

THE FORM OF GOD

Philippians 2:5-11

William M. Wachtel

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11 NASB)

In Philippians 2:6, Paul writes that Christ Jesus was "in the form of God," as many English versions render the Greek expression *en morphe theou*. This phrase has given rise to the claim that Jesus is "very God of very God," as declared in the Nicene Creed, the ancient and first official formulation of the Trinitarian faith. According to this faith, Christ is "co-equal, co-eternal, and consubstantial" with the Father, and is the "second person" of the trinity. This means that Jesus is really and truly God in every sense, apart from his being also man born of woman. All of this is declared to be a "mystery" which must be accepted by faith, under pain of excommunication or--in past centuries--death.

The investigator who has already been convinced by Jesus' words in John 17:3 that the Father is "the only true God" and by his testimony to the Samaritan woman that the Jews were correct in their doctrine of God (John 4:21,22)--a doctrine which left no room for anything but the absolute oneness of God--is puzzled by this insistence on viewing God as "three persons." One becomes further alarmed at such a requirement when reading John's criteria for a saving faith: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these 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" (20:30,31). Nothing here about the necessity of believing that Jesus is in fact God, the Eternal One. No hint here of the Trinitarian title, "God the Son." It is all a straightforward requirement to believe Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One, the promised Messiah of Israel, and that he is truly God's own Son.

In light of such facts, one must seriously ask what Paul meant, in saying that Jesus was "in the form of God." First of all, we note that he is talking about "Christ Jesus," the historical figure who had been born and later had been "anointed" by the Holy Spirit at his baptism, so becoming "the Christ" or "Anointed One" (Acts 10:38). Trinitarianism assumes that Paul is talking about what Jesus was *before* his "incarnation"--that is, during his supposed pre-existence as God in heaven before he was born. Paul gives no hint here, however, as he specifies the historical person Christ Jesus, that he has any such notion in mind. This interpretation can only be in the minds of those who have already decided that Jesus pre-existed as a person, either as a divine member of the Trinity, or as an angelic being--the Arian view.

No, the one who was "in the form of God" is the Man called "Christ Jesus," and Paul is describing what was true of that Man while he was on the earth! But what does Paul mean by this phrase? Trinitarian commentators often interpret the Greek word *morphe* in light of some of its usage in classical Greek literature, that is, from the period five or six centuries earlier. That usage could imply "what is essential and permanent." But the New Testament is not written in "classical Greek," but rather in what is called Koine Greek, the popular language of Paul's day. From many Koine manuscripts discovered by archaeologists and dating from the first century, we know that some terms had acquired new meanings. One of those terms was *morphe*, usually translated "form." From Professor of Greek at Moody Bible Institute, Kenneth S. Wuest, himself a Trinitarian, we learn that in Koine Greek the word *morphe* had come to refer to "a station in life, a position one holds, one's rank. And that is an approximation of *morphe* in this context [Philippians 2]" (*The Practical Use of the Greek New Testament*, p. 84).

How can we be sure that *morphe* in Philippians 2:6 means "station in life [status], rank, position," and not "inherent nature," as some translators or commentators would interpret the Greek word (see NIV on Philippians 2:6, for example)? Here we appeal to the immediate context to help us understand how Paul is using the word. In verse 7 he says that Christ took the "form," the *morphe*, of a servant--literally, of a slave. What does this mean? Does *morphe* suggest that a servant has some kind of "inherent nature" that would constitute him a slave, or does it not rather imply that servanthood is, *per se*, a matter of "status, rank, or position"? One's position as a servant is either a matter of choice or a matter of circumstances. We cannot see, therefore, that the context supports any other meaning for *morphe* than that which deals with one's rank or status. Christ's status as God is contrasted with His status as a servant. To translate or to understand *morphe* as "inherent nature" in Philippians 2, then, clearly does not fit the way it is used in this context.

What does all of this imply? It suggests that Christ as a Man on earth was functioning in the status, rank, or position of God. Amazing thought! But there had been a famous historical precedent for this. When God called Moses to be his agent to bring Israel out of Egypt, he told him, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet" (Exo. 7:1). The Hebrew text is even more startling, because the word "like" is not there at all. Rather, God declares to Moses, "I have given you [to be] Elohim to Pharaoh." Earlier, God had said that Moses would be "Elohim" to Aaron (4:16). This means that Moses functioned in some ways as though he were God on earth; he was the appointed leader to act for God and as possessing the authority God had conferred on him by designating him to bear Yahweh's own title, Elohim! This is similar to the character or role of an ambassador or other diplomat who has received "plenipotentiary" authority to act on behalf of the government he represents, and whose decisions and transactions are regarded as equal or identical to those of the sovereign state which has sent him.

