

Philippians 2:6-8

(6) Who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,

(7) but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men.

(8) Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (NASB)

1. These verses in Philippians are very important to Trinitarian doctrine (although they have also caused division among Trinitarians) and they must be dealt with thoroughly. There are several arguments wrapped into these two verses, and we will deal with them point by point. First, many Trinitarians assert that the word “form,” which is the Greek word *morphe*, refers to Christ’s inner nature as God. This is so strongly asserted that in verse 6 the *NIV* has, “being in very nature God.” We do not believe that *morphe* refers to an “inner essential nature,” and we will give evidence that it refers to an outer form. Different lexicons have opposing viewpoints about the definition of *morphe*, to such a degree that we can think of no other word defined by the lexicons in such contradictory ways. We will give definitions from lexicons that take both positions, to show the differences between them.

Vine’s Lexicon has under “form”: “properly the nature or essence, not in the abstract, but as actually subsisting in the individual...it does not include in itself anything ‘accidental’ or separable, such as particular modes of manifestation.” Using lexicons like *Vine’s*, Trinitarians boldly make the case that the “nature” underlying Jesus’ human body was God. Trinitarian scholars like Vine contrast *morphe*, which they assert refers to an “inner, essential nature,” with *schema*, (in verse 8, and translated “appearance” above) which they assert refers to the outward appearance. We admit that there are many Trinitarian scholars who have written lexical entries or articles on the Greek word *morphe* and concluded that Christ must be God. A Trinitarian wanting to prove his point can quote from a number of them. However, we assert that these definitions are biased and erroneous. In addition, we could not find any non-Trinitarian scholars who agreed with the conclusion of the Trinitarian scholars, while *many* Trinitarian sources agree that *morphe* refers to the outward appearance and not an inner nature.

A study of other lexicons (many of them Trinitarian) gives a totally different picture than does *Vine’s Lexicon*. In Bullinger’s *Critical Lexicon*, *morphe* is given a one-word definition, “form.” The scholarly lexicon by Walter Bauer, translated and revised by Arndt and Gingrich, has under *morphe*, “form, outward appearance, shape.” The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, has “form, external appearance.” Kittel also notes that *morphe* and *schema* are often interchangeable. Robert Thayer, in his well-respected lexicon, has under *morphe*, “the form by which a person or thing strikes the vision; the external appearance.” Thayer says that the Greeks said that children reflect the appearance (*morphe*) of their parents, something easily noticed in every culture. Thayer also notes that some scholars try to make *morphe* refer to that which is intrinsic and essential, in contrast to that which is outward and accidental, but says, “the distinction is rejected by many.”

The above evidence shows that scholars disagree about the use of the word *morphe* in Philippians. When scholars disagree, and especially when it is believed that the reason for the disagreement is due to bias over a doctrinal issue, it is absolutely essential to do as much original research as possible. The real definition of *morphe* should become apparent as we check the sources available at the time of the New Testament. After all, the word was a common one in the Greek world. We assert that a study of the actual evidence clearly reveals that *morphe* does not refer to Christ's inner essential being, but rather to an outward appearance.

From secular writings we learn that the Greeks used *morphe* to describe when the gods changed their appearance. Kittel points out that in pagan mythology, the gods change their forms (*morphe*), and especially notes Aphrodite, Demeter and Dionysus as three who did. This is clearly a change of appearance, not nature. Josephus, a contemporary of the Apostles, used *morphe* to describe the shape of statues (*Bauer's Lexicon*).

Other uses of *morphe* in the Bible support the position that *morphe* refers to outward appearance. The Gospel of Mark has a short reference to the well-known story in Luke 24:13-33 about Jesus appearing to the two men on the road to Emmaus. Mark tells us that Jesus appeared "in a different form (*morphe*)" to these two men so that they did not recognize him (16:12). This is very clear. Jesus did not have a different "essential nature" when he appeared to the two disciples. He simply had a different outward appearance.

