Walking the Way of the Cross with Paul

SESSION 3

Is Jesus God or human or both?

Introduction

Christianity has always been "about" Jesus in a way different from the way other religions relate to their founders. Not only his teaching and his deeds but his identity and the meaning of his life and death are constant subjects in Christian theology and preaching. But Christian claims about Jesus have always been contested. Is Jesus God or human or both? How much of him was human, how much was God, and how did the two relate? We find controversies, or at least differences, over these matters already in the New Testament (1 John represents one side in such a conflict; Luke depicts Jesus as an inspired prophet, while Matthew presents him as "God with us"). Other religions have often been skeptical of the idea of Jesus as divine, and today even some Christians share this skepticism.

It is not surprising, then, to see Paul taking up the theme of the identity and nature of Jesus. In fact, one passage in which he does so, in Philippians 2:1–11, builds on an even earlier reflection in the form of a hymn. What Paul does with this hymn is interesting too: he uses it to reflect, not on the nature of Jesus Christ, but on the way in which Christians should relate to one another. Here we see how early such exalted beliefs about Jesus developed and also what creative significance they could have. At the center of both the hymn and Paul's use of it is the cross.

An Early Hymn

Philippians 2:6-11 has been identified by modern scholars as at least a fragment of an early Christian hymn in

Today's Scripture

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

(Phil. 2:1–11)

praise of Christ. The language, style, and structure of the passage all give clues to its origin as a hymn, presumably used in Christian worship in some way. These same factors suggest that Paul himself did not compose the hymn but that (as preachers often do today) he quoted something familiar to his audience to help make a point.

One thing worth noting is the early date of this hymn and its ideas. Paul's letter to the Philippians was probably written around either the year 65 or 55, with 55 being somewhat more likely. If the hymn already existed when the letter was written, then it must be at least as early as 60 and more likely dates to around 50, perhaps even sometime in the 40s. This means that Christians were already singing hymns about Jesus as "equal to God" within 25 or even 15 years after his death. That is not a long time, given that both communication and cultural change were much slower in ancient times than they are today. These beliefs did not develop slowly, after the memory of Jesus' human life had long faded, but arose fairly quickly, while those who knew him were still alive and active.

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Another point worth noticing about the hymn is more obvious: it is a *hymn*, not a creed. The statement about Jesus' "equality with God" is not presented as a dogma to be believed, or else. Rather, it is set amid poetic and metaphorical (or symbolic) language as part of an act of joyous praise, something that catches the imagination as well as the intellect. It is the work of a poet or lyricist, not a doctrinal authority. The hymn is a creative statement of belief about Jesus for use in worship. Of course, such beliefs, and the language used to express them, were still in the early stages of their development. The wording of the hymn does not use the terminology that would become part of the official creeds a few centuries later. Instead, the hymn represents the creative ferment of early Christianity, when believers were first beginning to think such thoughts and to put them not only into theological formulas but into poetry and song.

Paul himself uses the hymn in yet another creative way—to present the *divine* Jesus as a model for *human* action. This suggests that in these early years, lofty beliefs about Jesus Christ were not something rigid and static, but a dynamic force in Christian worship, thought, and life. It also reminds us that the way we think about Jesus affects the way we think about ourselves. What does it mean for our lives to say that one who had "equality with God" became "obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross"?

The Cross in the History of God

Philippians 2:6–11 has an obvious story line. Christ Jesus was "in the form of God" but "emptied himself," taking on human form and in humility accepting crucifixion and death. Because of this, God then exalted him and bestowed on him "the name that is above every name" so that every creature in the universe ultimately will worship and confess that he is Lord, to the glory of God. This story has first a downward motion, from heaven to earth, and then a corresponding upward motion. The two movements cover a vast time, from Jesus' preexistence with God to a point beyond the singer's day when Jesus is universally worshiped. The chronological focus, however, is on the central point of Jesus' self-emptying, death, and exaltation.

