

The Two States of Christ

Rev. Jonas Schroeter
Evangelical Lutheran Free Church (Germany)

Introduction

Compare the child in the manger that the Gospel of Luke puts before our eyes with the risen Lord who on the evening of the first day of the week walks through a locked door to comfort his disciples with the greeting, "Peace be with you." Compare the man dying on the cross with the picture the Holy Spirit showed to Stephen when he looked up before his death and saw Jesus Christ standing at the right hand of God. We find an immense difference between the mode of existence of Christ during his earthly days until his death and the mode of existence of our risen Savior. The humble preacher and teacher Jesus from Nazareth on the one hand, and the exalted Lord of all on the other, show us the two states of Christ.

Besides the facts in the Gospel record we find this doctrine most clearly in Phil 2:5-10: Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

From this passage the terms are taken that are in use to describe the two states of Christ. Following the Greek expression *ejkevnwsen eJautovn*—"he emptied Himself," the Latin word *exinanitio* came into use, as well as the term *exaltatio*.

Before we discuss the facts that the Bible shows us about the states of exinanition and exaltation, we will first ask whom Scripture shows us as the subject of exinanition and exaltation. Phillipians 2 gives us Jesus Christ. This name is not used of the eternal *logos asarkos* but of the *logos ensarkos*. It is the Word that already became flesh who now emptied himself and was later exalted. To be precise we also need to define that it was the person of the Son of God according to his human nature. The man Jesus passed through exinanition to exaltation. This can not be stated of the divine nature since the eternal God does not and can not change (Psalm 102:27).

Since incarnation and exinanition start at the same point, we are tempted to equate both. But if we understand exinanition as equal to incarnation, this would necessarily lead to the conclusion that incarnation ended when the exaltation began. But Scripture tells us that the human nature also was exalted. For this reason we need to make the distinction between incarnation and exinanition. They both began at the same point, but incarnation continues beyond the grave forever. The state of exinanition ended on Easter morning.

In the state of exinanition the *logos ensarkos* refrained from living on an equal level with God and appeared in the form of a servant. In the state of exaltation He received the name above every name.

The State of Exinanition

General facts

During this period Christ voluntarily gave up the full use and revelation of the divine power and glory that was given to his human nature. He emptied himself and took on the form of a servant. This is not to be confused with giving up the divine attributes themselves. Even in the state of exinanition Christ possessed all of his divine power, knowledge and glory, and there are incidents when He actually used them even in His earthly days, for instance to perform miracles.

No one could have forced him to come to this world in the form of a servant. He humbled himself voluntarily only as he followed God's will to show love to sinners. He came in order to achieve salvation for mankind.

The History of Exinanition

The state of exinanition covers the period of Christ's earthly days from his conception until his burial. The Bible does not give us an exact number of steps or stages. We are free to distinguish any number as long as we keep in mind that all of these stages of exinanition are not steps of increasing humiliation.

Ever since the early church formulated the apostolic creed, five or six steps are customary. Let's discuss six stages of the history of exinanition and see which way our Lord went in supreme obedience in order to redeem us.

The conception of Christ

In looking at the conception of Jesus Christ we speak about the very beginning of exinanition. That's not because exinanition is the same as incarnation. But the very moment when Christ's human nature became united with the divine nature the human nature of Christ took on the "form of a servant."

Scientists in our day are working hard to research the mysteries involved in the normal process of human conception. But the conception of Christ through the direct work of the Holy Spirit will always remain a transcendent mystery and as such an article of faith. The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God (Luke 1:35). This is all we can know about the conception of Christ. By way of this miracle God became man, or to put it in other words: Godhood and manhood were united. This child will not have a human father.

When God created Adam, he made him an adult person. When God became man, he went so far in his humiliation as to develop from embryo through all stages of childhood. In this way he became fully our brother.

The birth of Christ

According to the report in Luke 2 the birth of Jesus took place in the common manner of all human births. There is not anything unusual or miraculous about the birth itself. Only the poverty and lowliness of the circumstances put the birth of our Savior in some extraordinary light.

The unusual aspect of this birth follows from the miraculous conception. Isaiah foretold that a virgin would be with child and give birth to a son (7:14). Mary learned to understand this miracle when the angel reminded her: Nothing is impossible with God. We maintain against all human understanding that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin.

Scripture only states that Mary remained a virgin until the birth of Christ. After the first centuries of Christianity, when the ideals of monastic asceticism began to take root, the question was debated whether Mary remained a virgin after the birth of Christ. In following this line of thought some even taught that Christ was born *clauso utero Virginis*. While there is no doubt that God could bring about even this miracle, this assertion has no basis in Scripture. Also the teaching that Mary remained a virgin forever does not have proof in Scripture, even though it is not possible to determine from Scripture whether Mary had children after the birth of Jesus.