More evidence for the word *morphe* referring to the outward appearance can be gleaned from the *Septuagint*, a Greek translation of the Old Testament from about 250 BC. It was written because of the large number of Greek-speaking Jews in Israel and the surrounding countries (a result of Alexander the Great's conquest of Egypt in 332 BC and his gaining control over the territory of Israel). By around 250 BC, so many Jews spoke Greek that a Greek translation of the Old Testament was made, which today is called the *Septuagint*. The *Septuagint* greatly influenced the Jews during the New Testament times. Some of the quotations from the Old Testament that appear in the New Testament are actually from the *Septuagint*, not the Hebrew text. Furthermore, there were many Greek-speaking Jews in the first-century Church. In fact, the first recorded congregational conflict occurred when Hebrew-speaking Jews showed prejudice against the Greek-speaking Jews (Acts 6:1).

The Jews translating the *Septuagint* used *morphe* several times, and it always referred to the outward appearance. Job says, "A spirit glided past my face, and the hair on my body stood on end. It stopped, but I could not tell what it was. A form (*morphe*) stood before my eyes, and I heard a hushed voice (Job 4:15 and 16). There is no question here that *morphe* refers to the outward appearance. Isaiah has the word *morphe* in reference to man-made idols: "The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in the form (*morphe*) of man, of man in all his glory, that it may dwell in a shrine" (Isa. 44:13). It would be absurd to assert that *morphe* referred to "the essential nature" in this verse, as

if a wooden carving could have the “essential nature” of man. The verse is clear: the idol has the “outward appearance” of a man. According to Daniel 3:19, after Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar’s image, he became enraged and “the form (*morphe*) of his countenance” changed. The *NASB* says, “his facial expression” changed. Nothing in his nature changed, but the people watching could see that his outward appearance changed.

For still more documentation that the Jews used *morphe* to refer to the outward appearance, we turn to what is known as the “*Apocrypha*,” books written between the time of Malachi and Matthew. “*Apocrypha*” literally means “obscure” or “hidden away,” and these books are rightly not accepted by most Protestants as being part of the true canon, but are accepted by Roman Catholics and printed in Catholic Bibles. Our interest in them is due to the fact that they were written near the time of the writing of the New Testament, were known to the Jews at that time and contain the word *morphe*. In the *Apocrypha*, *morphe* is used in the same way that the *Septuagint* translators use it, *i.e.*, as outward appearance. For example, in “The Wisdom of Solomon” is the following: “Their enemies heard their voices, but did not see their forms” (18:1). A study of *morphe* in the *Apocrypha* will show that it always referred to the outer form.

There is still more evidence. *Morphe* is the root word of some other New Testament words and is also used in compound words. These add further support to the idea that *morphe* refers to an appearance or outward manifestation. The Bible speaks of evil men who have a “form” (*morphosis*) of godliness (2 Tim. 3:5). Their inner nature was evil, but they had an outward appearance of being godly. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Christ was “transformed” (*metamorphoomai*) before the apostles (Matt. 17:2; Mark 9:2). They did not see Christ get a new nature, rather they saw his outward form profoundly change. Similarly, we Christians are to be “transformed” (*metamorphoomai*) by renewing our minds to Scripture. We do not get a new nature as we renew our minds, because we are already “partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4), but there will be a change in us that we, and others, can tangibly experience. Christians who transform from carnal Christians, with all the visible activities of the flesh that lifestyle entails, to being Christ-like Christians, change in such a way that other people can “see” the difference. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says the same thing when it says that Christians will be “changed” (*metamorphoomai*) into the image of Christ. That we will be changed into an “image” shows us that the change is something visible on the outside.

We would like to make one more point before we draw a conclusion about “*morphe*.” If the point of the verse is to say that Jesus is God, then why not just say it? Of course *God* has the “essential nature” of God, so why would anyone make *that* point? This verse does not say, “Jesus, being God,” but rather, “being in the form of God.” Paul is reminding the Philippians that Jesus represented the Father in every possible way.