The hymn tells this story as a story of God, the kind of story that is bound to arise when people believe that God has entered human life. The story line is clearly structured so as to make the cross both the low point and the turning point of the story. It moves downward from divine nature to human nature to death and then specifically to "death on a cross," reminding us that crucifixion was the most horrible and degrading form of capital punishment known. Jesus' crucifixion is an abyss unimaginably far removed from the status of "equality with God." The cross thus becomes a defining moment in *God's* history. It shows what God is willing to do, the lengths to which God is willing to go. Remember that in ancient culture, status and honor were everything. Anyone who possessed any honor at all would defend it to his last breath; to move downward on the social scale was a disastrous disgrace. The move from "the form of God" to "the form of a slave" would have been truly breathtaking to those who first sang and heard this hymn.

The meaning of "he was in the form of God" is not completely clear, but it seems to indicate that Christ

had an existence in which he shared the being, nature, or glory of God. Yet this One who was equivalent to God voluntarily went through death, and in a horrible way. Most current translations say that Christ, *in spite of* being divine, humbly took on human nature and human death (NRSV: "though he was in the form of God"). But the hymn can also be read as saying that Christ did so *because* he was divine (TNIV: "being in very nature God"). In this interpretation, self-humbling and self-giving for the sake of another is part of what it means to share the form or the nature of God.

The cross is the central moment of the story, but the story doesn't end there. After this low point there is a sharp rebound: "Therefore God also highly exalted him. . . ." In this exaltation, Jesus receives "the name that is above every name," meaning the *divine* name, "Lord" (v. 11; this is the word used to translate the sacred name of God in the Old Testament). This implies a number of things. First, "Jesus Christ is Lord" makes a strong contrast with "Caesar is Lord," the acclamation used for the Roman Emperor. Second, Christ receives this acknowledgment as the final consequence of his self-emptying. Rather than being hailed for his military prowess and triumphs, as emperors were, he is acclaimed for having allowed himself to be humiliated and defeated on the cross. In the end, Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection bring greater glory and praise to God, because they reveal the astounding plan that God has devised and carried out.

Humility, then, is not only a matter of inner feelings and of attitude. It involves *action at the service of others*.

"Let the Same Mind Be in You. . . ."

Whoever composed this hymn opened up possibilities for long and deep reflection on the mysterious nature and will of the God who sent us a crucified Messiah. As noted above, however, Paul does not incorporate the hymn into his letter to Philippi for the sake of theological speculation. Rather, he uses the hymn creatively, to talk to his readers not about how they should think or how they should worship but about how they should live. For Paul, the crucified Christ was the model for Christian life.

No one would accuse Paul himself of being a poet, but he does show literary skill in weaving the words of the hymn into the words of his letter. For instance, in Philippians 2:2 he speaks of the kind of mind the Philippians should have, and in introducing the hymn in v. 5 he refers to the kind of mind that Christ had. Paul's use of this hymn suggests that it is this Christ-like mind that will produce the unity of mind Paul urges the Philippians to have in v. 2. Other repetitions are more obvious in the Greek than in English. For instance, "conceit" in v. 3 is literally "empty-glory" (traditionally translated "vainglory"), the empty self-glorification to which human beings are prone. The beginning and end of the hymn then also speak of emptiness (Christ's self-emptying, v. 7) and of glory (the glory of God that increases through Christ's sacrifice and exaltation, v. 11). Finally, v. 3 counters conceit with humility, which paves the way for the reference to Christ's self-humbling in the hymn (v. 8).

By weaving some of the language of the hymn into his exhortation on Christian living, Paul seeks to make his point as much by playing with words as by using sheer logic. The culture of that time and place was more oral than ours (the Philippians would *hear* Paul's letter read aloud to them), and people enjoyed this kind of wordplay. It helped hearers follow an argument, and it carried a certain persuasiveness in itself. It's a little more work for us, but we too can let this playing with words guide us in understanding what Paul was trying to say.