The earthly life of Christ

When mentioning the different phases of the exinanition, the apostolic creed bypasses all of the earthly life of Christ after his birth until the *passio magna*. It is still worthwhile pointing out some more of the events that filled the days of his flesh. According to Gal 4: 4 Jesus was born and put under the Law. This can first be seen when the child was circumcised according to the law at the eighth day. All who list circumcision as a separate stage of exinanition have to be careful not to give the impression that Jesus was not under the law during the first seven days of his earthly life. In his conception and birth he put himself under the fourth commandment. But with his circumcision it was first shown publicly that the Son of God was subject to the Law. In Mt 12:8 Jesus states clearly that he is not naturally subject to the law. Rather he is the Lord also of the Sabbath. Jesus Christ placed himself voluntarily under the Law in a vicarious manner in our place.

In the next years of his life his education further shows how Jesus abandoned his divine omniscience. In Luke 2:52 it is reported that the child grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men. The education and training of Jesus did not differ from that which parents give to their children generally. He submitted to his parents and teachers and learned from the education they gave to him. His human nature developed in the way common to all human children. According to the customs of his time he learned the trade of a carpenter like his foster-father.

Even after he entered into his public ministry where he showed many proofs of his divine nature, he still continued to share the common necessities of human life. He was in need of food and sleep. He underwent temptations and felt strong emotions like grief and sorrow. Jesus also submitted himself to the authority of worldly government by instructing his disciples to pay taxes (Mt 17:24ff).

The sufferings of Jesus Christ

In order to describe the suffering of our Lord pastors probably think of the words they use to bring the torments of crucifixion to their congregations in Lenten sermons. But we should not restrict the suffering of Christ to the last week of his earthly life. Christ suffered not only during the last two days of his earthly life. Many other experiences during his life also added to his suffering and could be listed under the stage of suffering. Jesus experienced human temptations and strong emotions. However he never had a sinful thought in his heart. Scripture especially tells us that his loving soul suffered from the rejection of the Gospel by his own people (e.g. Mt 23:37). In dogmatic textbooks sometimes the distinction is made between the *passio inchoata* as the sufferings he endured during his daily life and the *passio magna* which refers to the agonies endured in Gethsemane and especially at the cross. Already in anticipation of this suffering the soul of Jesus was filled with real dread (Luke 12:50). We can hardly imagine the tortures of his body when he was flogged and finally nailed to the cross. But completely beyond our comprehension is the suffering of his soul. The sins of the whole world were laid on him. He carried them to the cross. He had to bear the chastisement of all sin of all mankind. He passed through the very torments of hell which made him cry: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? He experienced what it means if God turns away his grace and punishes with the full force of his anger.

The death of Jesus Christ

The Gospels report that Pilate was asked by the leaders of the Jews to remove the bodies from the cross since it was the day of preparation (John 19:31). The formal obedience to the law of the Jews led to a trustworthy report by independent witnesses about the death of Jesus Christ. Experienced Roman soldiers made sure he indeed died. This fact is important for the credibility of the resurrection and with it for our salvation. If Jesus had not died completely, he also would not have been raised from death. But we know for sure his soul was separated from the body.

We need to observe one important difference between the death of Jesus Christ and ordinary human death. Psalm 16 foretells and the Apostle Peter underscores it: You will not let your Holy One see decay. Even though Jesus died God did not allow the body to start decomposition. In one more point Christ's death was totally different from any other human death. Even in death the union of the human nature in body and soul with the logos was not severed.

The burial of Jesus Christ

The burial seems to be only a logical and human consequence of the death of our Savior that does not have much importance for our dogmatic interest. But we need to take into account that the divine power that was given to his human nature could have freed him from the cross and could have saved him the experience of burial. But he chose to refrain from using this divine power even in these decisive moments of his earthly days. In this way his burial also is a true stage of his exinanition and is mentioned in the apostolic creed. Furthermore the burial serves us as another witness for the certainty of his death.

The state of Exaltation

General facts

As soon as the purpose of exinanition was accomplished, Christ was placed in the state of exaltation as described in Phil 2:9,10: Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth. If we ask what Christ left behind, we find the *morfh*; *douvlou*—the form of a servant. In asking what he gained, we are pointed to the assumption of the unrestricted, continuous, perpetual use of the *morfh*; *geou'*—the form of God. After his resurrection Christ did not hide his divine glory any more but made full use of it. We have to note that exaltation pertains to the use of the divine glory and not to its possession,

since Christ was in possession of divine glory also during the state of exinanition but only refrained from making use of it. On a time line the state of exaltation began with the vivification, and continues forever.

