

An Exegesis of Philippians 2:5-9

By Thomas Ehnert

There is an ancient liturgical custom in the Christian Church that the people bow or kneel when the words of the creed are spoken, “And was made fully human.” This tradition is also reflected in the musical heritage of the Church. During the Credo of the different musical arrangements of the Ordinary of the Liturgy, the composer would hush all instruments, and the voices would reverently soar as they sang about the great mystery of our faith – the incarnation of the Son of God.

It is with the same awe and reverence that we approach our study of the two states of the incarnate Son of God, for the two states tell us what that incarnate Savior did for our salvation. In Philippians 2: 5-9, St. Paul beautifully and precisely summarizes these two states of Jesus’ life – the states of humiliation and exaltation. And as we study these verses, we find that Jesus’ two states make up a story that takes us from His humility to His glory.

Before taking up the verses in question, it is beneficial for us to keep in mind the wider context in which they occur. St. Paul was “in chains” when he wrote Philippians (1:7), during his first imprisonment. Despite his chains, the main thrust of his message to the Philippians is this: “Rejoice! Rejoice in the Gospel, as it advances, and as it works in your hearts and lives!”

St. Paul speaks with a deep love for this congregation, which showed their love for him by supporting him financially (4:10). In fact, St. Paul calls them his joy and crown (4:1). Paul’s greatest joy in all the Christian congregations was faith expressed by a sanctified life. Therefore, in chapter two, St. Paul encourages the Philippians to grow in Christian love and humility. He motivates them and gives them an example to follow by pointing them to Christ.

St. Paul begins this section with the present imperative, *touto froneite*, “keep on having this attitude.” The Apostle uses the *touto* in the beginning of verse five to peak the readers’ interest, in a sense. One can imagine a first-time reader saying to himself, “Have what attitude?” St. Paul also says where this attitude is to be found - *en umin*, in the sphere of you.

This attitude is to be entirely within the thinking of each member of the congregation individually, and it is to be a characteristic thoroughly pervading the congregation as a whole.

Now the Apostle is going to express exactly what this attitude is. It is an attitude which he describes as, *o kai en Cristw Ihsou*. The neuter relative, *o*, refers to the phrase *touto froneite*. Christ also displayed this attitude. This attitude was *en Cristw*, entirely within the sphere of Christ – thoroughly saturating His thoughts, words and deeds. This attitude was found in *Cristw*, the Messiah, who was anointed by God to carry out the work of our salvation (Lk 4: 18-19). The name of the Messiah is *Ihsou*, the Savior from sin (Mt 1: 21). It is important to note for later reference that St. Paul, when speaking about the Son of God, refers to Him with a *name*, Christ Jesus. This is the name that the Second Person of the Trinity received *after* His incarnation.

And so we have this translation for verse five, “Have this attitude in the sphere of you, which also was in the sphere of Christ Jesus.” Stoeckhardt beautifully sums up what St. Paul is trying to get across to the Philippians in this verse. He says that it is, “as if the Apostle would say, ‘All that I asked of you is to be meek and humble so as to be of one mind and one soul, all that you see exemplified in the person and conduct of our Lord’” (30).

Now St. Paul is going to describe Jesus Christ with another relative clause, beginning with *o*. This relative refers to the God-man, Jesus Christ. This Jesus Christ is first described as *en morfē qeou uparcwn*. This is a difficult phrase for the English mind. What is the *morfē qeou*? BAGD offers the meaning, “form” (528). Louw-Nida defines *morfē* as, “the nature or character of something, with emphasis upon both the internal and external form” (586). This *morfē*, Thayer says, is “intrinsic and essential.” Wenzel adds the thought that *morfē* is, “the manner in which an essence or nature expresses itself” (65).

So we arrive at this conclusion, that the *morfē* is “form”, with the descriptive genitive, *qeou*. Therefore we translate *morfē qeou* as “the divine form,” or the “form of God,” which Stoeckhardt (31) and TDNT (743-744), both define as the divine majesty, “or more fully

expressed, the sum of His divine attributes” (Stoekhardt, 31). A picture of the divine form is found in Isaiah six, where Isaiah says, “I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple.” Another way to help us understand the *morfh qeou* is to look at another time this word comes up – the transfiguration, where Jesus *metemorfwqh*, was changed in form. The form into which Jesus changed was the divine form, shining in divine glory. For a few moments, Jesus allowed His divine form to shine through His human body.

