

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Deity of Christ	Pastor/Teacher
Number:	3	Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Philippians 2:1-11	
Date:	June 3, 2018 (a.m.)	

THE NAME ABOVE ALL NAMES (Part II)

Kermit Zarley in his heretical book claims outright that Philippians 2:1-11 does *not* teach that Jesus preexisted or that Jesus is God incarnate – and bowing and confessing Christ (2:10-11) should not be construed as worship of Jesus as God.¹ Let's look closely at Paul's language. Robert Letham points out that "Paul refers to Christ's preincarnate state, saying that he did not regard his status of being 'in the form of God' as something to be exploited for his own advantage, but instead 'humbled [*or* emptied] himself.' The present participle 'being' (*hyparchōn*) denotes continuance, so that Christ's being in the form of God neither ends nor is curtailed by his incarnation, but rather continues. Incidentally, as we shall see later in the book, this attitude of loving self-abasement reflects the character of God. Moreover, this attitude continues, for by his incarnation he adds the form of a servant (humanity) and becomes obedient to death itself, even the death of the cross. Thus, he empties himself by addition, not subtraction, by adding his human nature with all that that entails, not by abandoning his deity. In turn, at his resurrection the incarnate Christ is exalted by the Father to his right hand and is given the name that is above every name, the name of Lord (*kyrios*), the Greek equivalent of Yahweh.²

- I. **CHRIST'S HUMILIATION.**³ Our Lord's divine nature is clearly affirmed in the expression "form of God" and "equal with God." Robert Strimple, one of my former professors, wrote, "Therefore, I believe Calvin was quite correct in pointing us to John 17:5 for the meaning of *en morphēi theou* – 'and now, glorify thou Me together with thyself, Father, with the glory which I ever had with thee before the world was.' Such a description of the eternal Son as in the form of God, sharing God's glory, reminds us of Hebrews 1:3 ('the radiance of His [God's] glory and the exact representation of His nature') and of his title, Logos. As Johannes Weiss wrote: 'in the Pauline sense, Christ was from the beginning no other than the *Kabōd*, the *Doxa*, of God himself, the glory and radiation of his being, which appears almost as an independent hypostasis of God and yet is connected intimately with God."⁴ The humiliation that is described in this text speaks of something He took *voluntarily* upon himself. What did this involve?
- A. **He became man.** He was man "found in fashion as a man," "made in the likeness of men."⁵ That was humiliation. It would have been humiliation under the most ideal of human and earthly conditions, humiliation because of creator/creature distinction. It was not, however, into an ideal world that Jesus came. It was into a world of sin, of misery, and of death. He came in the likeness of sinful flesh, in the likeness of sin-cursed humanity, though himself without sin (2 Corinthians 5:21).
- B. **He took the form of a servant.** Again, the word "form" (*morphēi*), points to the reality and fullness of his servanthood. It was not merely that he became a servant; he

became a servant with all the subservience and obligation that subjection to the will of another entails. It is true that Jesus devoted himself to the service of men. But it is not his service of men that defines "the form of a servant." Jesus did not subject himself to the will of men. To have taken the form of a servant in reference to any human will or authority would have contradicted his dignity and mission. It was to God the Father that he assumed this relation, and it was to the will of the Father that he surrendered himself in the fullness of subjection and obligation (John 6:38; Isaiah 42:1, 49:3, 6, 52:13, 53:11). It was this office of unreserved commitment to the Father's will that he voluntarily undertook. Because it was the Father he served, there was humiliation, but no degradation.