History of Exaltation

The descent into hell

The Apostles' Creed lists one stage in its enumeration that we don't find in the Gospels. Two passages are commonly quoted as the source for this teaching: 1 Peter 3:18,19, Christ was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison and Col 2:15. After Christ had returned to bodily life in the tomb through divine power, in his glorified body he went where no human can go—to hell. He made his way into the prison of the damned in order to “preach” to them. Scripture reveals very little about his descent into hell and there is no revelation on what and how he preached. Only if we look into Col 2:15 do we find a hint as to what his preaching may have included: And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

What Christ “preached” could not have been a preaching of Law and Gospel in the way he commanded preaching to us. He went to hell in order to show to the devil and to the damned that he indeed had won the battle and he presented himself as the one who has the victory. At the same time he confirmed the condemnation for all in hell. It well may be that this preaching was not a verbal proclamation but rather a show and display of his victory.

Our confessions mention this stage of the exaltation of Christ only with the short article IX in the Formula of Concord. There the purpose of the descent into hell is described in view of the believers: For it is sufficient that we know that Christ descended into hell, destroyed hell for all believers, and delivered them from the power of death and of the devil, from eternal condemnation and the jaws of hell. The Confessions go on to warn against attempting too detailed an explanation: But how this occurred we should [not curiously investigate, but] reserve until the other world, where not only this point, but also still others will be revealed, which we here simply believe, and cannot comprehend with our blind reason. It is interesting to notice that the earliest versions of the Apostles' Creed don't mention the descent into hell.

Common errors in the teaching of the descent into hell are the ideas that it was part of the humiliation and that it took place during crucifixion or right at the moment of his death. Another way of misinterpreting Scripture's teaching on this point would be the attempt to make a distinction between hell and the “prison” referred to in 1 Peter 3:19. It has been claimed that “prison” does not describe the place where the devil and the damned are but a place for all dead where they await judgment day. Christ's preaching in such a place is easily misunderstood as if those passed away are given one more chance to repent and believe.

Resurrection

When the tomb was still sealed and the angel had not yet removed the stone, early on the third day the dead body of Christ was quickened and brought back to life. The miracle that is completely unbelievable to human reason happened. What power caused this miracle to happen? At Pentecost the Apostle Peter preached: But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him (Acts 2:24). Here and in many other passages God the Father is mentioned as the power who raised Christ from death. But Jesus also speaks of himself as one who has the power to bring his life back. In John 2:19 we read: Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” Also in John 10:17f we are informed that the Son is active in the resurrection. “The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. . . . I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.” In the light of these passages we can maintain that both the Father and the Son are causing the resurrection.

When Jesus appeared to his disciples later that day, they quite understandably doubted at first that they really saw him and that he was indeed among the living. Jesus had to show them his body: After he said this, he showed them his hands and side (John 20:20). It was still the same body they had brought to the tomb. But still this was a glorious body (Phil 3:21) that was no longer restricted by space and time and no longer

needed food and sleep. His body after resurrection could no longer die (Romans 6:9). His human body already took on that glorified form which even our bodies will take on when he raises us at the last day.

The Lord had already foretold the time of resurrection. He would rise from the dead on the third day. This refers to the Jewish custom of counting the days. The first day was the day of his crucifixion and burial. The day of resurrection then was counted as the third day. We don't know the exact hour in which Christ rose from the tomb, but this event took place before the angel removed the stone and the sun rose.

The New Testament gives many witnesses who saw the risen Savior and proves that his resurrection is certain. All who heard the message doubted at first. But then the disciples went out to see the empty tomb and Jesus appeared to them. For a period of 40 days he occasionally spent time with them in order to comfort them and to give instructions concerning the kingdom of God. In these weeks many more became eyewitnesses of Christ's resurrection (1 Cor 15:6).

The resurrection of Christ gives great comfort to sinners. Jesus could not remain in the grave. This is proof for us that he is God. He had foretold that he would rise again from death as part of his messianic mission. Now resurrection proves that his word is truth and he indeed is the Messiah and that his mission is indeed accomplished. With the resurrection God publicly declared the justification of all mankind.

The errors concerning the resurrection can be grouped into two groups. There is the rationalistic contention that there are no miracles and for this reason there can be no resurrection—not even of Christ. They deny the possibility, necessity, and reality of the resurrection and so reject the fundamental teaching of Christianity, as Paul says in 1 Cor 15:14.

