the one who could save him from death [an allusion to Jesus’ Gethsemane prayer?], and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

All of these *homologia* portions will be discussed in chapters 2 and 3, which analyze their contents and study how they have been contextualized in the NT letters where they appear. Perhaps other portions should also be included, particularly expressions used within the lyrical and almost defiant affirmations of Rom 8:33–39. Possibly there are also echoes of confessional materials in Rom 14:9, 1 Thess 1:9–10, and Heb 4:12–13. Suffice it here to

say, however, that this study accepts all of the portions presented above as examples of early Christian confessional materials and that it will build on them in what follows.

■ 3. SINGLE-STATEMENT AFFIRMATIONS

In almost all of the studies of early Christian hymns and *homologiai*, various single-statement affirmations regarding Christ have been highlighted as well. Most often these single-statement affirmations ascribe titles to Jesus. Numerous books and articles, in fact, have been written on the titles of Jesus in the NT; some of these titles appear in the poetic and prose confessional portions, and others in separate traditional statements.

One of the earliest studies of a NT christological title was Wilhelm Bousset's *Kyrios Christos* (1913), which removed the title "Lord" from the consciousness of the earliest Jewish believers in Jesus and assigned it to the outlook of later hellenized Christians.¹⁷ But Ernst Lohmeyer's *Kyrios Jesus* (1928) and Ernst von Dobschütz's "Kurios Iesus" (1931) largely exploded Bousset's theory.¹⁸ Since then, many scholars have dealt with the single-statement confessional affirmations of the NT in a more constructive and positive fashion—for example, Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (ET 1964, which is an extensively revised version of his 1958 French original); Ferdinand Hahn, *Christologische Hoheitstitel: Ihre Geschichte im frühen Christentum* (1963; ET = *The Titles of Jesus in Christology: Their History in Early Christianity*, 1969); Werner Kramer, *Christos, Kyrios, Gottessohn* (1963; ET = *Christ, Lord, Son of God*, 1966); R. H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (1965); and Richard N. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (1970). The most definitive of such christological studies undoubtedly are those of Oscar Cullmann (see particularly *Les premières confessions de foi chrétiennes* [1943, ET 1949] and *Die Christologie des Neuen Testaments* [1957, ET 1959]) and Martin Hengel (see particularly *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity* [1983] and *Studies in Early Christology* [1995]).¹⁹

Criteria for identifying single-statement confessional affirmations in the NT are much the same as those for identifying

homologiai and hymns—obviously excluding, however, criteria relating principally to extended prose or poetry portions (e.g., *parallelismus membrorum* and a preference for participles over finite verbs). Certain linguistic features commonly appear in the introductions to quoted confessional materials, such as the use of

1. the verb ὁμολογέω (“confess”);
2. other verbs of a kerygmatic, didactic, or confessional nature;
3. the *hoti recitativum*, a double accusative, or an infinitive (often in combination); and
4. a participial construction or relative clause.

Furthermore, single-statement confessional affirmations speak in a distinctive manner about the work or person of Christ. Chief among them are those ascribing to Jesus the titles “Christ,” “Son of God,” or “Lord.”

Passages where the title “Christ” appears in a confessional manner include the following:

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| Mark 8:29b, par. | Peter’s confession: “You are the Christ”; |
| John 1:15–27 | John the Baptist’s statements in “testifying about” and “confessing” Jesus that include, by implication, nuances about him being the Christ; |
| John 1:41 | Andrew’s words to his brother Simon: We have found the Messiah (that is, the Christ)”; |
| John 7:41 | Some of the people said of Jesus, “He is the Christ”; |
| John 9:22b | “The Jews had decided that anyone who confessed him [Jesus] to be the Christ would be put out of the synagogue”; |
| John 11:27 | Martha’s response: “Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world”; |
| John 20:31 | “These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name”; |

- Acts 9:22 “Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ”;
- Acts 17:3b Paul’s preaching in the synagogue at Thessalonica culminated in the proclamation: “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ”;
- 1 John 2:22a “Who is the liar? It is the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ”;
- 1 John 5:1a “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.”

Passages that call Jesus “Son of God” in a confessional manner include the following:

- Mark 15:39 The centurion’s affirmation: “Surely this man was the Son of God”—with Mark (also Matt 27:54) highlighting this statement as being the proper confession, whatever the centurion himself might have meant;
- Matt 16:16 Peter’s confession (*à la* Matthew): “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”;
- John 1:34 John the Baptist’s testimony: “I have seen and testify that this is the Son of God”;
- John 1:49 Nathanael’s declaration: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel”;
- John 11:27 Martha’s response: “Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world”;
- John 20:31 The evangelist’s statement: “These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name”;
- Acts 9:20 Paul preached in the synagogues of Damascus “that Jesus is the Son of God” (as well as “that Jesus is the Christ,” as in v. 22);

- 1 John 4:15 “If any confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they live in God”;
- 1 John 5:5 “Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.”

Passages where the confessional title “Lord” is used of Jesus include the following:

- Rom 10:9 “That if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord [the *hoti recitativum* is included in B, et al.] and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved”;
- 1 Cor 12:3 “No one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says ‘Jesus be cursed,’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit”;
- 2 Cor 4:5 “We do not preach ourselves, but ‘Jesus Christ is Lord,’ and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake”;
- Phil 2:11 “and every tongue confess that ‘Jesus Christ is Lord,’ to the glory of God the Father”;
- Col 2:6 “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him.”

