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The Christology of Philippians 2, 5-11

GEORGE REULE, Hillsboro, Oregon

WHEN JESUS ENTERED JERUSALEM on Palm Sunday "all the city was moved, saying, Who is this?" That question has continued to haunt the minds of men down through the centuries; it is the question behind the quest for the historical Jesus in our day. That quest, started by Hermann Reimarus and continued by Strauss and Renan, reached its climax at the beginning of our century in the monumental work of Albert Schweitzer. After reviewing the centuries of research on this subject, Schweitzer concluded:

There is nothing more negative than the result of the critical study of the Life of Jesus. The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the Kingdom of God, who founded the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth, and died to give His work its final consecration, never had any existence." . . .

Schweitzer based his conclusion on the fact that there were so many contradictions in the Gospel life and personality of Christ, such as the unbridgeable gulf between Jesus at Jacob's well, hungry and thirsty, and the Christ who fed the thousands with miracle bread, that it is impossible to accept both as historically valid. This failure to reconcile the helpless infant wrapped in swaddling clothes with the Everlasting Father,—to reconcile the lowly Carpenter with the Lord of Glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, is born of the failure to grasp the true dimensions of the humiliation of Christ as it is presented in Philippians 2, 5-8.

This section is commonly known as the KENOSIS of Jesus. It is also referred to as a "Crux Interpretum," and not without reason. Before launching into an exposition of the text, however, it is well to consider the context that prompted it. The Philippian congregation was Paul's pride and joy. But, unhappily, these saints were still sinners, and their particular area of weakness, so common in every congregation still, was strife, vainglory and self-centeredness. This is what Paul wanted to put across to them as he proceeded to call upon them to look at themselves in the mirror of Christ's humility and self-abasement. He tells them, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God; But made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; And being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

To grasp the sense of this passage we shall have to establish the meaning of each word in its grammatical as well as in its historical context. To do this we must carefully study lexicon and grammar. Verse 5 reads: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." The key word in this verse is *phroneite*, 2nd person plural present of *phroneo*, which means: "Think, form or hold opinion,

judge." "As a man thinketh in his heart so is he." The Philippians were thinking only of themselves. And so, Paul exhorts them to think continually (present tense) as Jesus thought, who never thought of Himself, but only of others. "He pleased not Himself" (Rom. 15, 3), says Paul. In the succeeding verses he proceeds to illustrate that fact. In verse 6 he says: "Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God." This verse is the "Gordian Knot" of this entire section. Every word is important, particularly the noun *morphe*. What exactly does this word mean? The lexicon definition is simple enough. Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich, Thayer, Schirlitz-Eger, Wescott & Hort agree that it means, "form, outward appearance, shape." But these definitions do not suit the context. What does it mean to say that Christ was in the form of God, or to say that He had the outward appearance of God, or to say that He was in the shape of God? This difficulty becomes doubly compounded when one reads on and learns that Jesus emptied Himself of this *morphe* and took on the *morphe* of a slave. Of what did Jesus empty Himself by emptying Himself of divine form, or outward appearance, or shape? And what did He actually assume if He took upon Him the form, the outward appearance, or the shape of a slave? The difficulty posed here is reflected in the various translations of the passage. The KJV and the RSV translate *morphe* as "form." Phillips equates it with "nature," and so does the NEB and the TEV. Luther gives it as "Gestalt," which is equivalent to the English word "form." Of all the renditions, however, there are none quite so impossible as the translations that define *morphe* as "nature." To say that Jesus emptied Himself of His divine nature is to rob Jesus of His deity and reduce Him to the mere level of man. Nor does it make much sense to say that he took on the nature of a slave. In what way is the nature of a slave intrinsically different from that of any other man? The slave has the same body and soul, appetites and aspirations, fears and frustrations that his master has. What, then, does *morphe* mean in the context of this chapter as well as in the larger context of the life of Christ? What is this *morphe* that can be used of God and used of a slave as well? I would suggest that *morphe* in this connection is best expressed in contemporary English by the word, "status." Jesus had divine status from eternity by being equal with God. The absence of the definite article here shows that *theos* means Divine Being, or Essence. The apostle means to say that Jesus always enjoyed complete equality with the Father and the Holy Ghost. That was His status from everlasting. And it was of this status that He emptied Himself to take upon Him the status of a slave.

Now we must continue with the next word in verse 6, which is *hyparchon*, the participle form of *hyparcho*, which means: "exist, be present, be at one's disposal." The KJV translates this word as "being in the form of God"; RSV has: "He was" in the form of God; Phillips: "He has always been"; NEB: "The Divine Nature was His from the first"; TEV: "He always had the nature of God." All of these translations are substantially correct inasmuch as the Greek word does mean "exist," while the grammatical form of it indicates

that this existence has been continuous from eternity and will ever continue to be so. That, by the way, also implies that Jesus did not empty Himself of His Divine Nature in His incarnation, but continued to exist in His Divine Essence as He had always done.