We may ask, then, how did Jesus function in the status of God during his earthly ministry? Do the four Gospels portray his activities in such a way as to suggest that he was doing what the Father himself would have been doing, had God been present visibly and personally to carry out the ministry that his Son in fact fulfilled? Does the record show that on earth Christ was exercising prerogatives that really belong to God himself?

We do not have to go far to find the answer to these questions. Very early in Christ's ministry the question arose, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2:7). Jesus had just said to a paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven." The teachers of the law who heard him say these words accused him of blasphemy. Jesus replied, "Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'?" Then he added the crucial words, "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . ." (2:10). The scribes were correct in understanding that the ultimate authority to forgive men's sins rests with God. But they needed to understand even further that God had delegated his Son with that authority to act in God's stead and in his name! In this act of forgiveness, then, Christ was functioning in the *morphe*--the status--of God, who had sent him.

Further evidence of Jesus' status as God on earth is seen in John 5:21: "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it." The power to resurrect the dead is in the Father's hands, and he manifested that power gloriously when he raised his Son from death to immortality (Acts 17:30,31; Rom. 6:9; 8:11). But while Christ was on the earth, he himself raised several from death--the most famous case being that of his friend Lazarus. So shocking was this to Christ's enemies that they plotted to kill the risen Lazarus as well as the One who had raised him! (John 12:9-11) Again, Christ was acting in God's stead when he raised the dead and showed himself to be in the *morphe* of God. He will fulfill this role again someday, "for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out." The voice they will hear, to awaken them, is "the voice of the Son of God" (John 5:25-29).

A third evidence of Christ's status as God is revealed in John 5:22, 23: "Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him." Paul told the Athenians that someday God would judge the world with justice "by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31). God is the Judge of the universe, one who is both just in his judicial sentences and yet able to be the "justifier of him who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). But again, Paul reveals that "God will judge men's secrets *through Jesus Christ*" (Rom. 2:16). Such texts provide evidence that the White Throne Judgment described in Revelation 20:11ff. will be presided over by Christ, who will be seated on the throne of judgment. [The Greek text does not have "God" in verse 12, but "the throne"--contrary to the reading in KJV.]

Equality with God

Christ "did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped." In what sense was Christ "equal" with God? We have already seen that Paul is saying that while on earth Jesus was "in the status of God." We have also considered what were clearly some of the implications of this divine status: his authority to forgive sin, to raise the dead, and to judge mankind. To this may be added his command of the elements, to make even the winds and the sea obey him. (Matt. 8:23-27) This status made it possible for Paul to declare him "equal with God" in the sense that such equality was a matter of *delegated authority* from God Himself. Equality, be it noted, is not the same as *identity*. Paul is not saying that Christ was identical with God. That would be to provide evidence for either Trinitarianism or modalistic monarchianism (also called Sabellianism--the doctrine that God is simply one person or one being, but one who may be viewed as Father *or* Son *or*

Holy Spirit). A helpful illustration of the difference between equality and identity may be found in the fact that under the U.S. Constitution, the vice-president becomes equal to the president when the latter becomes incapacitated. The vice-president is then authorized to fulfill all the duties and responsibilities of the presidency. In this capacity he is equal to the president, but not identical with him.

The Greek text of Philippians 2:6 shows that Christ recognized his equality with God but that he did not consider this God-given equality a *harpagmos*. KJV translates this word as "robbery." The word can imply something that is snatched or taken by force. The Arndt-Gingrich lexicon says it can also mean a "prize" or a "windfall" in Koine usage. If Paul is using it in the latter sense, he implies that Christ did not have any kind of presumptuous attitude as he viewed his equality with God, nor did he seek to take advantage of it, or exploit it, for his own purposes. Rather, he took the status of a slave, seeking only to serve his God and the human race that he had come to save.

