

The Debate about the Interpretation of Philippians 2:6-11

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The confessional position I learned in seminary was one of balance and moderation; that is, balancing biblical scholarship with confessional allegiance. At the time I signed the Augustana Constitution, the seminary faculty expected seminarians to be faithful to the insights of Luther and the Confessions but trained them with historical critical use of the Bible.¹ This seminary training set up for me a Lutheran dialectic model in which faith is always open to critical questions and viewpoints. The challenge and positive contributions that biblical criticism brings to the issue of confessional allegiance remains an important hermeneutical issue for the church today as we attempt to come to terms with the new information provided by a more complete social history of early Christianity.

In the early 1900s coming to terms with contemporary historical critical study of the Bible was a major issue for Church leaders and Augustana Seminary faculty members. While church leaders warned against the destructive criticism of the Bible, a number of faculty members attempted to find the positive contributions of historical criticism.² The thorny question in the debate has remained constant: what is the proper role of Biblical scholarship and the historic confessions of the Lutheran church?³

Rather than survey the various answers proposed since 1900, I have chosen to look at two representative figures in the hermeneutical debate at the seminary, namely, C.E. Lindberg and Eric Wahlstrom. Their views about the interpretation of key christological texts in Paul's letters reveal very different hermeneutical answers to the task of preaching the Gospel and the use of critical scholarship. Their answers make up a conversation between two successive generations about the meaning of key biblical texts. The differences in their answers give us a glimpse of the kind of conversations and debates that also occurred between clergy and members in Augustana Synod churches during this period.

If a conservative confessionalism marked the beginning of the Augustana century, the slide into biblical fundamentalism is illustrated by the writings of C.E.

¹ See E. Wahlstrom, "The Bible is History," *Centennial Essays*, (ed. Engberg, Bergendoff and Carlson. 1960), 64-66.

² E. Wahlstrom, "The Means of Grace," *Centennial Essays*, 65-66.

³ See the four essays from the 1960-1961 meetings between NLC and Missouri Synod representatives. J.W. Behnken and N.A. Menter, *Essays on the Lutheran Confessions Basic to Lutheran Cooperation* (New York and St. Louis: 1961) 1-41.

Lindberg during his long academic career as a professor of systematic theology at the Seminary (1890-1930). The refreshing views of Eric Wahlstrom about Paul's metaphors and the Christ event stand in sharp contrast to Lindberg's literal use of the New Testament. Wahlstrom's work in New Testament theology dramatically illustrates the changing hermeneutic in the seminary faculty after 1930.

I will critique the views of both Lindberg and Wahlstrom with observations about their interpretation of one key text, Phil. 2:6-11, the text generally viewed today as an early Christian song or ode to Christ. The debate about the interpretation of Philippians 2:6-11 enables us to take a close up look at dramatic changes in biblical hermeneutics at Augustana Seminary, and to consider new ways of viewing this important christological text today.

A) 1922: Historical Criticism and Lindberg's Dogmatic Scholasticism.

Conrad Emil Lindberg, a defender of a literal interpretation of the New Testament and conservative Christianity, went out of his way to disparage critical biblical scholars who he felt undermined the foundations of Christianity. His *Apologetics* has the subtitle *A System of Christian Evidence*.⁴ The book was written for "true believers" who hold a literal interpretation of the New Testament against the modernists who Lindberg felt only speculate about the meaning of the texts of the Bible. His views are based on the conservative conclusions that all the New Testament books were written in the first century, the synoptic Gospels must have been written before the destruction of Jerusalem, and Matthew, John and Peter were all eye-witnesses.⁵

For Lindberg proofs for the divinity of Christ are necessary because of doubters influenced by Deism and Pantheism. According to Lindberg, the oath of Jesus before the high priest is absolute proof of his divinity. Jesus was fully self-conscious of his divinity at 12 years of age and never wavered in his consciousness of his divinity.⁶

Lindberg expressed hope that his book *Christian Dogmatics* would serve as a guide for students of scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. The book first published in Swedish in 1898, then republished in 1922 in English with 125 pages of new material, was intended to serve as a textbook in theological seminaries.⁷ According to J. L. Neve, Lindberg found the clarity, order, and certainty he desired in the classic Lutheran dogmaticians of the 17th century.⁸

⁴ C.E. Lindberg, *Apologetics* (Rock Island: Augustana, 1917).