So what can we conclude about *morphe*? The Philippian church consisted of Jews and converted Greeks. From the *Septuagint* and their other writings, the Jews were familiar with *morphe* referring to the outward appearance, including the form of men and idols. To the Greeks, it also referred to the outward appearance, including the changing outward

appearance of their gods and the form of statues. The only other New Testament use of *morphe* outside Philippians is in Mark, and there it refers to the outward appearance. Also, the words related to *morphe* clearly refer to an outward manifestation or appearance. We assert the actual evidence is clear: the word *morphe* refers to an outward appearance or manifestation. Jesus Christ was in the outward appearance of God, so much that so he said, “He who has seen me has seen the Father.” Christ always did the Father’s will, and perfectly represented his Father in every way.

Schema, as Kittel points out, can be synonymous with *morphe*, but it has more of an emphasis on outward trappings rather than outward appearance, and often points to that which is more transitory in nature, like the clothing we wear or an appearance we have for just a short time. As human beings, we always have the outward form (*morphe*) of human beings. Yet there is a sense in which our *schema*, our appearance, is always changing. We start as babies, and grow and develop, then we mature and age. This is so much the case that a person’s outward appearance is one of the most common topics of conversation between people when they meet.

Like the rest of us, Christ was fully human and had the outward form (*morphe*), of a human. However, because he always did the Father’s will and demonstrated godly behavior and obedience, he therefore had the outward “appearance” (*morphe*) of God also. Also, like the rest of us, his appearance (*schema*) regularly changed. Thus, in Philippians, 2:8 *schema* can be synonymous with *morphe*, or it can place an emphasis on the fact that the appearance Christ had as a human being was transitory in nature. The wording of Philippians 2:6-8 does not present us with a God-man, with whom none of us can identify. Rather, it presents us with a man just like we are, who grew and aged, yet who was so focused on God in every thought and deed that he perfectly represented the Father.

2. After saying that Christ was in the form of God, Philippians 2:6 goes on to say that Christ “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped” (*NIV*). This phrase is a powerful argument *against* the Trinity. If Jesus were God, then it would make no sense at all to say that he did not “grasp” at equality with God because no one grasps at equality with himself. It only makes sense to compliment someone for not seeking equality when he is not equal. Some Trinitarians say, “Well, he was not grasping for equality with the Father.” That is not what the verse says. It says Christ did not grasp at equality with *God*, which makes the verse nonsense if he were God.

3. The opening of verse 7 contains a phrase that has caused serious division among Trinitarians. It says, “But made himself of no reputation” (*KJV*), “but made himself nothing” (*NIV*), “but emptied himself” (*NASB, RSV, NRSV, New American Bible*). The Greek word that is in question is *kenos*, which literally means, “to empty.” For more than a thousand years, from the church councils in the fourth century until the nineteenth century, the orthodox position of the Church was that Christ was fully God and fully man at the same time in one body. This doctrine is known as the “dual nature of Christ,” and has to be supported with non-biblical words like *communicatio idiomatum*, literally, “the communication of the idiom.” This refers to the way that the “God” nature of Christ is

united to the “man” nature of Christ in such a way that the actions and conditions of the man can be God and the actions and conditions of God can be man. Dr. Justo Gonzalez, an authority on the history of the Christian Church, notes, “The divine and human natures exist in a single being, although how that can be is the greatest mystery of the faith.”¹ Biblical truth is not an “incomprehensible mystery.” In fact, God longs for us to know Him and His truth (see the notes on Luke 1:35).

The doctrine of the dual nature of Christ has been the standard explanation for the miracles of Christ, such as multiplying food, knowing the thoughts of others, raising the dead, *etc.* This explanation is maintained in spite of the fact that the prophets in the Old Testament were also able to do these things. The doctrine of Christ’s dual nature has caused a serious problem that is stated well by John Wren-Lewis:

Certainly up to the Second World War, the commonest vision of Jesus was not as a man *at all*. He was a God in human form, full of supernatural knowledge and miraculous power, very much like the Olympian gods were supposed to be when they visited the earth in disguise.”²

Our experience in speaking to Christians all over the world confirms what Wren-Lewis stated: the average Christian does not feel that Christ “was made like his brothers in every way” (Heb. 2:17), but instead feels that Christ was able to do what he did because he was fundamentally different. We believe that the teaching of the dual nature is non-biblical and robs power from people who might otherwise seek to *think* and *act* like Christ. This artificially separates people from the Lord Jesus.