He Emptied Himself

The verb "empty" is the Greek *kenoo*, from which some Trinitarians have developed a doctrine called the "kenosis theory." According to this doctrine, the "pre-existent Christ" divested himself of the manifestation of some of his attributes of deity in order to become man. Without going into the various aspects of this theory and the disagreements even among those who profess it, we may say that all of them use the term "kenosis" to support the idea of Christ's personal preexistence. KJV ignores such ideas by translating that he "made himself of no reputation," an obvious reference to the period of his human lifetime and ministry. We have already seen that Paul is talking about the historical man Christ Jesus, not about a person who was later *to become* Christ Jesus! It is therefore this historical person who "emptied" himself. In such a setting, the word suggests that Christ put away any temptation for self-aggrandizement or to exalt himself in any way. The queen of Sheba was "emptied" of her pride when she saw the magnificence of Solomon's court. There was "no more spirit in her"! (1 Kings 10:1-13) Likewise, Christ's "self-emptying" left within him no room for pride, arrogance, or any plans being made without total subjection to the will of God. (Heb. 10:7-10; Psa. 40:7-9)

Christ's "self-emptying" may be seen as part and parcel of his having taken the status of a servant and of his having come into existence in human likeness. "Having taken" is from the aorist participle *labon*, and "having come into existence" from the aorist participle *genomenos*. Such aorist participles often denote a time *prior to* the action of the main verb. This would support the view that his "self-emptying" (the main verb) occurred after he was born, not before. "Kenosis theories," therefore, can be considered simply philosophical speculations that can have no basis in the present text. As such, they would be an example of "eisegesis" (reading into the text), not exegesis.

In Appearance as a Man

Moulton and Milligan's lexicon sees the word *schema*, here translated "appearance," as implying "external bearing" or "fashion." One is tempted to translate that Christ was found to be "in the human scheme of things" or "in the human condition." He was totally human, apart from sin. He looked to be what he was--a man. Such descriptions, being inspired of God, forbid any kind of Gnostic or Docetist teaching that Christ only "appeared" to be a flesh-and-blood human being while being in fact "purely spirit." In their view anything material was, *ipso facto*, evil. So Christ could not have a material body. He only "appeared" to have one, said the Docetists. Pastor C. T. Russell

used a similar kind of "sleight of hand" when he taught that Jesus had no physical body after his resurrection. He simply "materialized" a temporary body to show to his disciples--a teaching still propagated by those called Jehovah's Witnesses as well as by others from the Russellite tradition.

He Humbled Himself

Paul now goes on to declare how far Christ went in subjecting himself to his Father, who had placed him in the status of God to carry out his earthly ministry and had delegated him to exercise equality with God according to that status. "He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death." God's plan, as foretold by Isaiah, was to lay upon his Son "the iniquity of us all" (53:6), to crush him and to cause him to suffer, and to make his life a guilt-offering (v.10). Peter says that Jesus was delivered unto death by God's "predetermined plan and foreknowledge" (Acts 2:23). And yet Jesus willingly submitted himself to this plan, in loving obedience to his Father. "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life--only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (John 10:17,18). Any doctrine of the atonement must take into account this judicial infliction of death upon Christ by his Father, so that God the Judge could also act justly in being the "justifier" of those who belong to Christ. (Rom. 3:26 KJV)

Christ's willing obedience "to the point of death" is made even more amazing by the fact that his death was carried out by one of the most painful and humiliating methods available--that of crucifixion! Paul stresses this shocking truth by using the word "even." Of all the ways that one might die, death on a cross is the most horrible he can imagine--and at the same time the kind that most reveals Christ's total submission to the will of God! As a Roman citizen, Paul realized that the government reserved death by crucifixion for the worst criminals, or else for the persons she most despised--the ones she viewed as avowed enemies of her authority to rule the world.

God Highly Exalted Him

From this lowest point of humiliation Christ was elevated to the highest pinnacle of authority in the universe, excepting that of God himself. Jesus as Lord is exalted "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come" (Eph. 1:21 NASB). His present position is such that all God's angels must worship him as being "much superior to *them*"; he has inherited a name superior to *theirs* (Heb. 1:4-6). This name is "the name above every name." One could say that God has given to his Son his own name, just as human fathers do in naming sons after themselves. Certainly God's name *Yahweh* (or, *Jehovah*) is applied to Messiah in such prophecies as Jeremiah 23:6--"This is his name by which he will be called, the LORD our righteousness [literally, *Yahweh-tzidkenu*]." Zechariah 14:3, 4 speaks of the day when "the feet of Yahweh" will stand on the Mount of Olives when he fights against the nations making war on Jerusalem. It appears that this refers to Christ himself, coming in his Father's name, to "strike down the nations" and to "tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty" (Rev. 19:15). It is God's exalted Son, despised and rejected of men, who will appear once more on earth to be glorified in the same place where he was humiliated! In the presence of Jesus, King of kings and Lord of lords, every knee must bow--whether angelic, demonic, or human. Every tongue must then confess that Messiah Jesus is lord of all, by the express command of God and to the glory of God, the Father who so exalted his Son!