- C. ***He became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.*** This is the extent of Jesus' humiliation. Death for our Lord was an act of obedience, and it was the grand climax of his commission as Servant. It was not mere death; it was the accursed death of the cross. It was death in the unspeakable anguish of damnation vicariously borne, death in the experience reflected in the most mysterious cry that ever ascended from earth to heaven, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" It would have violated all divine propriety; it would have shaken the foundation of God's throne, justice, and judgment, if this were not damnation vicariously borne. For Jesus was holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners, and in the very ordeal of laying down his life on the accursed tree he was rendering the supreme act of obedience to the Father, an obedience that has no parallel and will never be duplicated. Berkouwer writes, "Paul points out that Christ did not merely die, but that he died *in this manner* to show that God's curse was laid on him. And that is what the Jewish people wanted. The cross was the culmination point in the action of men, the converging point of historical and psychological lines which seemingly were very arbitrarily drawn; but this arbitrariness is assimilated by and made subservient to God's action. In all of Christ's suffering we plainly see the thread of God's providence. For crucifixion was not a Jewish form of punishment. Blasphemy was to be punished by stoning, not by hanging. In their bitter opposition to Christ the Jews called upon the Romans to crucify Christ, a form of punishment which the Romans in turn had adopted from elsewhere. The Jewish people asked specifically for this heathenish punishment because they knew what 'hanging on a tree' implied according to their law (Matt. 27:23, 26; John 19:6). Christ's *passio magna* is determined by the raging passion of the opposition. By demanding and inflicting this form of punishment it was not only Israel that got even with Christ, but according to their religious concept also the God who made this law, and they gladly accepted the responsibility for this execution. They openly rendered Christ's whole Messianic dignity an absurdity. To Israel, Christ's death on the cross was their greatest victory. But all these factors are, so to speak, only the 'inside' of God's powerful doings, which manifest, in the anti-messianic desire for Christ's crucifixion, the reality of the curse when this curse was laid on him whom God *made to be sin* (2 Cor. 5:21) to reconcile the world unto God. But in this curse the *blessing* is revealed: 'that upon the Gentiles might come the blessing of Abraham in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:14)."⁶

- II. **THE EXALTATION BESTOWED.** The contrasts are eloquent. The divine dignity Christ Jesus *possessed*. The humiliation was *undertaken*. But the exaltation is *bestowed*. "God hath highly exalted him." This is the action of the Father. There are three features to be particularly noted.

- A. ***The exaltation is the reward of humiliation.*** “Wherefore” establishes this connection. Here is obedience that merited reward, the only obedience that has this intrinsic quality. The obedience of the saints will be rewarded. Each “will receive his own reward according to his own labour” (1 Corinthians 3:8). But this is the reward of grace, not of merit. In the obedience of Christ we have obedience that divine propriety must reward.
- B. ***The exaltation is the guarantee that Christ Jesus perfectly fulfilled the commitment given to Him by the Father.*** In Paul’s teaching this is the echo of our Lord’s own prayer to the Father: “I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do. And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was” (John 17:4, 5).
- C. ***The exaltation is the highest conceivable.*** “. . . highly exalted him, and given him the name which is above every name.” Paul’s words here are stunning in their implications, especially in light of Isaiah 45:18-25.⁷ This constitutes one of the most obvious affirmations of Christ’s Deity in all of Scripture. As Moule points out, “God, in the incarnation, bestowed upon the one who is on an equality with him an earthly name which, because it accompanied that most God-like self-emptying, and has come to be, in fact, the highest of names, because service and self-giving are themselves the highest of divine attributes. Because of the incarnation, the human name, ‘Jesus,’ is acclaimed as the highest name: and the Man Jesus thus comes to be acclaimed as Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”⁸ He is exalted “far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come” (Ephesians 1:21).

CONCLUSION: The apostle has here delineated the great pivots of the mystery of godliness. It is high and heavenly doctrine, and for that reason of little appeal to dull minds and darkened hearts. It is the mystery that angels desire to look into. But it is also the delight of enlightened and humble souls; they love to explore the mysteries which bespeak the glories of their Redeemer. And there is a direct line from these great themes to the most elementary duties of their high vocation. The humiliation of Christ is here appealed to in support of considerate, unselfish regard for others. “Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.” It is on the supreme example of our Lord that the basic virtues of the Christian life are nurtured. It is significant that what was unique in Jesus’ undertaking is the pattern. “There can be no repetition or duplication of what he had done. To have the mind that was in Christ Jesus is not mimicry of his action. It is to be animated in our vocation and in our relations to others by that mind exemplified by him in his inimitable commitment. Our Lord’s incomparable self-humiliation accord to the humble mindedness required of us the highest sanction. ‘It is enough for the disciple to be as his master, and the servant as his lord.’”⁹

ENDNOTES

¹K. Zarley, *The Restitution of Jesus Christ* (Triangle, 2008), p. 260.