To return to our verse; In what way was Jesus *en* the divine form? Hendriksen says, “in order to show the greatness of our Lord’s sacrifice, the Apostle’s starting point is the Christ in His pre-incarnate state” (105). However, the Logos is not *in* the divine form. He *is* the divine form with the Father and the Holy Spirit intrinsically and essentially. John writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, *and the Word was God*” (Jn 1: 1).

This phrase, *en morfe qeou uparcwn*, must therefore refer to the incarnate Word. “Jesus Christ *as man* was in the form of God...hence He possessed all divine glory in His human nature” (Schaller, 86). Wenzel lists three reasons for taking the *morfh qeou* as referring to the human nature. First, the subject is Jesus Christ, the regular name for the incarnate Son of God. Secondly, Christ is set before us as an example of humility. The Godhead cannot humble itself. Third, St. Paul does not say one word about the incarnation and preexistent Logos (Wenzel, 64). It is this third reason which F. Pieper points to as most conclusive (Pieper, 287f). The participle, *uparcwn*, in view of the following statement concerning Jesus’ equality with God, is concessive, “*although He was in the form of God.*”

St. Paul continues verse six, *ouc arpagmon hghsato to einai isa qew*. The Apostle uses the aorist middle-deponent indicative, *hghsato*, “Jesus did not consider.” The verb takes a double object. The first object is the articularized infinitive *to einai* with *isa qew*. The second object is *arpagmon*. Jesus did not consider the fact that He was equal with God *a arpagmon*. One way to take *arpagmon* is in an active sense, as the NIV does, as robbery, “to rob, to carry off, to

plunder, to forcefully seize” (Louw-Nida, 584). It can also be taken in the passive sense, as “something already held by force, something forcibly retained” (Louw-Nida, 584).

Wenzel points out, “The Church Fathers universally use the word in the passive sense, the thing robbed, the booty, the loot” (66). This definition makes sense in context of the rest of the verse. We know from that fact that Jesus was *en morfē qeou* that Jesus possessed the divine attributes, and from the end of the verse that Jesus was equal with God. The sense in context of *arpagmon* is well expressed by Kuschel:

Jesus was well aware of the fact that He is God. He knew perfectly that from all eternity He possessed all the majesty of God and that He possessed it fully also during the days His earthly ministry. But Jesus did not consider this *something to be exhibited or displayed for His person self-advancement and glory*” (43f).

So a better translation of *arpagmon* is, “something ostentatiously displayed” (Wenzel, 66).

This idea of *arpagmon* would not be lost on the Philippians. In fact, it would be quite vivid to them. Wenzel reminds us that the city of Philippi was a Roman colony for retired soldiers. When a general would win a battle, he would parade through town ostentatiously displaying the booty he had taken in the war (67). Christ did not consider His equality with God as something to be ostentatiously exhibited. Astonishingly, Jesus’ attitude toward His *to einai isa qeou* plays a most interesting role in the next verse.

Speaking of verse seven, Wenzel says that Christ, “used His equality with God as an opportunity not for self-exaltation, but for self-abasement” (67). Paul says that Christ *al la eauton ekenwsen*. St. Paul uses the strong negative, *al la*. Christ did not use His equality with God for boasting. Rather He emptied Himself! The NIV renders *ekenwsen* as “He made Himself nothing,” but that is not the full meaning of *ekenwsen*. This verb rather means, “to completely remove or eliminate elements of high status or rank by eliminating all privileges or prerogatives associated with such status or rank” (Louw-Nida, 740). Note that this verb is aorist, signaling to us that the action simply and truly happened. Also, this verb is active; Jesus actively emptied Himself. Here we see the great truth that Jesus *willingly* emptied Himself.

But of what did He empty Himself? He certainly did not and could not empty Himself of His divine nature. St. Paul says that all the fullness of the deity dwelt in Christ bodily (Col 2: 9). Indeed, it was necessary for Jesus to be true God. The reason for this is stated by Pieper, “Christ could not dispense with His deity in the state of exinanition. He had to attach the full weight of His deity to His obedience, suffering, and death” (F. Pieper, 289). He therefore emptied Himself of the full use of His prerogatives which He possessed in the *morfh qeou*, the form of God!

