

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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The Mercies of God and the Deity of Christ (Part I)

S. Lewis Johnson Jr., who I had the privilege to study under at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, served for over twenty-five years as a New Testament professor before transferring to Systematic Theology (a path taken as well by the likes of Charles Hodge and B.B. Warfield and more recently by Richard Gaffin, who I also studied under at Westminster Theological Seminary) complained on more than one occasion about the growing tendency among Biblical scholars to ignore the systematic and historical theology. He made this observation in print. "This divorce of theology from exegesis is frequently represented as primarily an impoverishment of theology, which, of course, it is. But it is sometimes forgotten that contemporary exegesis as well has lost its grip on systematics, with dire results for interpretation. We are quite willing to grant that theology cannot really be done well without exegesis, but we are not as willing, it seems to me, to grant that exegesis cannot be done well without systematic theology. Exegesis, armed with the original text and modern critical tools and methodology, too frequently sees itself as autonomously self-sufficient, pouring out its arid and superficial grammatical, syntactical, and critical comments, while the deeper meaning of the texts in the light of the broader problems at issue is lost to it. In the introduction to his commentary on 1 John, Principal Candlish spoke of his desire to bring out the full mind of the apostle upon the truths embodied in the letter, and then added, in words surely applicable to the study of all the biblical literature: For I am deeply convinced after years of thought about it, that it can be studied aright exegetically, only if it is studied theologically. William Manson, late Professor of New Testament at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, used to refer to this type of exegesis, the type that kept exegesis and theology in holy bonds of matrimony, as depth exegesis. It might just as well be called *depth theology*."¹ A prime example of what Johnson was seeing in the field of Biblical studies is N. T. Wright, who served for many years as the Anglican Bishop of Dunham and now holds the position of research professor of New Testament at St. Andrews University in Scotland. Wright has been one of the more vocal advocates of what is called the New Perspective on Paul, which repudiates the Reformation's understanding of justification by faith alone (I have addressed this from time to time in earlier installments in this series on Romans). Wright has also gone on record repudiating the doctrine of penal substitution and serves as one of the leading voices for the BioLogos Foundation. He has become one of contemporary Evangelicalism favorite authors, primarily due to his staunch defense of the bodily resurrection of Christ. But Wright's recent writings on the Person of Christ should be cause for concern. In response to the question: *Is Jesus God?* Wright answered, "When people ask *was Jesus God?* they usually think they know what the word God means and are asking whether we can fit Jesus into that. I regard this as deeply misleading... I do not think Jesus "knew he was God" in the same sense that one knows one is tired or happy, male or female. He did not sit back and say to himself, "well, I never! I'm the second person of the Trinity!"² Wright has been so bold as to suggest that prior to him, *no one* from Augustine to the present day really understood the Apostle Paul! This astonishing claim is made even more astounding when we discover that Wright displays little grasp of historical theology and church history. His attitude toward systematic and dogmatic theology is one of disdain. He, and he alone, is able to read the text without *any* theological presupposition inherited from the past. But is that all that commendable? Actually, no, it is not. Nobody, including Wright, approaches the text of Scripture in a completely neutral and purely objective