⁵ Lindberg, *Apologetics*, 114.

⁶ Lindberg, *Apologetics*, 115-116.

⁷ C.E. Lindberg, *Christian Dogmatics* (Rock Island: Augustana, 1922) 5-6.

⁸ J.L. Neve, *A History of Christian Thought II* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg,1946) 310.

The method by which Lindberg constructs his christology from a literal reading of both the New Testament and Lutheran Confessions is demonstrated in his discussion of the two states of Christ, the state of humiliation and the state of exaltation.⁹ He calls this christological issue one of the most important in dogmatics and the doctrine of Kenosis as one of the burning questions in the church. His interpretation of Philippians 2:6-11, the scriptural foundation for this doctrine, illustrates both his exegetical assumptions and scriptural analysis.

Lindberg begins with a literal reading of the Greek text of Phil 2:6-7: “Who, being in the form of God...” For Lindberg Jesus was the Son of God when he took the form of a servant. He continued to remain divine and in the form of God but he voluntarily abstained from the full exercise of divine attributes. He emptied himself. Jesus had assumed and possessed manhood, but even in his exaltation he possesses the human nature and never ceased to be the God-man. Self-renunciation did not consist in a complete renunciation of divinity. Christ was in the form of God throughout the whole period that he was in the form of a servant, in the likeness of men in their experiences, being hungry, thirsty, sleepy, tired, etc. He had a perfect right to grasp after a victor’s prize or loot for himself; but instead he emptied himself and abstained from the full use of the divine attributes (as in the miracles he performed).¹⁰

Lindberg cites the Formula of Concord, Epitome VIII: 11 and 20, to support his exegetical comments on Phil. 2:6-8 that only the human nature of Jesus was humiliated or emptied.¹¹ Because the Confessions do not treat the question of self-renunciation in an exhaustive manner, Lindberg gives an extended explanation of how Jesus Christ could be omniscient according to his divine nature and according to his human nature know only as a man. For Lindberg New Testament passages “clearly prove” Jesus was conscious of his eternal divinity during his humiliation and was not humiliated as to his divine nature.

Lindberg builds his kenosis christology on the assumption that what Paul wrote in Phil. 2:6-7 describes Jesus, the God man who never completely gives up his divine attributes as a human, nor his human nature in his exaltation. He interprets Phil. 2:6-11 as the scriptural foundation of the kenosis doctrine rather than as a song used in an actual first century letter. Current Biblical exegesis begins with attention to the historical context and original intent of the author.¹²

B) 1950 –Wahlstrom: Finding the Original Meaning.

In his important book *The New Life In Christ*, 1950, Wahlstrom took a completely different approach to the interpretation of Paul’s letters from the

⁹ Lindberg, *Dogmatics*, 227-250.

¹⁰ Lindberg, *Dogmatics*, 228-230.

¹¹ Lindberg, *Dogmatics*, 230.

¹² See Braaten, *Christian Dogmatics I*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 76-77.

method of study employed by C.E. Lindberg, the systematic theologian. Wahlstrom focused on what he considered the central principle of Paul's theology, his metaphors for salvation. Wahlstrom wanted to peel off the thick coating of dogmatic verdigris from Paul's picture language in order to find what Paul meant to express by his real figures of speech, not theological propositions. For Wahlstrom the purpose of analysis is to recognize the *original meaning* of such words as justification, reconciliation, redemption and adoption, that is, the pictorial expressions of salvation.¹³