Titular ascriptions and single-statement confessions can also be found in the confessional prose materials noted earlier, which speak about the work or person of Christ. Chief among these portions, though hardly an inclusive list, are Rom 1:3–4; 3:24–26; 1 Cor 1:17–18, 23; 2:2; 15:3–5; Gal 1:4; 3:13, 26, 27–28; 4:4–5; 1 Thess 4:14, and Heb 5:7, 8–9.

■ 4. QUESTIONS OF GENRE AND PROVENANCE

While hymns, *homologiai*, and single-statement affirmations are today generally treated separately in the study of early

Christian formulaic materials, questions still persist about exactly what to call these various portions, either individually or collectively. What type of material or literary genre do they represent? Furthermore, questions remain about what branch, stratum, outlook, or situation of early Christianity these portions stem from, either individually or collectively. What place of origin and ideological background (provenance) do they reflect?

Genre

Scholars have often used such terms as “creed,” “formula of faith,” “kerygma,” “paradosis” (i.e., “tradition”), “hymn,” “prayer,” “confession,” “liturgical formulation,” “ecclesial tradition,” “narrative portion,” “story,” and/or “saying” when trying to establish a nomenclature for this material. But as Ethelbert Stauffer long ago observed, “Many confessions were hymn-like and many hymns were creed-like.”²⁰ All of these proposed genre classifications seem to overlap.

It is more appropriate, we believe, to give priority to content and classify all these materials under the generic rubric “early Christian confessions”—that is, to speak of them as formulaic statements that express the essential convictions of the earliest believers in Jesus. The noun *ὁμολογία* was used by Greeks in the classical and Koine periods to mean (1) “agreement” or “acknowledgment” in matters of law, (2) “concession” or “admission” of guilt, and (3) “conformity” to nature. In the LXX, however, the word often took on a distinctly religious sense: (1) “praise” or “thanksgiving” to God or (2) “confession” or “admission” of sin before God. The NT writers, picking up on this religious use, always employed the noun *ὁμολογία* to mean a formulaic statement of Christian conviction (cf. 2 Cor 9:13; 1 Tim 6:12, 13; Heb 3:1; 4:14; 10:23). And while the verb *ὁμολογέω* was used, at times, to mean “to confess” guilt or sin (cf. Acts 24:14; 1 John 1:9), it usually connotes “to confess” something about Jesus or something about one’s relationship with Jesus (cf. Matt 10:32 // Luke 12:8; John 9:22; 12:42 [also see 1:20]; Rom 10:9; Phil 2:11 [with the preposition *ἐκ*]; 1 John 2:22–23; 4:2, 3, 15; 2 John 7).

Provenance

A great deal of effort has been directed toward discovering the historical, ideological, and theological matrix (the *Sitz im Leben*) of each of these individual formulaic expressions. Some scholars have focused attention principally on form, believing it to be the best indicator of provenance, and so have set out to determine whether the various affirmations, *homologiai*, and hymns are Jewish or Greek in form, and thus Jewish or Greek in outlook. For example, Jack Sanders finds Hebrew poetry in the hymns of the NT and concludes that all these hymns had their origin in a myth of cosmic reconciliation that Christians took over from the wisdom writings of Second Temple Judaism.²¹ Others object to drawing conclusions primarily from form, preferring rather to focus on vocabulary and content. Klaus Wengst, for example, working on the bases of vocabulary and content, assigns the origin of each formulaic confession and hymn to an Aramaic-speaking Jewish church, a Greek-speaking Jewish church, or a Greek-speaking Gentile church.²²

Today, however, many scholars doubt that we can fit the various early Christian formulaic materials into specific historical, ideological, and theological matrices. Form-critical studies have successfully identified many of these materials and directed us back to a time before our NT writings were composed. But form criticism's promise has exceeded its performance in determining provenance. Thus Deichgräber, whose work is probably the best form-critical treatment of the NT hymns to date, argues that there is virtually no evidence for assigning these poetic portions a *Sitz im Leben* any more specific than simply the worship of the early church²³— which is the conclusion that Stauffer and Cullmann came to as well.²⁴

James Charlesworth essentially agrees, for while highlighting the Jewish features of the NT hymns and prayers, he concludes:

Obviously, scholars are presently far from a consensus on many key issues. We do not know the exact length of most of the hymns quoted in the New Testament, whether they are complete or fragmentary, or whether they originate with the author, his community, or with an earlier anonymous Jew or Christian. We are

convinced that many—if not most—of the hymns and prayers have been expanded or interpolated, but the extent of such editorial activity is not clear. We have no refined sieve with which to isolate and remove a quoted hymn. Most importantly . . . we have no clear-cut paradigm or set of categories with which to judge if it is originally Jewish or Jewish Christian.²⁵

Hengel is probably right to surmise that christological thought developed more in the early church between 30 and 50 CE than between 50 and 700 CE, although that latter period encompasses all seven great ecclesiastical councils.²⁶ As to the exact provenance of the confessional materials that came to expression in that earlier time, however, the only truly scholarly stance is one of agnosticism. All that can be said historically is that probably most of the confessional materials identified above were formed earlier than Paul's major missionary letters, which are the earliest writings in the NT. And all that can be said religiously is that these early confessions evidently came about through the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the earliest Christians meditated on the work and person of Jesus of Nazareth and as they attempted to express their new faith in their particular circumstances of worship, instruction, and witness.

Endnotes

■ INTRODUCTION

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4. Cf. Theological Education Fund, *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund, 1970–77* (Bromley, England: New Life, 1972), 29.

5. Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), 1.

6. Cf. J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 11–19, *passim*.

■ CHAPTER 1

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7. Eduard Norden, *Agnostos Theos: Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte religiöser Rede* (Leipzig: Tuebner, 1913; repr., Leipzig: Teubner, 1956), 240–308.
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