The other errors concerning the resurrection deny or misinterpret single features. The Calvinists teach that Christ's human nature did not effectively participate in its own resurrection nor was the glorified body of Christ immediately independent of time and space.

Ascension

Forty days after Easter the Gospels report one last incident in the earthly life of Christ. After some final instructions to the disciples, Jesus went up to the clouds and a cloud hid him. In this way Jesus disappeared from the eyes of his disciples. For the moment of his resurrection Jesus did not have any eyewitnesses. Here at his ascension the disciples and perhaps many others saw how he was taken up to heaven. Jesus intended to show them that he was no longer going to appear to them in the way he did in the last weeks. They were to wait for his final coming on Judgment Day and not for an occasional reappearance.

Where did he go? The Gospels answer: He was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God (Mark 16:19). While the visible skies are not meant here, there are possible explanations of what is meant by "heaven." Jesus told one of the criminals at the cross: I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise. Also Paul is looking forward to come to the place where Christ is (Phil 1:23). Christ went to the place of the saints, to the *coelum beatorum*. But scripture tells us also that he went to a place that is far different from all other places: He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe (Ephesians 4:10). The place of his sitting at the right hand of God is also called *coelum maiestaticum*. We also learn from this passage that Jesus was not fixed to a certain place, like a retirement or state of rest in glory. He also fills the whole universe. And from there he is working and active, as we will see in discussing the next stage of his exaltation.

Sitting at the Right Hand of God

It was promised in the Old Testament and declared in the New Testament in numerous passages that Jesus Christ after his ascension would be seated at the right hand of God. While reading such passages we first think of the throne of a king where God the Father is seated and at the right hand his first and most influential adviser. But we have to take into account that the Holy Scripture here speaks in anthropomorphic language. This is also true for similar passages where it is said that God lives in heaven or that he looks down upon his children. God is spirit and a spirit does not have flesh and bones. So we can not picture God's right hand as an organ, like a human hand. Also, the place at the right hand of God is not a spatial position. We need to understand this metaphor and look for the point of comparison. 1 Peter 3:22 can help us: . . . who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in

submission to him. The right hand of God refers to a position of inexpressible authority, power, glory and heavenly majesty. Quenstedt sums it up: Christ's sitting at the right hand of God is the highest degree of exaltation, or an act by which he himself after his ascension into heaven, when he was placed according to his human nature on the throne of divine majesty, dwells in the fullness of honor, glory and majesty and fully exercises his infinite power and through it rules in a most present and powerful way over all things in heaven and on earth for the glory of his own name and for the comfort and salvation of his afflicted church.

Who was it who was seated at the right hand of God? In his sermon at Pentecost the apostle Peter tells us, God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). And in Phil 2:9 we read that God gave him a name above all names. So he was not in this position before and he did not have the name before. These expressions can only speak about the human nature of Christ which alone could be raised to a higher state of perfection. According to the divine nature Christ reigned together with the Father and the Holy Spirit from eternity. Quenstedt points us to a subtle distinction: To sit at the right hand of God the Father is not entirely the same as to reign with the Father. For until now Christ has reigned with the Father and the Holy Spirit from eternity. Nevertheless, he did not sit at the right hand of God from then, for his sitting began first from the time of this exaltation.

Scripture reveals to us a comforting truth about what Christ does while sitting at the right hand of God: And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way (Eph 1:22f). Jesus uses his rule at the right hand of God in order to turn everything into good for his people and for his body, which is his church.

With the sitting at the right hand of God (*sessio*) we have left the realm of space and also of time where we described most of the stages of Christ's exinanition and exaltation. The sitting at the right hand will last forever.

Return to Judgment

The *sessio* is the final stage of exaltation. But in the apostolic creed we confess one more point: . . . from there he shall come to judge the living and the dead. Christ's human nature will not receive any additional glory on this day. All his glory now is his and he reveals it to his church already in his word. At the last day his glory and power will be visible, not only to those who believe in him but to all mankind and also to those who rejected him. At judgment day Christ for the last time will be active as our Savior when he puts all who believed in him at his right hand side and invites them: Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world (Matthew 25:34).

We are looking forward to this day, when we will see him and when we will also receive a glorified body. Now the deep mysteries of the states of exinanition and exaltation are hidden from our eyes and we try to understand with our limited minds what he reveals in his word. It will be on this day that we will be able to fully understand and see him as he is. Until then we want to teach and confess and preach all the comforting truth to lost souls in order that they might be saved.

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