fashion – in fact, Wright comes to the text with a boatload of presuppositions gleaned from the Jewish scholar E.P. Sanders and his take on Second Temple Judaism. This is the framework in which Wright does *all* of his exegetical work. Note the overt presuppositions embedded in this statement from Wright. "I suggest, in short, that the return of YHWH to Zion, and the Temple-theology which it brings into focus, are the deepest keys and clues to gospel Christology. Forget the "titles" of Jesus, at least for a moment; forget the pseudo-orthodox attempts to make Jesus of Nazareth conscious of being the second person of the Trinity; forget the arid reductionism that is the mirror-image of that unthinking would-be orthodoxy."³ Wright goes on to say that "After fifteen years of serious historical Jesus study, I still say the creed *ex animor*, but I now mean something very different by it, not least by the word *god* itself." In sharp contrast to Wright, B.B. Warfield stands as one of the great exegetes of all time in the words of Zaspel. "More than just a polemic theologian, Benjamin Warfield was first and foremost a christologist. The person of Christ and his work clearly topped the list of Warfield's many interests as measured by his literary output and preaching, as well as his recurring mention of and express concern for the doctrine. His reasons were more than academic: he was deeply convinced that in this theme we are brought to the very heart of the Christian faith. For Warfield, to maintain vigorously and carefully the doctrine of Christ set forth in Scripture is to preserve Christianity itself. The contemporary denials of the historicity of Christ, his mighty works, his deity, his two natures, his vicarious death, and his triumphal resurrection all threaten the very essence of Christianity. If these issues are not understood scripturally, the entire Christian structure crumbles, and redemption from sin is only a dream. Warfield writes, therefore, as the polemic theologian he is—with penetrating analysis, careful exposition, and often devastating critique. Yet he consistently displays a sense of adoration of Christ and of utter dependence upon him for redemption from sin. Without question, in the person and work of Christ (the topics of this chapter and the next) we have reached the heart of Benjamin Warfield.⁴ Despite Warfield's major contribution in the field of christology, one searches Wright's writing in vain, trying to find a reference to Warfield! One of the texts that Warfield devoted a lot of attention to is our passage in Philippians. We are examining the Scriptural support for the Deity of Christ and Phil. 2:5-11 is one of the texts that demands careful attention. As it turns out, this passage also addresses the question of "What Would Jesus Do?"

I. THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT

Another of my former professors, in a class that focused on the exegesis of Philippians made this important observation. "The meaning of this well-known passage will only be ascertained if we can determine how the passage functions in the context of the whole letter. In what way do these verses contribute to achieving the apostle's purposes? The question is hotly debated, as the subsequent exposition will show. Yet careful attention to the earnest concerns of the previous section (1:27-2:4) suggests a simple answer. If the opposition being experienced by the Philippians calls for steadfastness, if steadfastness is impossible without spiritual unity, and if unity can come about only from an attitude of humility, then surely Paul must reinforce the critical importance of humility in the hearts of believers. And what better way to reinforce this thought than by reminding the Philippians of the attitude and conduct of Him to whom they are united in faith? When admonishing the Corinthians to contribute generously for the sake of the poor in Jerusalem, Paul sets before them the example of Christ: "though He was rich, He became poor on account of you, so that through His poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). Similarly here he appeals to the spirit of servanthood that brought Jesus to His death—a death which, incidentally, has overflowed in life for the Philippians."⁵ In other words, the Apostle in this passage points to the person of Christ as the example of what it means to act with humility of mind. Here is the great illustration of what it means to have certain rights and yet to *purposely* and *voluntarily* lay them aside in service to others. Paul's design is not directly doctrinal, but ethical. "His object," as Hawthorne remarks, "is not to give instruction in doctrine, but to reinforce instruction in Christian living. And he does this by appealing to the conduct of Christ. The hymn, therefore, presents Christ as the ultimate model for moral action."⁶ The passage divides into two sections with each section concluding with a climactic addendum. Thus in section one (vv. 6-8) we have three stanzas that speak of Christ's

humiliation with the climatic addendum “even death on the cross.” The second section (vv. 9-11) also has three stanzas that speak of Christ’s exaltation with the climatic addendum “to the glory of God the Father.”

II. PAUL’S EXHORTATION (2:5)

“Your attitude should be” (NIV) “Have this attitude” (NASB) “Have this mind” (KJV) are various ways this has been translated. PHRONEITE lit. means “to think.” The complete phrase of v. 5 indicates that Paul’s exhortation speaks of a particular *disposition*; i.e., “Be so disposed in your attitude toward one another.” (cf. Phil. 4:2 for a similar exhortation).