Chemnitz helps us understand this. He writes:

The humiliation mentioned in Philippians two, therefore, does not indicate a deprivation, removal, robbing, exclusion, taking away, degradation, putting away, lack, absence, loss, bareness, or emptiness of the fullness of the Godhead...But it has to do with the use or exercise of it (488).

That this is true we see from the next three phrases, which define for us with three participles what it means that Christ emptied Himself. The first participial clause expresses the means, that is, how it happened that Jesus emptied Himself. St. Paul says that Jesus emptied Himself *morfhn doulo u labwn*, by taking the form, the intrinsic essence of a servant. Whom was Jesus serving? In Luke 2, Jesus tells Mary and Joseph, “Didn’t you know that I had to be about my Father’s business?” In John 12, Jesus says during Holy Week, “Father, glorify your name.” In Mark 14: 36, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, “Father, take this cup away from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” And when He died, Jesus prayed, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Lk 23: 46). But Jesus also was serving us, for He said to the disciples, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20: 28).

Why was it necessary for Christ to empty Himself of the full use of the *morfh qeou* and to appear in the form of a servant? Pieper eloquently and vividly answers this question for us:

Had Christ, however, appeared in this form (of God), which would have been His normal form, He could not have been made under the Law and suffered and died. His parents and relatives, the Jews, the high priests...etc. would have fled in consternation before Him. In the interest of His office He, therefore, limited the use of His divine majesty. He did not appear as Lord, but as servant... (F. Pieper, 286).

At times, Jesus indeed made use of His divine prerogatives during His earthly life, but only in the service of others. Wenzel points out that, “Though He emptied Himself of His divine prerogatives for His own person, He was free to use them in the interest of others...He literally ‘helped others, Himself He could not help’” (68). In His miracles for the benefit of the sick, the grieving, and those in need, Jesus revealed a bit of His divine glory at times. But normally, “It was as if He covered the glory of His divine majesty with the tattered rags of a beggar. He became altogether lowly” (Kuschel, 45).

St. Paul continues, *en omoiwmati anqrwpwn genomeno*". This second participial clause continues to explain what it means that Christ humbled Himself. This clause also adds to the thought of Christ's taking on the form of a servant. Christ did not live on this earth in the form of God, because then everyone would fear Him, as mentioned above. Therefore, He was in the form of a servant, part of which meant that He was just like (*omoiwmati*) other men. The participle is present middle-deponent, modifying the masculine, singular understood subject of *ekenwsen*.

The Apostle says that Jesus was *en omoiwmati anqrwpwn*, in the sphere of the likeness of men. This phrase cannot mean that Jesus seemed like a human being, as the Docetists teach. John 1: 14 leaves no room for doubt, as it declares that the Word became (*egeneto*) flesh. What does it mean, then, that Jesus is in the likeness of human beings? Romans 8: 3 sheds light on this phrase. There St. Paul says that God sent His own Son *en omoiwmati sarko*" *amartia*", in the *likeness of sinful flesh*. Jesus does not have sin, therefore He does not have sinful flesh. Accidentally, all human beings are sinful from conception. Jesus is not sinful! It is in this sense that Jesus is in the likeness of human beings.

The author of Hebrews says, “Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity.” As a sharer in our humanity, Jesus was “in the ‘fashion’ of the human nature as weakened and made infirm through the fall” (Schaller, 86). Chemnitz says that Jesus, “manifested the assumed infirmities of the humanity and endured sufferings *of every kind*” (487).

How true it is that Jesus “took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows” (Is 53: 4). The holy writer says that we have a High Priest who is able to sympathize “with us in our weakness” and who, “was without sin” (He 4: 15). This phrase, that Jesus was in the likeness of human beings, therefore also “leaves room for the other side of His nature, the divine.” Gabriel said it all when he told Mary, “The holy one (sinless, unlike all other human beings) to be born (human) will be called the Son of God (divine)” (Lk 1: 35).

Lenski says that F. Pieper is guilty of an oversight in regard to this phrase (786). Lenski maintains that this phrase is temporal, referring to the incarnation. The problem with this interpretation is that it ignores context. This phrase, as mentioned, is the second in a group of three participial phrases that together describe the verb *ekenwsen*, “He humbled Himself.” The incarnation does not and cannot describe the humiliation. Therefore Lenski is incorrect here.