Here Wahlstrom provides an important exegetical and methodological point especially directed to his students. Wahlstrom recognizes that a study of Paul's figures of speech is complicated with "grave and intricate problems" but asserts that his message is presented in language that is "easy to understand." His thesis is that Paul used his metaphors to make his meaning clear---the letters are not composed of riddles, obscure mysteries and metaphysical subtleties. The last paragraph in his introduction is directed to preachers in every age: "Paul laid hold upon all the resources of contemporary language and culture in order to make his message intelligible and compelling."¹⁴

Is the language "to die and rise again" simply a figure of speech? According to Wahlstrom, "to die" is the most radical figure Paul uses to explain the change God has brought to the Christian through the deed of Christ. It is Paul's way of describing the reality of living a new life with Christ. The question about the relation of this figure to the mystery cults and Paul's Hellenistic setting is of secondary importance for Wahlstrom. He thinks Paul's usage has a reference to the newness of life lived now, not to a regeneration for eternity as in the mystery cults¹⁵

The question of historical distance from Paul's time and audience remains a critical question for Wahlstrom and any interpreter of Paul's metaphors of salvation. Biblical scholarship has made it more difficult to claim that the historical distance can be easily overcome or that the language is easy to understand without looking at the intellectual milieu from which it originated.¹⁶ When Wahlstrom makes the Hellenistic setting secondary he pushes aside the obscure and difficult details that are often necessary to more clearly show how Paul makes his message intelligible to his own audience. It is those details from the Hellenistic setting that are the keys to the interpretation of Phil. 2:6-11.

In his perspectives on biblical theology, *God Who Redeems* (1962), Wahlstrom discusses Philippians 2:6 ff. in connection with the humanity of

¹³ Wahlstrom, *New Life in Christ* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1950) x, xviii-xix,

¹⁴ Wahlstrom, *New Life*, xv, xix-xx.

¹⁵ Wahlstrom, *New Life*, 59-60.

¹⁶ See Bultmann's discussion of the world-view of Paul vs the modern world-view in *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958) 35-43.

Jesus.¹⁷ Like Lindberg he focuses on the question of the “self-emptying”, the kenosis doctrine derived from this passage, but avoids the metaphysical questions that preoccupy Lindberg. For Wahlstrom the doctrine of kenosis is concerned with the Incarnation. If the Incarnation was to be real, Jesus had to accept the physical, mental, and spiritual limitations of human life on earth.

The confession of faith that Jesus was true God and true man is the fulcrum upon which Wahlstrom moves the discussion of the humanity of Jesus. However, he prefers a way of talking about Jesus that is “true to both the biblical witness and to life as we experience it.” For Wahlstrom the New Testament records the ministry of “the man in whom men came to perceive God.”¹⁸

C) Lindberg and Wahlstrom: Comparison of Views.

A brief comparison shows the striking differences in exegesis and theology between Lindberg and Wahlstrom on the interpretation of the New Testament and in particular, Paul’s christology in Phil. 2:6 ff.

While Lindberg vilified scholars whose critical investigations of primitive Christianity and the New Testament threatened his view of Christianity, Wahlstrom accepted the goals and results of the historical critical method.¹⁹ Wahlstrom advocated a search for the original meaning of Paul’s metaphors of redemption. Lindberg’s literal interpretation of Philippians 2 puts him in the camp of 17th century German theologians who taught a theology of glory by endowing Jesus with divinity.²⁰

Both Lindberg and Wahlstrom focus on the *kenosis* doctrine derived from exegesis of Phil. 2:6-7, and both provide radically different solutions of the way to think about Jesus. In Lindberg’s exegesis of the Pauline text Jesus is the God man who did not give up his divine nature when he took the form of a servant. He did not lay aside the form of God, although he used his divine attributes only at times as in the performance of miracles. Wahlstrom completely rejects such an interpretation of Philippians.