In Germany in the mid-1800’s, a Lutheran theologian named Gottfried Thomasius began what has now developed into “Kenotic Theology.” This thinking arose out of some very real concerns that some Trinitarians had about dual nature theology. First, dual nature theology did not allow Christ’s full humanity to be expressed. Second, it seemed to turn Christ into an aberration: very God and very man at the same time. Third, “if Jesus were both omniscient God and limited man, then he had two centers, and thus was fundamentally not one of us”. Kenotic Theology (which has since splintered into a number of variants) provided a “solution” to these problems. Since Philippians 2:7 says Christ “emptied himself,” what he must have “emptied” was his God-nature, *i.e.*, sometime before his incarnation, Christ agreed to “self-limitation” and came down to earth as a man only.

Trinitarian theologians have vehemently disagreed among themselves about Kenotic Theology, and some orthodox theologians have even called its adherents “heretics.” The central criticisms of Kenotic Theology are: First, being only a little more than a hundred years old, it is simply not the historic position of the Church. Second, orthodox theologians say that it is not biblical, and that Philippians 2:7 does not mean what kenotic theologians say it means. And third, Kenotic Theology forces God to change—God becomes a man—which causes two problems for orthodox Trinitarians: God cannot change, and God is not a man.

We agree with the Kenotic theologians who say that dual nature theology does not allow Christ's humanity to be expressed, and that it creates a "being" who is really an aberration and "fundamentally not one of us."³ However, we also agree with the orthodox Trinitarians who take the biblical stance that God is not a man, and that God cannot change. We assert that it is Trinitarian doctrine that has caused these problems, and that there simply is *no solution* to them as long as one holds a Trinitarian position. We assert that the real solution is to realize that there is only one True God, the Father, and that Jesus Christ is the "man accredited by God" who has now been made "both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:22 and 36). Then Christ is fully man and is "one of us," and God is God and has never changed or been a man.

4. While Trinitarians have argued among themselves about the meaning of Philippians 2:6-8, an unfortunate thing has occurred—the loss of the actual meaning of the verse. The verse is not speaking either of Christ's giving up his "Godhood" at his incarnation or of his God-nature being willing to "hide" so that his man-nature can show itself clearly. Rather, it is saying something else. Scripture says Christ was the "image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4), and Jesus himself testified that if one had seen him, he had seen the Father. Saying that Christ was in the "form" (outward appearance) of God is simply stating that truth in another way. Unlike Adam, who grasped at being like God (Gen. 3:5), Christ, the Last Adam, "emptied himself" of all his reputation and the things due him as the true child of the King. He lived in the same fashion as other men. He humbled himself to the Word and will of God. He lived by "It is written" and the commands of his Father. He did not "toot his own horn," but instead called himself "the son of man," which, in the Aramaic language he spoke, meant "a man." He trusted God and became obedient, even to a horrible and shameful death on a cross.

The Philippian Church was doing well and was supportive of Paul, but they had problems as well. There was "selfish ambition" (1:15; 2:3) and "vain conceit" (2:3), arguing and lack of consideration for others (2:4 and 14) and a need for humility, purity and blamelessness (2:3 and 15). So, Paul wrote an exhortation to the believers that, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (2:5). He then went on to show how Christ did not grasp at equality with God, but was completely humble, and as a result God "highly exalted him." The example of Jesus Christ is a powerful one. We do not need to make sure people notice us or know who we are. We should simply serve in obedience and humility, assured that God will one day reward us for our deeds.

Buzzard, pp. 48-50

Dana, Letter #2, pp. 16 and 17

Farley, pp. 76-78

New American Bible, footnote on Philippians 2:7.

Norton, pp. 191-193

Racovian Catechism, pp. 119-121

Snedeker, pp. 443-446

Endnotes:

1. Justo Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1992), pp. 222 and 223.
2. John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1963), p. 66.
3. Walter Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1984), pp. 600 and 601.

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