The last participial phrase used to describe what it means that Jesus humbled Himself is the phrase, *kai schmati eureqei" w" anqrwpo"*, “and in respect to appearance, He was found (having been found) as a human being.” The *kai* is continuative, showing that this phrase belongs with the previous clauses. The dative of reference, *schamti*, is translated by Louw-Nida, “appearance as an element of outward form.”

This participle is passive as far as Christ is concerned, because, when other people saw Jesus’ outward appearance, they found Him to be just like everyone else, a human being. Isaiah foretold this very thing when He wrote, “He had no beauty of majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in His appearance that should desire Him.” In Mark 6: 3, the people of could not see beyond Jesus’ outer appearance, as they said, “Isn’t this the carpenter?”

Now St. Paul describes how deeply Jesus humbled Himself. He says that Jesus Christ, who took the form of a servant, who laid aside His divine prerogatives, who was in the likeness and appearance of every other human being, *etapeinwsen eauton*, humbled Himself. Notice that this is an aorist, active, indicative verb. Jesus acted in His humiliation indeed very actively. He took upon Himself this state of existence. He willed to be conceived of a lowly virgin, to be

born in humble surroundings, to be raised in a backwater town in Galilee, and to have no place to lay His head (Mt 8:20). He willed and He acted with the result that He was humble.

The means of Jesus humbling Himself is expressed in the phrase, *genomeno" uphko"*, that is, "He humbled Himself by being obedient." Jesus' whole life was one of obedience. He was obediently submissive to His own Law (Gal 4: 4-5). He was obedient to His parents (Lk 2: 51). In fact, during the days of Jesus' humiliation (*en sarko*"), Jesus, "offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save Him from death, and He was heard *because of His reverent submission*. Although He was a son, He *learned obedience* from what He suffered" (Heb 5: 7-8). We hear Jesus in the Garden ask, that if it be God's will, the cup might pass from Him (Mk 14:36). But He was obedient even when the Father said, "No, this cup cannot pass away."

Therefore, Jesus was obedient *mecri qanatou, qanatou de staurou!* Jesus humbled Himself by being obedient "to the point of death, that is, death of a cross (descriptive genitive)." The Son of God obeyed the will of God even when it meant His own death! And this wasn't just any death, but the most horrible – the death of the cross, the death of a slave! In His sermon for Palm Sunday, Reinhold Pieper speaks of the depths to which Jesus was obedient. He says:

In this service, Jesus was obedient to His heavenly Father to the point of death. He let Himself be placed under the Law by His Father, in order to fulfill it in our place and for us. He let our sin be imputed to Him, in order to pay the penalty for them (*um zu Buessen*). He went to His death, a death which we had merited by our sins, in order to redeem us from the same, and not in a customary way, but in the shameful, torturous death of the cross! (205).

The death of the cross, being hung on the tree, meant that Jesus was cursed by His Father (Gal 3: 13). The death of the cross was most shameful (Heb 12: 2). The death of the cross is a stumbling block to unbelievers (1 Co 1: 23). The death of the cross, however, was for the glory of His Father's name (Jn 12: 28). The death of the cross was for the reconciliation of all things (Col 1: 20). The message of Christ's death on the cross is the power of God for the working of salvation (1 Cor 1: 18). In view of how Scripture speaks of the death of Jesus on the cross, it

seems the height of irreverence that all Tillich can say about Jesus' death is that it is "the conquering of existential estrangement" (Tillich, 153).

St. Paul moves on to examine Christ's exaltation, *dio kai o qeo*" *auton uperuywsen*. The conjunction is simply *dio*, which Louw-Nida explains as a, "relatively emphatic marker of result, usually denoting the fact that the inference is self-evident – 'therefore, for this reason...so then'" (783). The exaltation is the result of the humiliation. The conjunction carries the same weight as it does in Luke 1: 35, where Luke writes that the power of God and the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit will come upon Mary; therefore (*dio*), the child will be the Son of God.

The exaltation is not some reward given to Jesus, as if Jesus merited the exaltation, as Hendriksen interprets (110). The conjunction Paul uses, *dio*, says nothing about a reward. In fact, if Jesus only humbled Himself to receive a reward, He would be acting entirely contrary to His purpose in the humiliation – "Jesus sought no benefit for Himself, but came to save sinners" (Schaller, 98). This conjunction is rather a great comfort *to Christians*, as Wenzel summarizes:

It (*dio*) clearly states that the humiliation of Christ was very effective; that Christ actually carried out the original intention of His humiliation, the salvation of mankind; that God was very much pleased with what His Son had done; that, as a result of His satisfaction, He highly exalted Christ (70).

