

Μορφή, Transformation, and Glorification

In eternity Christ possessed a divine form (μορφή), the glorious expression of His divine nature or essence. In incarnation He laid aside this glorious expression (but not the divine essence) and acquired a human μορφή with its human nature or essence. As the culmination of the process of His incarnation, human living, death, and resurrection, His human μορφή was transfigured into a glorious μορφή. The human form was still preserved even in the process of its uplifting and glorification. Through such a process the glorious, divine μορφή that He had before incarnation was now expressed in the human μορφή that He laid hold of through incarnation. This transfiguration was the glorification of Christ's humanity.

As a result of Christ's regeneration of the believers, the divine nature or essence was added to the believers' human nature so that like Christ they also possess two natures or essences. Through the process of transformation and conformation to the image of Christ, the believers' human μορφή will be also transfigured into a glorious μορφή, with divinity being expressed in the human μορφή. This is the believers' glorification—the believers becoming a reproduction of Christ.¹

In this article we look at the meaning of the word μορφή, particularly as it relates to the essence or nature of a substance, both in general terms and in compound words such as *transform* and *conform*. Next we look at how the word μορφή is used in relation to Christ in Philippians 2 and the process that He went through that resulted in His glorification. Finally, we consider the application of μορφή to the believers especially in terms of their transformation and conformation, which also consummates in their glorification.

The Meaning of Μορφή

In classical Greek and in the Septuagint, the word μορφή carries the notion mostly of outward form or external appearance, without necessarily indicating the inward essence. In the New Testament μορφή only occurs three times, and it is used only in reference to the person of Christ (Mark 16:12; Phil. 2:6-7). It is mostly translated "form" in English, but in the theological context of Philippians 2 it denotes more than just the outward appearance of something. Here μορφή carries the notion

of the outward expression of a thing insofar as it is a reflection of inward nature or essence. This also can be seen when it is compared with two other Greek words in the same context that emphasize more the outward expression. As O'Brien, quoting H. A. A. Kennedy, concludes, "μορφή refers to that 'form which truly and fully expresses the being which underlies it'" (210).

Μορφή is the root of the verb μορφόω, "to form, to give shape to," and two compound verbs, μεταμορφόω, "to transform, change shape," and συμμορφίζω, "to conform."² In the New Testament all of these verbs are used in the passive voice. Μορφόω, "to be formed," only occurs once in the New Testament (Gal. 4:19). Μεταμορφόω is a compound of μετά, "after, with" (frequently having the meaning "change" in compounds) and the verb μορφόω, which strictly speaking means "'to change into another form.' The change may be an external one, or a change of state, or an inner change" (Behm 609). It occurs four times in the New Testament. In Matthew 17:2 and Mark 9:2 it is usually translated "to be transfigured"; in Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18 it is translated "to be transformed." Συμμορφίζω, a compound of the preposition σύν, "with," and μορφίζω, "to cause to have a form, to make a form—the causative of μορφόω," occurs only once and means "to be conformed, to be formed together" (Phil. 3:10). Related to it is the adjective σύμμορφος, which means "having the same form, conformed" and occurs twice (Rom. 8:29; Phil. 3:21). The same notion of μορφή in reference to Christ—the outward expression of something related to its inward nature or essence—can also be applied to the believers' transformation and conformation to become the same as Christ in life, nature, and expression.

Μορφή in Reference to Christ

In Philippians 2:6-11 we have the clearest example of the word μορφή according to the understanding of it outlined above. It occurs in these verses along with two other Greek words *ὁμοιώμα* (likeness) and *σχῆμα* (fashion), which have similar, but distinct, meanings. The verses refer to Christ in His pre-incarnation state, incarnation, human living, crucifixion, resurrection, and exaltation:

Who, existing in the form (μορφή) of God, did not consider

being equal with God a treasure to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form (μορφήν) of a slave, becoming in the likeness (ὁμοιώματι) of men; and being found in fashion (σχῆματι) as a man, He humbled Himself, becoming obedient even unto death, and that the death of a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should openly confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory (εἰς δόξαν) of God the Father.

Prior to His incarnation, Christ existed in the form of God. He had the essence of God with its corresponding outward expression. What this expression was, the New Testament gives us only a hint. John 17:5 says, “And now, glorify Me along with Yourself, Father, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.” Clearly it was a glorious expression. This expression was the effulgence or shining out (Heb. 1:3) of the invisible God whose image is Christ (Col. 1:15; 2 Cor. 4:4). Christ’s form with its outward expression, while deriving from His inward essence, is not identical with that essence. As Vincent clearly states, “This *form*, not being *identical* with the divine essence, but dependent upon it, and necessarily implying it, can be parted with or laid aside” (431). Indeed this is what happened when Christ became a man.