The next word is more difficult. *Harpagmon* is quite rare in secular Greek and not found at all in the O. T. translation, according to Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich. The first meaning of the word is "robbery," (which is next to impossible in Phil. 2, 6: the state of being equal with God cannot be equated with the act of robbery), says Arndt. Another meaning of the word is "prize, booty, a piece of good fortune, a windfall." It would appear that "prize" is the one best suited to the thought of the text, not in the sense of an award, but in the sense of a treasure that is retained at all costs, a prized possession. What the apostle means to say is that Jesus did not selfishly regard His Divine status as something to be retained at all costs.

In verses 7 and 8 the apostle proceeds to delineate that life of self-abnegation in the words: "But made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." What the KJV translates as "made Himself of no reputation" and the NEB renders as made Himself nothing," is *ekenosen* in the Greek. That's the aorist of *kenoo*, which means: "Make empty, to empty." The grammatical form in this instance implies that the emptying was complete. There was nothing left. We must take this word seriously, and realize that this cannot refer to His Divine Nature, His Divine Essence, or His Divine Equality. Here again it is quite obvious that it was His Divine status of wisdom, power and glory of which He emptied Himself. The pronoun *heauton*, Himself, stands in an emphatic position, underlining the fact that He emptied Himself of His Divine status only as far as it *concerned Himself*, not as far as it concerned others. This is also clearly demonstrated in the Gospel history of His life. While He employed His omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence freely in behalf of others, He never employed these advantages of His Divine status *in His own behalf*. That explains the apparent contradiction in His life and what some theologians are pleased to call His ignorance. That explains why Jesus did not know that there were no figs on that tree by the roadside, and yet was able to destroy that tree with a word. In the one case He was acting for Himself in search of food to appease His hunger. In the other case He was giving His disciples an object lesson on the destiny of a fruitless tree in the spiritual life of Israel.

That also explains His temptation in the wilderness. The point of that temptation was to reverse His *ekenosen*, employ His almighty power in His own behalf and turn those stones into bread to feed His own hunger. Similarly, it is quite impossible to understand how He could predict the phenomena that would herald the end of the world and still not know the day and the hour in which the end would come unless one bears in mind that His predictions were made for the benefit of His disciples for all time to come, while the precise time of the end was not for them to know and, by the same token, not for

Him to know either in His state indicated by the word, *ekenosen*. Here is the key to much of the mystery that surrounds the strange and contradictory behavior in the life of Christ. But while Jesus emptied Himself of His Divine status, He did not remain in a vacuum. The emptiness was simultaneously filled with the status of a slave. "Himself He emptied," says the apostle, "the status of a slave having taken." This is no metaphorical language. Jesus gave His own interpretation of that when He said: "The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Matt. 20, 28). The primary difference between the slave and the free is that the slave has no option to serve himself, but must surrender himself completely into the service of another. That, not the nature, not the outward appearance, is the real form, or status of the slave. And it is this status that Jesus took upon Himself in His incarnation when He "was made in the likeness of men." The word for likeness is *homoioima*, which means: "Similarly, in the same way." In other words, Jesus was not merely masquerading as a man, but was made of the same stuff as the rest of us.

In verse 8 the apostle continues his reflection on the incarnation as he adds: "And being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." The word "fashion" is from the Greek word *schema*, which means: "outward appearance, form, shape." The word implies that Jesus also had the natural appearance of a man in every respect and could be universally recognized as a true man even though He was God incarnate. The word for "humble" is *tapeinoo* which literally means "to run low" and is used of the River Nile in that sense. Generally it means: "To humble, humiliate by assigning to a lower place, or exposing to shame." It is significant that this humiliation of Jesus is not equated with His incarnation. The Deity loses nothing by taking humanity into itself. The humiliation of Jesus was a voluntary act following His incarnation. Even in His humanity Jesus could have been "summa cum laude," but instead He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death. This does not mean that He was obedient, or subservient to death. Death was never His master. On the contrary, He was always the master of death. When He died, He did so of His own volition. The word "unto" in the Greek means "up to the point to." The humiliation consisted in subjecting Himself to the persecution, the ridicule, the rejection, the betrayal and the shame that culminated in His death, even the death upon the cross. To be executed as a criminal was humiliating enough, but to be executed by crucifixion was the unkindest cut of all.

Jesus Himself said that "He that humbleth himself shall be exalted." That also proved to be true in His own life. "Wherefore," writes the apostle, "God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name; that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." In the Greek the word for "highly exalted" is *hyperupsoo*, which means to "raise someone to the loftiest height." He who had humbled Himself to

the lowest depths is now exalted to the highest rank. By the same token, He was given to *onoma*, the NAME, which is *hyper pan onoma*, above every name. This NAME, which declares the true character and dignity of Christ, is both the basis and object of worship. The ineffable grandeur expressed in this NAME is beyond every imagination, but when it is revealed to the world at last every tongue will confess that the lowly Man of Nazareth, maligned and crucified, is Lord, to the Glory of God the Father. The whole purpose of the working out of salvation is the glory of God the Father. This end is attained when men yield to His operation and acknowledge Christ as Lord.

In the concluding paragraph of his QUEST, Schweitzer wrote of Jesus:

“He comes to us as One unknown, with name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: “Follow thou me!” And sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.”

In contrast to this sentimental eulogy to an unknown Christ of humanism, hear again the transcendent paean of Paul: “Wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name; that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things on earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”