This is exactly what Isaiah said, that "because He poured out His life unto death," the Father gave Him "a portion among the great" (Is 53: 12).

As a result of the humiliation, *o qeo*" *auton uperuywsen*. The subject is God, in particular here, the Father. The object is Christ, the incarnate Word. God *uperuywsen*, super-exalted Jesus, as Stoeckhardt translates (39). It comes as no great surprise that this word is a hapax. Only Jesus, who obeyed to the fullest extent and to the greatest depths, could also be exalted to the highest heights. Louw-Nida explains this word as, "To regard a person as being exceptionally honored in view of high status – 'to give exceptional honor'" (735). Since the divine nature of Christ never was humbled, this super-exaltation can only refer to the human nature of Christ.

Luther defines the super-exaltation this way, “He is Lord over all angels and creatures, death, Satan, Hell and now empties Himself and lays aside the slave-form, not only henceforth remains in divine form, but also is illumined, praised, preached, recognized, honored, and held as God” (477). The loud prayers and petitions of Jesus, who obeyed, suffered, and died, were answered, as the author of Hebrews says (5:7). We think here particularly of Jesus’ prayer in regard to His human nature on the night before He died. He prayed, “Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” (Jn 17: 5). The human nature, at the moment of the super-exaltation, was glorified. Now Jesus fully used the divine attributes, which the divine nature had always fully used. Hendriksen says it well when he writes, “Therefore Christ’s *assumption* of glory is in a sense also *resumption* of glory” (114).

This super-exaltation of Christ includes His descent into Hell, where Jesus heralded His victory to the demons (I Pt 3: 19). And this super-exaltation includes the rest of the steps of exaltation. The Apostle writes, “That power is like the working of His mighty strength, which He exerted in Christ when He *raised Him from the dead* and *seated Him at His right hand* in the heavenly realms. God has placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church” (Eph 1: 19b-22). Who but the Incarnate Word has ever been seated at the right hand of God? Truly this is a super-exaltation!

St. Paul concludes verse nine, *kai ecarisato autw to onoma to uper pan onoma*. The *kai* is simply connective with the previous clause. The subject is still the Father, the indirect object is still the human nature of Christ. The Father *ecarisato*, gave to Jesus Christ something. This verb is aorist, middle-deponent indicative. The aorist tells us that this is something that truly happened – the Father gave something to Jesus.

What did the Father give to Jesus? *to onoma uper pan onoma*, the name above every name. The variant reading takes out the first definite article, but the variant does not effect the meaning of the text. What is *to onoma uper pan onoma*? Reinhold Pieper preached on this:

Not the name, “Jesus Christ,” for this He had indeed already before His exaltation, but it is the Name, “Lord.” In the designation, “Lord,” is included everything together, which Jesus is in and of Himself, His entire divine majesty and glory, what He is for us, the Savior, Redeemer, whereby He has become our Lord” (207).

Before that name every knee will bow. The fact that Jesus is our Lord is indeed what every tongue will confess when He comes again, to the glory of God, the Father (Php 2: 10-11).

As for the *habitus practicus* of Philippians 2: 5-9, we need look no further than verse five. There St. Paul urges us to have the attitude that Christ Jesus had. The Holy Spirit works through the Gospel, so that we have the same attitude that Jesus had. As Christians, we practice the same self-sacrificing humility that Jesus practiced. We know that our humility may bring us shame, scorn, and even death. But we also know that we will follow Christ in being exalted with Him in glory, on account of His own humiliation and exaltation.

Pastors are to exemplify this humble attitude of the incarnate Christ for their people. It is with a deep sense of humility that pastors regard their office. Pastors do not seek to lord their authority over their sheep. They seek to be a servant, just as Christ was. They seek to usher souls by means of the Word they preach from the humble circumstances of this life into the glory of eternal life. At last, they too, with their people, will share in the glory of Jesus Christ, the Lord. It is a humbling thought that through the Word they preach, many more will confess with believing hearts at the last day, and confess with joy, “Jesus Christ is Lord!” to the glory of God the Father!