²R. Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (P&R, 2004), p. 42. Letham's book is the work of a highly-trained theologian who has a commanding knowledge of historical theology. Zarley's book is the work of a rank amateur by comparison.

³Robert Schuller's distortions of the Gospel even extend to Christ's humiliation. In his bold, even brazen, translation of Christian concepts into the argot of pop psychology, Schuller explicitly criticizes traditional theology for being overly pessimistic. He dismisses "negative theologians" who dwell on the humiliation of Christ in the Incarnation and suggests that pastors instead should accentuate the positive: "The Incarnation was God's glorification of the human being." Cf. his *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* (Word, 1982), p. 100, and the critique of K. H. Sargeant, *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way* (Rutgers Univ. Press, 2000), p. 102.

⁴Robert Strimple, "Philippians 2:5-11 in Recent Studies: Some Exegetical Conclusions," *The Westminster Theological Journal* (Vol. XLI, Spring, 1979, No. 2), p. 261. J. B. Lightfoot, considered to be one of the greatest Biblical scholars of the 19th century (with a masterful command of the Greek NT): "We cannot suppose St. Paul to have meant, that our Lord was not in the likeness of men before His baptism and ministry, and became so then for the first time. On the contrary all accounts alike agree in representing this (so far as regards His earthly life) as the turning-point when He began to 'manifest forth His *glory* (John ii. 11).' It was an exaggeration indeed when certain early heretics represented His baptism as the moment of His first assumption of *Deity*: but only by a direct reversal of the accounts in the Gospel could it be regarded in any sense as the commencement of His *humanity*. The whole context in St. Paul clearly implies that the being born as man was the first step in His humiliation, as the death on the Cross was the last. In other words, it requires that *en morphēi, theou huparchōn* be referred to a point of time prior to the incarnation. This being so, what meaning must we attach to 'the form of God' in which our Lord preexisted? In the Clementine Homilies St. Peter is represented as insisting upon the anthropomorphic passages in the Scriptures and maintaining therefrom that God has a sensible form (*morphēi*). To the objection of his opponent that if God has a form (*morphēi*), He must have a figure, a shape (*schēma*) also, the Apostle is made to reply by accepting the inference: 'God has a *schēma*; He has eyes and hands and feet like a man; nevertheless He has no need to use them.' Not such was St. Paul's conception of God. Not in this sense could he speak of the *morphēi*, not in any sense could he speak of the *schēma*, of Him who is 'King of kings and Lord of lords, who only hath immortality, who dwelleth in light unapproachable, whom no man hath seen or can see (1 Tim. vi. 15, 16).' It remains then that *morphēi* must apply to the attributes of the Godhead. In other words, it is used in a sense substantially the same which it bears in Greek philosophy. *St. Paul's Epistle to The Philippians* (rpt. Zondervan, 1975), p. 132.

⁵The RSV has "being found in human form," but the word for "form" is not *morphēi*, as in 2:6. This is the word *schēma*, and refers to "the external appearance of the incarnate Son as he showed himself to those who saw him in the days of his flesh." Alex Motyer, *The Message of Philippians* (IVP, 1984), p. 115.

⁶G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Work of Christ* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 161.

⁷Although "confess" is the rendering most common on Phil. 2:11, the sense of *exhomologoumai* would be improved if the phrase were rendered, "every tongue shall *praise* because Jesus Christ is Lord." Lightfoot long ago observed the meaning of *exhomologoumai* here as praise or thanksgiving, for this secondary sense has in the LXX (the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT) almost entirely supplanted the primary sense, especially in the very passage of Isaiah which Paul adapts. Cf. J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 115, and Nigel Turner, *Christian Words* (Nelson, 1981), p. 338.

⁸C. F. D. Moule, "Further Reflections on Philippians 2:5-11 in *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce on His 60th Birthday*, eds. W. W. Gasque and R. P. Martin (Eerdmans, 1970), p. 270.

⁹*Collected Writings of John Murray II* (Banner of Truth, 1982), p. 241. The substance of this sermon and outline are adapted from Murray's exposition of this text, "The Mystery of Godliness," pp. 236-241.