For Wahlstrom the text of Phil. 2:6 ff. is about the Incarnation. No metaphysical discussions are necessary or useful because Jesus had the normal limitations of all human beings ---physical, mental, and spiritual. Lindberg’s interpretation of the text, a type of theological docetism, takes away the reality of the death on the cross. Does Jesus retain the form of God when he empties himself and takes on the form of man? For Wahlstrom Jesus did not retain the

¹⁷ Wahlstrom, *God Who Redeems* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1962) 112-113.

¹⁸ Wahlstrom, *God Who Redeems*, 113.

¹⁹ E. Wahlstrom, “The Means of Grace,” *Centennial Essays*, 64-65.

²⁰ For discussion of the 17th century German christological debate, see C.E. Braaten, *Christian Dogmatics I* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 509-510.

form of God but emptied himself in taking on the form of man.²¹ Acceptance of human limitations was necessary for the Incarnation to be real.

For Lindberg the doctrine of *kenosis* was a burning issue in the church when he republished his book *Christian Dogmatics*. Wahlstrom still dealt with the doctrine of kenosis in his discussion of Phil. 2:6-11, but he was more focused on the humanity of Jesus rather than his divinity. More recent study of Phil. 2:6-11 has focused on the nature of the passage as a christological hymn.²²

D) On interpreting Philippians 2:6-11 as a Victory Song or Ode to Christ.

Phil. 2:6-11 is the classic test case for understanding Paul's presentation of Jesus as a Divine Man whose death on the cross is lauded in song. The challenge to find answers to the questions about the mythic language of this text and its social context has inspired an incredible number of scholarly publications since Ernst Lohmeyer in 1928 argued that Phil. 2:6-11 has the form of a hymn.²³

The notorious difficulty in resolving questions as to the Pauline or pre-Pauline origin of the song has often led to the conclusion that the other issues of this famous text are also insoluble. Yet the themes of this Pauline passage continue to challenge interpreters because they are at the center of Christian reflection about the meaning of Christ and the origin of Paul's christological language.

Let me share my personal conclusions about this text and indicate how a discussion of the origin of the song moves us beyond kenosis christology to look at Paul's christology in relation to Hellenistic religion and culture.²⁴

1) General characteristics: a victory ode.

Paul's song has the characteristics of a victory song used in processions to celebrate the winner of athletic contests at the Isthmian games. The Greek meter, the structure of two stanzas, and even distinctive motifs suggest the song was intended for use at a Greek festival where Paul could gain attention for his message about Christ. The stanzas of Paul's song juxtapose mortality and immortality in a manner typical of a Greek ode.

²¹ Wahlstrom, *God Who Redeems*, 112-113.

²² For review of past scholarship, see R.P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians 2:5-11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Cambridge, 1967; rev. ed., Grand Rapids, 1983); R. P. Martin, *Philippians* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987), 113-114.

²³ E. Lohmeyer, *Kyrios Jesus: Eine Untersuchung zu Phil.2,5-11* (Heidelberg: Universitaetsverlag, 1928 = 1961) 3-89.

²⁴ Conclusions are based on an unpublished paper by A.G. Levin, *A Trajectory for a Song: Philippians 2:5-11*, (Andover, 2002) 1-82.

The first stanza develops the story of the obedience that leads to the cross and the second confers a type of immortality in the recognition of the name of Jesus. Paul's description of God's gift of exaltation and name recognition for Jesus (Phil. 2:9-11) is the language of victory and success characteristic of an epinician ode. In such Greek odes the celebration of the victor's name endows him with a kind of immortal life on the lips of men that can even reach the dead in their graves.²⁵

2) The question about quantitative Greek meter.²⁶

The attempt to reconstruct the original setting of the song begins with the recognition that Phil 2:6-11 not only has the form of a hymn but was composed in a meter characteristic of ancient Greek lyric poetry and victory songs.²⁷ Identification of the basic structure and line length of each of the two stanzas requires scansion and evaluation of the units of meter within each line. Scansion of the quantitative Greek meter is the factor that determines the direction the analysis must follow in the related questions about structure, myth, and occasion. Once the meter is established as *Aeolic* these related questions about the song can also be answered.²⁸