Paul's exhortation really begins in Philippians 1:27. It is focused on unity, a theme that also occurs elsewhere in Philippians (for instance, in 4:2–3). In pleading for unity, he urges them to "be of the same mind . . . being in full accord and of one mind" (2:2). He then introduces the hymn by an encouragement to have the same kind of mind as Christ (v. 5). Clearly Paul thinks this Christ-like mind will lead to unity of mind among the Philippians, and that is the point he is trying to get across by using the word "mind" to link the believers and Christ.

How does a Christ-like mind produce unity? The exhortation to oneness of mind is followed closely by the contrast between conceit and humility (2:2–3). This humility

reappears in the self-humbling of Christ Jesus in v. 8. His humble action forms the pattern that Paul wishes the Philippians to follow. There is something important to be noticed about this pattern of humility. It is not the humility of a person in a subservient position giving deference to her or his "superiors." Instead it is the humility of someone in the most superior position imaginable, "in the form of God," exchanging that position for one of lowly obedience. It is one thing to be forced into humility because you have no other safe choice. It is something else altogether to have all the choices in the world and to choose humility instead of grandeur. This is the way of Christ, choosing to abandon high status and identify with lowliness in order to serve the lowly. Humility, then, is not only a matter of inner feelings and of attitude. It involves *action at the service of others*. This is why it contrasts with "conceit" or "empty-glory" (v. 3) and why the Christ-like mind set on humility can create unity. Rather than seeking its own good and its own honor and public esteem, humility seeks the good of others and gives honor to them. In this way, humility lowers the intensity of competitiveness and smoothes out antagonism, helping to make unity possible.

Having used wordplay to establish the similarity between the mind and humility of Christ and the mind and humility desired of the Philippians, Paul now uses it to show the difference between human "conceit" and the actions of Christ. In place of the human tendency toward empty self-glorification, Christ emptied himself and so brought glory to God. Paul's wordplay breaks apart the "empty-glory" that he rejects into the self-emptying and God-glorifying of Christ. Seeking one's own glory and honor (the fundamental social quest in that culture) leads only to emptiness; emptying oneself leads to exaltation from God and to God's glory. We are reminded of the paradoxes taught by Jesus: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it" (Luke 9:24); "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35); "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:11).

Modern American culture regards humility and obedience with suspicion. We are told to focus on self-improvement and self-assertion. Rebellious individualism is vigorously promoted in movies, television, music, and video games, particularly for males. If humble obedience is encouraged as a traditional Christian virtue, many will question this tradition as stifling to self-esteem at best and supporting the oppression of people in marginal social positions and abusive relationships at worst. It is easy to blame Paul for this; but the portrayal of Christ in the hymn he quotes, as one who abandoned status to serve others in unfathomable humility, is consistent with the teaching of Jesus himself. This is an area, it seems, in which Christianity is as countercultural today as it was in the first century.

If we accept Paul's urging to have the same mind-set as Christ, then we must accept this countercultural stance as well. We do need to guard against the misapplication of this teaching, particularly when it is used (as it often has been) to reinforce the domination of weaker persons and groups by those in power. Jesus, like the prophets before him, spoke and acted against that sort of domination. In fact, Paul's exhortation to "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. . . . Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" is most properly addressed to those who have some measure of power or standing. They are the ones who may be most tempted by ambition and who may be most in need of self-emptying. In a culture that rewards ambition and the quest for fame, Christians walking the way of the cross may need to ask themselves where they are placed and whether their faith is inviting them to live against the grain of the world around them.

Even Death on a Cross

The claim that Jesus was God incarnate means that a *story* about God is more significant for Christianity than for other monotheistic religions. The story sung in the hymn in Philippians 2 tells of divine self-emptying and exaltation. With the cross at its center, if offers rich possibilities for thinking (and singing) about God's ways with us, Jesus' story as part of God's story, and the ways in which our own stories may be patterned after his. Ever since Jesus himself called disciples and invited them into his story, the cross has been the central guidepost of the Christian landscape, the keynote of the Christian song.

About the Writer

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