III. THE GREAT DESCRIPTION OF CHRIST (2:6)

What is the meaning of “nature of God” (NIV) “form of God” (NASB, KJV)? The word MORPHĒ is used only here in the Greek NT. It refers to a most profound and genuine identity.⁷ David Wells cogently argues that it would appear inescapable that by “form” we are to understand that Paul meant the essence or essential characteristics of a thing. He who was in essence a servant and showed the essential characteristics of serving was in essence divine and had those characteristics essential to being divine.⁸ The word, for example is used four times in the Greek translation OT (the Septuagint). In each instance, MORPHĒ refers to the visible form or appearance (the form of the son of a king, Judges 8:18; “there was no form before my eyes,” Job 4:16; an idol in the form of a man, Isaiah 44:13; the form of Nebuchadnezzar’s countenance was changed, Dan. 3:19).⁹ Notice also the word “being” (NIV) “existed” (NASB). “The present participle HYPARCHŌN stands in sharp contrast with all the aorists which follow it, and therefore points in the direction of continuance of being; Christ Jesus was and is eternally existing “in the form of God.”¹⁰ Paul does not say that Christ “came to exist” or “entered into existence,” but he uses the *present* tense to indicate *ongoing* existence. And since the time frame of the passage is clearly eternity past, the beginning assertion is that the One we know as Jesus Christ existed eternally in the very form of God. The “form of God” is not merely a category of existence (like “spirits” or “creatures”). The “form of God” presents a direct correspondence to reality itself—that which exists in the “form of God” is true Deity. B.B. Warfield was correct when he said, “Paul does not say simply, “He was God.” He says, “He was in the form of God,” employing a turn of speech which throws emphasis upon Our Lord’s possession of the specific quality of God. “Form” is a term which expresses the sum of those characterizing qualities which make a thing the precise thing that it is... When Our Lord is said to be in “the form of God,” therefore, He is declared, in the most express manner possible to be all that God is, to possess the whole fullness of attributes which make God, God.”¹¹ Furthermore, Warfield makes this important point regarding the expression *taking* (LABON) *the form of a servant* “You cannot ‘empty’ by ‘taking’ – adding.” There is no exchange of one nature for another; there is a taking, an adding of another. He also observes that this verb is often used without a genitive either expressed or implied in the context. For example, a physician might speak of “emptying” the digestive tract without ever suggesting “of what” it was emptied. So also here. Moreover, “himself” (HEAUTON) appears in a prior position, thus receiving greater emphasis. Paul’s point is not that Christ “emptied himself” but that he “emptied himself.”¹² Putting the interpretation of all the elements together yields the following. Although Christ was truly God, MORPHĒ THEOU, two things resulted: (1) He did not attempt to “outrank” the Father, as it were (cf. John 14:28 for a similar thought: “The Father is greater than I am”); (2) Instead, he submitted himself to the Father’s will, even to the point of death on a cross. It was thus not Christ’s Deity that compelled his incarnation and passion, but his obedience.¹³

CONCLUSION: This passage ascribes Deity to Christ. “It does so in three ways: First, by its description of Jesus as “in the form of God (continually) being”; second, by its tacit ascription to him of “equality with God” when it affirms that he did not “seize” this station in the sense that at the time of his temptation he did not assert himself in a self-willed show of power commensurate with his divine station; and third, by the very nature of his delegated lordship, the entail of his exaltation.”¹⁴

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. "Romans 5:12 – An Exercise In Exegesis and Theology" *New Dimensions In New Testament Study* (Zondervan, 1974) p. 299.
- ² N.T. Wright and M. Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus* (Harper One, 2007) p. 144 and p. 154
- ³ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Augsberg Fortress, 2009) p. 653
- ⁴ F. Zaspel, *The Theology of B.B. Warfield: A Systematic Summary* (Crossway 2010) p. 213
- ⁵ Moisés Silva, *Philippians: The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary* (Moody, 1988), p. 104.
- ⁶ G.F. Hawthorne, *Philippians: Word Biblical Commentary* (Nelson, 1983), p. 79.
- ⁷ Alec Motyer, *The Message of Philippians* (IVP, 1984), p. 104.
- ⁸ D.F. Wells, *The Person of Christ: A Biblical and Historical Analysis of the Incarnation* (Crossway, 1984), p. 64.
- ⁹ Cf. R. Strimple, "Philippians 2:5-11 in Recent Studies: Some Exegetical Conclusions" *The Westminster Theological Journal* 41 (1978-79), p. 260.
- ¹⁰ W. Hendriksen, *Philippians: New Testament Commentary* (Baker, 1962), p. 103.
- ¹¹ As cited by James White, "Beyond the Veil of Eternity: The Importance of Philippians 2:5-11 in Theology and Apologetics" *Christian Research Journal* (Vol. 22/no. 3), p. 35.
- ¹² F. G. Zaspel, *The Theology of B.B. Warfield: A Systematic Summary*, p. 265.
- ¹³ Cf. D.B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Zondervan, 1996), p. 635.
- ¹⁴ Cf. R.L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nelson, 1998), p. 264.