Visualization of the meter for verses 6 and 7a is included to show the results of a quantitative metrical analysis for these lines:

Vs. 6a	+	-	-	,	-	+	+	-	,	-	-	-	-	-
ba, cho, doch														
6b	-	-	+	+	-	-	,	+	-	-	,	+	-	-
pher, 2 ba														

²⁵ In Phil. 2:11 the supernatural fame of Jesus will reach even the dead under the earth. Compare Pindar Olympian 14.20-24 and Olympian 8.77-84.

²⁶ Quantitative Greek meter is the regular pattern of short and long vowels imposed on the natural rhythm of language in this Pauline text.

²⁷ Study of the quantitative metrical characteristics of the Greek text of Phil. 2:6-11 was initiated in 1980 by Barbara Eckman who identified five metrical patterns based on the rules of Greek scansion. Eckman did not compare these patterns with ancient Greek victory songs. B. Eckman, "A Quantitative Metrical Analysis of the Philippians Hymn", *NTS* 26 (1980), 258-266.

A quantitative system of meter was used in Greek lyric poetry and victory songs between the eighth and fourth centuries B.C.E. From the first century A.D. onward the quantitative rhythm gradually declined. See Paul Maas, *Greek Metre* (London: Oxford, 1962), 1-3.

²⁸ Aeolic rhythms are common in Pindar's poems (20 in Aeolic). See F. J. Nisetich, *Pindar's Victory Songs* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980) 33-34.

cho, dim A, cr ^{7a} § + + - , - - - - , - + -

Identification of the meter as aeolic is based on analysis of both stanzas of the song, 2:6-8 and 2:9-11. The identification of Paul’s song with a meter long associated with victory songs for winners at the major Panhellenic festivals leads to the recognition that Greek mythology is the source of Paul’s unusual language in Phil. 2:6-7.

Since Paul gives few clues about the specific deities or myth he opposes, it may be impossible to answer the many questions surrounding this long-standing debate. However, the important clues introduced by resolving the question of meter narrows consideration to deities connected with the Panhellenic festivals and athletic games like chariot races and boxing. The deities connected with such events as patrons and participants of the games include the Dioscuri.

Let’s consider clues and evidence that suggest the Dioscuri story is the myth Paul has targeted.

3) Translation question (verse 6): the meaning of *Harpagmos*.

If Paul expected his listeners to recognize a veiled allusion to the celebrated Dioscuri story in the first two lines of the song, he gains attention and power from the comparative allusion without retelling or endorsing the myth. The sounds of the Greek metrical pattern with distinctive key words are critical clues of meaning.

The most important clue involves a translation of the rare word *harpagmos* located at the end of line one in stanza 1 (verse 6a). The word has been translated as something to be “clung to” or “grasped at”, but has been a problem for translators who have not known how to read the line. Latin translators show the type of difficulty that developed by translating the Greek word with the noun *rapina*, a word that may be translated as robbery.³⁰ William Tyndale’s 1526 edition translated the line, “thought it not robbery to be equal with God.”

A possible translation of *harpagmos* in verse 6 as “abduction” makes the line an allusion to the popular Dioscuri story, a myth with wide circulation in Paul’s time and roots in classical myth and poetry going back to Pindar and Homer.³¹

²⁹ Notation for the units of meter are the following: ba = bacchiac, cho = choriamb, doch = dochmiac, pher = pherecratean, dim A = dimeter includes 4 longs and a choriamb, cr = cretic. Scansion for verses 6ab and 7a, and for 7b-11 are cited from A. Levin, *Trajectory*, 7-11

³⁰ C.T. Lewis and C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962) 1523.

³¹ Homer, *Ody.* 11, 298-204; Pindar, *Nemean* 10:49-90; Theocritus, *Idyll* 22. 135-205; Ovid, *Fasti* 5.693-720; and Apollodorus, *Library*, 3.11.2.