In order to be incarnated as a man, Christ laid aside this glorious outward expression and emptied Himself so that He could take on another form (μορφή), that of a human being, as a slave. In so doing, He did not lay aside the essence and nature of God but only the outward expression. It was not a change of essence but a change of state. Just as salt can exist in a form or state that differs from its crystalline state (e.g., a liquid or gas) but still retain its inward chemical constituents, so also Christ took on a human form while retaining His divine essence and nature.³ His human form was that of the lowliest of humans, that of a slave to serve both God (Rev. 22:3) and man (Matt. 20:28). As a result, Christ had two natures (as stated clearly in the Chalcedonian creed) in the one human form (μορφή). The meaning of μορφή—the outward form which implies Christ’s inward human essence or nature—becomes clearer when compared to two similar words used to describe His human form, ὁμοίωμα (likeness) and σχῆμα (fashion), both referring to His outward appearance or semblance, not implying anything about the inward essence or reality.

Christ became in the likeness (ὁμοιώματι) of men, in outward appearance just like other human beings (yet without sin, being only “in the likeness (ὁμοιώματι) of the flesh of sin,” Rom. 8:3). The word ὁμοίωμα implies His full identification with the human race. If He were placed in a crowd of human beings, He would look just like anyone else with-

out standing out as unusual or particular—so much so that people attributed to Him a very ordinary existence as indicated by statements such as, “Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?” (Matt. 13:55).

Further, the Lord Jesus was also found in fashion (σχῆματι) as a man. Σχήμα differs from μορφή in that it signifies His whole outward presentation, His outward guise or semblance perceptible to the senses, without implying the inward reality.⁴ When He was examined and scrutinized, He was found to be a genuine man according to God’s original creation (1 Tim. 2:5; John 19:5). He was a perfect human being. He was also a genuine descendant of Adam with a genealogy going back to Adam (Luke 3:38) but not tainted by the fall. The application of ὁμοίωμα and σχῆμα to Christ in Philippians 2 confirms that Christ’s human μορφή was indeed a genuine human expression.

This genuine human being, containing the divine nature and essence, died on the cross, was buried, and resurrected. In resurrection His human form was transfigured into a glorious form.⁵ This form had been unveiled on the Mount of Transfiguration prior to His death. His transfiguration was a glimpse of the glorious manifestation of the coming kingdom (Matt. 16:28). “He was transfigured [μετεμορφώθη—the same word in Greek also translated “transformed”] before them” (17:2; Mark 9:2; cf. Luke 9:29, which states simply that His face became different).⁶ His human form was glorious, with His face shining like the sun and His garments as white as the light. This glorious manifestation was proleptic: it was not the normal expression of Jesus in His humanity but a precursor of the time when Jesus’ humanity would be deified humanity, humanity saturated with the divine element. Analogous to a grain of wheat falling into the ground, dying, and changing its form (1 Cor. 15:35-49), His death and His resurrection caused the shell of His humanity to be broken and His divine element, with its divine expression, or glory, to be released; thus, He was glorified (δοξασθή—John 12:23-24). Christ was not only glorified (δοξάζω—7:39; 12:16; 13:31; 17:1, 5; Acts 3:13, 15), a result of the process of His death and resurrection, but also entered into His glory (εἰς δόξαν—Luke 24:26), a pioneering act that paved the way for the many sons of God to follow (Heb. 2:10).

What Christ’s death and resurrection produced was not a third form but a manifestation of the divine form—the divine glory (“His glory”—Luke 24:26) that He possessed in eternity past before incarnation (John 17:5)—but now also expressed through the human form that He received through incarnation. It was the expression of divinity in His glorified humanity. Jesus’ body was a glorious spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:44), saturated with divinity, able to pass through walls (John 20:19, 26), yet it was still a tangible human body (cf. Luke 24:29; John 20:27), very human in

appearance. Sometimes He was recognizable (1 Cor. 15:5; Matt. 28:17; John 20:19, 26), but at other times He was not initially recognized by His disciples; He was mistaken for a gardener (v. 15), a traveler (Luke 24:16, cf. v. 31), and someone cooking fish beside the seashore (John 21:4, 7).⁷ After His ascension He is still a man. He is the Son of Man sitting on the throne (Acts 7:56), He will come again as the Son of Man in glory (Matt. 26:64; Luke 9:26), and in eternity He will be the Lamb on the throne as an eternal reminder of His redeeming humanity, yet on the throne, as an eternal testimony to His divinity (Rev. 7:17; 22:1, 3).