Verses 6-7 may be translated as follows:³²

- (vs. 6) Who, being in the form of God, considered equality
with God not (a matter of) an abduction
(vs. 7) but emptied himself taking the form of a servant...

The translation of the rare word *harpagmos* in Phil. 2:6 as “abduction” is confirmed on the basis of linguistic evidence.³³ The negative phrase “not (a matter of) an abduction” is followed by the contrary positive action that states what Jesus did. Jesus gave up all of his immortality—he emptied himself—without considering his divine status.

4) The Myth.

For Paul the sacrifice of Jesus was a greater self-sacrifice than that of Polydeukes, the popular son of Zeus, and twin brother of Kastor, but the comparison works only if you are well acquainted with the stories and escapades of these popular divine heroes, the Gemini twins.

Let me summarize important missing information that Paul could expect his listeners to know.

First, their family connections are important common knowledge. Polydeukes and Kastor are the brothers of Helen and sons of Zeus, born to be saviors of men in battle or at sea (Homeric hymn 33). Among the many titles of the Dioscouri are these: great gods (Paus. 1.31.1), sons of the gods, and Lords (Pin. Pyth. 11.60), and divine saviors of men (Paus. 2.1.9). Homer described them as sons of Tyndareus and Leda, honored as equal to gods (Homer, Ody. 11.298-304).

Secondly, Paul could expect listeners in Corinth to know the famous story of the Dioscouri incident. The full oral story included three basic parts: 1) the abduction of the daughters of Leucippus; 2) the fight between the two pairs of brothers in which Kastor was mortally wounded; 3) the plea of Polydeukes for his brother Kastor resulted in the generous offer from father Zeus of a second existence for the Dioscouri in which they would spend half time beneath the earth

³² For translation of both stanzas of the song, see Appendix 1.

³³ The linguistic evidence from Plutarch, Strabo and Vettius Valens shows that *harpagmos* and *harpagēv* are synonyms and mean abduction when used in the context of love relationships. For fuller discussion of the synonyms, see R.W. Hoover, “The Harpagmos Enigma: A Philological Solution”, *HTR* 64 (1971), 112-114.

and half time at Olympus. In response Polydeukes gave up half of his immortality in order to open the eyes and restore the voice of Kastor.³⁴

This classic myth and its adaptation fostered the popularity of the Dioscuri as the standard of hospitality and brotherly love in the Hellenistic world. The Dioscuri were also noted as tutelary gods, vigilant protectors, models of athletic prowess in boxing, footraces and chariot races.

5) Original occasion and later use in Philippians.

The information about the meter and the myth supports the hypothesis that Paul's song is a deliberate imitation of a classical victory song intended for use at a Greek festival like the Isthmian games. It is likely that when Paul made his first visit to Corinth, he was present in the spring of 51 C.E. for the Isthmian contests held in the stadium and theater of Corinth.³⁵

Paul apparently brought his message about Jesus and his victory on the cross into the festival and sports world of first century Greece in order to challenge the cult of Divine Men like the Dioscuri with the story of Jesus, a Divine Man more worthy of imitation.

Paul's later insertion of the song in Philippians to explain "concern for others" (2:4) appears to be based on the fact that the popular divine Dioscuri twins not only were patrons of athletic games but also defined brotherly love and concern for others in Greek and Roman traditions. Paul's song replaced the Dioscuri with a new model of inspiration.

E) The distinctive theological Features of Phil. 2:6-11.

The conclusion that Phil 2:6-11 is a two stanza song about Christ's victory on the cross with mythological allusions has resulted in numerous interpretations including my conclusion that the Dioscuri myth should be considered one of the possible sources of Paul's language.³⁶ Convincing proof may not be reached in

³⁴ This form of the oral story was used and adapted by Pindar (518-438 B.C.E.), Theocritus (3rd cent. B.C.E.), Ovid (1st cent Roman poet) and Apollodorus (1st or 2nd C.E.). Zeus takes Polydeukes up to lofty heaven (Apollodorus) and opens its door at the response of his son (Ovid).

³⁵ A revised chronology indicates that the victory celebrations and games more likely occurred in Corinth in 51 C.E. rather than the traditional location ten miles away at Isthmia. E.R. Gebhard, 'The Isthmian Games and the Sanctuary of Poseidon in the Early Empire', *JRA* (SS 8, *The Corinthia in the Roman Period*, Ed., T.E. Gregory, Ann Arbor, 1993) 78-94.

³⁶ See Appendix 1 for translation and line arrangement based on considerations of quantitative meter.

this discussion about the origin of divine man terminology in Phil. 2 but this is a very different christological question than discussed by Lindberg or Wahlstrom.

Both Lindberg and Wahlstrom focused on the meaning of the kenosis doctrine based on the use of the word *kenosis* in Phil. 2:6-7 and interpreted with reference to other New Testament passages. The attempt to understand how Paul used his encounter with his Hellenistic and sports world to proclaim Jesus as a divine man more worthy of imitation changes the way this important christological text can be studied. The issue is about hermeneutics: how should we read this text?

If we interpret Phil. 2:6-11 as a deliberate imitation of a victory ode and an example of creative mission theology designed to introduce the name and deeds of Jesus at a sports festival, the unusual features of the song are clarified. In Hellenistic and Roman times “imitation of the ancients” was an essential element in rhetorical and poetical composition.³⁷ Paul’s attempt at recreating a victory song, an epinician poetic form, required the use of a Greek myth appropriate for the occasion. The following are distinctive functional and theological features of the song:

- 1) The form, meter and mythological allusions make this an example of reflective theology--presenting the story of Jesus in a song that mimics Greek mythic heroes and victory odes.
- 2) When viewed as two stanzas, the song demonstrates ring composition (also called chiasm) where there is an inverse correspondence (a b c/ c’ b’ a’) between the key lines and verbs in the two stanzas. “Death on the cross” is the compositional center around which the antithetical parallels form concentric rings.³⁸
- 3) The ring composition had a practical mnemonic purpose: to help the singer keep in mind what had been sung. Such metrical songs apparently were a feature of victory celebrations at the Isthmian games.³⁹

³⁷ D.A. Russell, ‘De Imitatione’, *Creative Imitation and Latin Literature* (ed. D. West & T. Woodman; Cambridge, University Press, 1979) 1-3.

³⁸ C Mearns makes a similar point about the central function of the phrase “death on a cross”. C. Mearns, ‘The Identity of Paul’s Opponents at Philippi’, *NTS* 33 (1987) 195.

³⁹ Dio Cocceianus Chrysostom VIII.9, late first century C.E. sophist and moralist, recounts a description of a visit to the Isthmian games. According to his imaginative account the Isthmian games attracted large noisy crowds, as well as writers and poets who sang their metrical songs for those who attended the victory celebrations.

- 4) In the first stanza the emphasis falls on the death of Jesus (“even death on a cross”). The Divine-man Jesus gave up his God-like status completely (*kenosis*) as a servant and died a real death. The deed of victory is the death on the cross.
- 5) In the second stanza God grants exaltation and name recognition. Here the kerygmatic pattern of death and resurrection is modified by epinician sport motifs: exaltation for the victor and name recognition even under the earth among the dead.⁴⁰
- 6) The assertion of the superiority of Jesus as Lord (*kyrios*) over all the so-called great gods and saviors is a polemic with special relevance to the religious rites and deities that were an essential part of the festival of the games.
- 7) The language of Incarnation for the first stanza is misleading since it reads later Christian theology into this text. New Testament parallels are not in play at the time of the original oral use of the song. The original contrast is with Greek divine men and their story of tragic death and brotherly love.
- 8) The kenosis christology of this song is early apologetic christology. The song makes the case for the greater example of Jesus who gave up all---not half---of his divine status and died an actual human death on the cross. The song begins with a familiar sounding motif about a Divine man tragedy but ends with assertion of Jesus as Lord (*kyrios*). This “minature epinician” was composed for a public occasion.