Μορφή Related to the Transformation and Glorification of the Believers

Through creation and birth, human beings receive the human essence and nature with its corresponding μορφή. Through regeneration the believers are born again, born from above, or born of God, and receive the divine essence and nature. Through transformation the human essence and nature is mingled and saturated with the divine essence and nature, resulting in a change in expression that is a reflection of the inward content. This transformation process occurs by the renewing of the believers' mind (Rom. 12:2) and by then beholding and reflecting like a mirror the glory of the Lord, progressing from one degree of glory to another degree (2 Cor. 3:18). Transformation is an inward organic process that differs from outwardly being fashioned (μετασχηματίζω) according to the age of this world and from being fashioned according to the former lusts in ignorance (Rom. 12:2; 1 Pet. 1:14), which the believers are charged to avoid.⁸

In addition to being transformed, we are undergoing a process by which Christ Himself is being formed in us (μορφωθῆναι, Gal. 4:19). Wuest translates this verse, "Until Christ be outwardly expressed in you, that outward expression proceeding from and being truly representative of Him" (50-51). At the time of our regeneration, the glorious Christ was born into us, and now He lives in us (2:20), desiring to grow unto maturity until He is fully formed within us. As a result, He will be wrought into us to such an extent that we express Him from our Christ-constituted being. We are also undergoing the process of conformation, by which we are being conformed to the image (συμμόρφους τῆς εἰκόνος) of the firstborn Son (Rom. 8:29), the One who was begotten as the Son of God in His humanity at the time of His resurrection (1:4; Acts 13:33). Conformation is the end result of transformation, including the inward, organic change in essence and nature that occurs through transformation as well as the outward change in form, so that we match the glorified image of Christ. In this way, we become His many brothers, fully matured to be the same as He is in life, nature, and expression. By being conformed to His death (συμμορφιζόμενος τῷ θανάτῳ αὐτοῦ, Phil. 3:10), we also

live the same kind of life that He lived, a self-emptying, self-humbling, self-denying, and crucified life as revealed in Philippians 2. Through Christ being formed in us and our being conformed to His image, we and He ultimately will bear the same μορφή.

At the end of the processes of transformation and conformation, Christ will transfigure our body (μετασχηματίσει), making it conformed (σύμμορφον) to the body of His glory (Phil. 3:21). Transformation refers to an inward organic change and takes place primarily in the soul, whereas transfiguration refers to the change that takes place primarily in the body as the ultimate consummation of God's salvation. Transfiguration manifests the change that has taken place through transformation. Transfiguration is the equivalent of being glorified. Like Christ, the believers are not only glorified (Rom. 8:17, 30), they also enter into glory (Heb. 2:10; 1 Thes. 2:12; 1 Pet. 5:10). As the Pioneer and the Author of our salvation (Heb. 2:10), Christ, the Firstborn, is leading us, the many sons of God, along the pathway to glory.

As a result of all these processes, our μορφή will correspond to Christ's. Our human life, nature, and essence will be mingled and permeated with the divine life, nature, and essence, and the divine μορφή will be expressed in our human μορφή. The same glorious expression that radiated from Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration will radiate out of the glorified believers in the New Jerusalem, the city that has the glory of God as His corporate expression (Rev. 21:11, 23).

by Roger Good

Notes

¹While the word μορφή is not used to refer to the believers in the New Testament, three related words μορφώω, μεταμορφώω, and συμμορφίζω, which have μορφή as their root and impact a change in the human μορφή, are used in reference to the believers.

²Μορφή is also the root of the word μόρφωσις (form), which carries the notions of outward form, or external shape alone, without inward reality, especially in its two occurrences in the New Testament when used by the apostle Paul as in "form of the knowledge" (Rom. 2:20) and "form of godliness" (2 Tim. 3:5).

³The crystalline form or μορφή of rock salt (the chemical sodium chloride—NaCl) is that of a cube. However, the same essence of sodium chloride can also exist in other states (e.g., liquid or gas) in which its cubic crystalline form is not observable to the eye, as occurs with salt water, where the existence of the element sodium chloride is evident when one tastes it. (I am indebted to my colleague Kerry Robichaux for this illustration.)

⁴Trench has some good examples to illustrate the difference between μορφή and σχήμα:

The distinction between them comes out very clearly in the compound verbs μετασηματίζειν ["to transfigure"] and μεταμορφῶν ["to transform"]. Thus if I were to change a Dutch garden into an Italian, this would be μετασηματισμός; but if I were to transform the garden into something wholly different, as into a city, this would be μεταμόρφωσις. It is possible for Satan μετασηματίζειν ["to transfigure"] himself into an angel of light (2 Cor. xi.14); he can take the whole outward semblance of such. But to any such change of his it would be impossible to apply the μεταμορφῶσθαι: for this would imply a change not of external but internal, not of accidents but of essence, which lies quite beyond his power. (263-264)

The variation can also be observed in Romans 12:2:

"Do not fall in," says the Apostle, "with the fleeting fashions of this world, nor be yourselves fashioned to them (μὴ συσηματίζεσθε), but undergo a deep abiding change (ἀλλὰ μεταμορφῶσθε) by the renewing of your mind, such as the Spirit of God alone can work in you" (cf. 2 Cor. iii.18). (264)

Μορφή is "of the essence of a thing"; σχῆμα is its "accident," an attribute not essential to the nature of something, and "whatever changes it may undergo" leave "the thing itself essentially, or formally, the same as it was before." (265)

Contrast too in English "*deformed*" and "*disfigured*." A hunchback is "deformed," a man that has been beaten about the face may be "disfigured"; the deformity is bound up in the very existence of the one; the disfigurement of the other may in a few days have quite passed away. In "transformed" and "transfigured" it is easy to recognize the same distinction. (266)

⁵Or, different form. Mark 16:12 says, "And after these things, He appeared in a different form [ἕτερον μορφήν] to two of them as they were walking on their way into the countryside." There is some debate as to the meaning of the words *different form*. Many commentators believe that it refers simply to a form different than the form (of the gardener, cf. John 20:15) in which He appeared to Mary Magdalene in Mark 16:9, i.e., as He appeared to the two walkers as a fellow traveler (cf. Luke 24:16; v. 31). However, since this was after His resurrection and transfiguration of His body, it can also be considered a testimony to the change that had taken place through that process (cf. Trench, "The words intimate to us how vast the mysterious change to which his body had been submitted, even as they are in keeping with the μεταμορφώθη of Matt. xvii.2; Mark ix.2; the transformation upon the Mount being a prophetic anticipation of that which hereafter should be" (265)). However, due to the ambiguity of the meaning of ἕτερον μορφήν in this verse and the textual problems with the last twelve verses of Mark (which are absent in two of the oldest Greek manuscripts), we should not read too much into the significance of meaning of μορφή here.

⁶Strictly speaking, the transformation that occurred on the Mount of Transfiguration was a *transfiguration* rather than a *trans-*

formation, as is indicated by the translation of these verses in most versions. Christ did not change into a form wholly different from that which He had already possessed. In eternity He had the divine μορφή with the divine essence and nature; in His incarnation He put on the human μορφή with its human essence and nature; and then in His transfiguration the same divine μορφή that He had in eternity momentarily was expressed out through His human μορφή. In contrast, the believers undergo a real, eternal transformation, a change into a form that they have never possessed before. They begin merely as human beings having a human μορφή with its human essence and nature but are transformed by the divine life and nature growing and maturing in them. This produces a glorious expression, the expression of Christ with His divinity expressed out of their human μορφή. Luke in his recounting of Christ's transfiguration is finer in his use of the Greek words than the other synoptic Gospels. He does not use the verb μεταμορφῶ but rather merely states that "the appearance [τὸ εἶδος] of His face became different [ἕτερον]" (9:29). We could say that Christ's humanity was transformed in the sense that it was changed when He rose from the dead. It was vivified, glorified, uplifted, and deified. However, His humanity still has the human essence and nature with a human μορφή. His human μορφή did not change into something other than a human μορφή, but it was changed in the sense that it was glorified.

⁷It is interesting to note that there is no record after Christ's resurrection and before His ascension of His having the same glorious features that were present on the Mount of Transfiguration. Although His body had no doubt undergone a major change through the process of death and resurrection, there was also something quite normal about His appearance that did not distinguish Him from a gardener or a traveler. Perhaps the glorious manifestation on the Mount of Transfiguration is particularly relevant to His coming in His kingdom (Matt. 16:28). When He returns for His kingdom, He will appear with a glorious manifestation (24:30; 25:31; Luke 9:26). At this time the glorious manifestation will not be His alone, but it will be shared with the believers (2 Thes. 1:10; Col. 3:4; 1 John 3:2; 1 Pet. 1:7; cf. 1 Tim. 3:16).

⁸Cf. note 4 above.

Works Cited

- Behm, J. "*Metamorphōō*." *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Eds. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Trans. and abr. in 1 vol. G. W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, (1985): 609.
- O'Brien, Peter T. *The Epistle to the Philippians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.
- Trench, Richard C. *Synonyms of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980.
- Vincent, Marvin R. *Word Studies in the New Testament*. Vol. 3. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980.
- Wuest, Kenneth S. "Studies in the Vocabulary." *Wuest's Word Studies from the Greek New Testament*. Vol. 3. [1945]. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973.