Historical critical study allows one to consider the original meaning and use of the victory song apart from the New Testament in a setting that called for creative and imaginative adaptation of the kerygma. The distinctive characteristics of this song stand out more clearly when historical critical study clarifies the mythological allusions and identifies the language drawn from the first century sports world.

Paul and his associates could have sung this song as they moved in procession through the crowds in places where victories were celebrated. The song is short, repeats key words, and is arranged in mnemonic patterns.
⁴⁰ See Pindar, Isth. 3.7-88, 1.64, One must exalt, lift up the victor with gentle poems of praise. Also compare victory odes where the news about the victory will reach even the dead (Nem. 4.85-90, Oly. 8.77-84, Oly.14,20-24, and Pythian 5.98-103).

F) Final Observations about Biblical Criticism and Confessional Allegiance.

Let's summarize a few observations from the above discussion.

First, let me comment about Lindberg's interpretation of the doctrine of kenosis based on his exegesis of Phil. 2. His detailed discussion of Phil. 2 and the kenosis doctrine seems flawed on several counts but the basic mistake results from his literal reading of Phil. 2:6-7 and related New Testament passages. When he takes the mythological allusion in Phil. 2:6-7 literally as a description of Jesus the God-man who always is aware of his divinity, he is working with assumptions about Scripture that make Jesus a Docetic figure. Lindberg is not only locked into literal analysis but appears to be a convert to 17th century German scholarship where such docetic scholarship flourished.⁴¹

Upon his death in 1930 the theological change at the Seminary began with the appointment of new faculty like Wahlstrom, but it would be wrong to view the change as a complete makeover. A clarity about the hermeneutical task and sensitivity to confessional issues characterized Wahlstrom's role as teacher and scholar. In his discussion of the humanity of Jesus and the doctrine of kenosis he preferred talking about Jesus in a way "true to the Biblical witness and life as we know it." A healthy awareness of confessional norms characterized all of Wahlstrom's scholarship.

Wahlstrom's work on Paul's metaphors demonstrated another side of his creative energy that fascinated his students. Here he left his confessional garb and encouraged students to forget about theological propositions so that we could find the original meaning of Paul's figures of speech. If we understood the original meaning we could find new metaphors about the work of the living God free from first century language. He argued that Paul laid hold of "all the resources of contemporary language and culture in order to make his message intelligible and compelling."⁴² For Wahlstrom, preachers in every age have the same task.

Contemporary Biblical scholarship has continued to emphasize that Paul's letters and other New Testament texts must be studied in the context of their historical and social world. Paul developed his christology in a specific historical context. The new insights resulting from this historical critical study prepare us to talk about Jesus and the early church in more open and honest terms without reference to historic confessions of faith or biblical jargon.

⁴¹ For discussion of 17th century German Lutheran dogmatists, see Braaten *Christian Dogmatics I*, 509-510.

⁴² Wahlstrom, *New Life*, xx.

Augustana Seminary prepared its students to articulate the message of Scripture with new vitality and acumen. A review of Augustana heritage makes this point again and again.

Appendix 1

Translation of Philippians 2:5-11

Introduction (vs.5)

Have the same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus

First Stanza (Phil. 2:6-8)

6. Who, being in the form of God considered equality with God not (a matter of) an abduction (*harpagmos*)
7. but emptied (*kenoww*) himself taking the form of a servant, being found in the form of a man
8. he humbled himself and became obedient unto death---even death on a cross.

Second Stanza (Phil. 2:9-11)

9. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name above every name,
10. so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11. and every tongue acknowledge that
Jesus Christ is Lord (*kyrios*),
to the glory of God the Father.