

# Sample Exegetical Paper

## A CONVERGING PATH: PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11

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Many paths connect at Philippi. As Philippians 2:5-11<sup>1</sup> reveals, a convergence of faith and thought distinguishes the ancient setting. The old Mediterranean city has since declined, but the ideas shared through Paul's epistle endure.

Philippians 2:5-11, often referred to as a christological hymn, is a kind of Via Egnatia<sup>2</sup> that links Philippi to the wider Christian Church; it also serves as an avenue for modern readers to connect early thought recorded between A.D. 54 and 64 and included in New Testament Scripture to contemporary Christian understanding. Whereas in the centuries following the fall of the Roman Empire the manmade roads deteriorated, the christological hymn as it describes Jesus' humbling, mortal death and his divine exaltation survives in tact as a testament to the timelessness of Christ's witness. The cross, "even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8), is the eternal pathway between the proliferation of human sin and God's transcending grace. Therefore, Philippi as the recipient of Paul's epistle functions as a key geographical location between eastern and western exchange in the Empire. Also serving as a network, Paul's letter to the church reconciles two relational paradoxes: Christ's human and Godly status, and the role of Christ's followers in an overall unchristian world.

### I. Background: Intersection of Culture

As Paul ministered throughout the Mediterranean in the first century, the city at Philippi served as a stopover for traders journeying between Asia in the east and western Roman cities. A bridge between two continents,<sup>3</sup> Philippi linked Asian and Hellenistic influence. The city was a crucial point of passage that connected the Asian world to Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Asians, Greeks, and Romans were among early converts<sup>5</sup> who brought their varied histories to church community at Philippi and extended the Christian message to their widespread destinations.<sup>6</sup> The economic, religious, and social multiplicity<sup>7</sup> that characterized Philippian life shaped the growth of the churches that Paul and others organized. J.B. Lightfoot describes the city as a "confluence of the streams of European

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture references throughout: B.M Metzger and R. E. Murphy (eds), *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, NRSV* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Paul frequented the Via Egnatia, or Egnatian Way, as it was the "main Roman road across Macedonia. It runs alongside the forum at Philippi..." See Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 88-9.

<sup>3</sup> John F. Walvoord, *Philippians: Triumph in Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973), 17.

<sup>4</sup> J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1900), 49.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*. 55.

<sup>6</sup> Walvoord, *Philippians: Triumph in Christ*, 17.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on diversity in first century Philippi, see Richard S. Ascough, "The Philippian Christian Community." *Paul's Macedonian Association: The Social Context of Philippians and 1 Thessalonians* (Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

and Asiatic life” from which “we see reflected in the evangelization at Philippi, as in a mirror, the history of the passage of Christianity from the east to the west.”<sup>8</sup>

While Philippi served as an assembly point of different peoples and cultures, Paul preached in the midst of a colorful religious life of Oriental cults<sup>9</sup> and Roman paganism. In Galatians and elsewhere in his epistles, Paul as a Pharisee and former persecutor of Christians uses his conversion story to illustrate the strength of his conviction (Gal 1.13-24; Phil 3:4-6). Paul utilizes his own narrative as an allusion to the authenticity of Christ’s life and resurrection. Despite the prevalence of those whose “minds are set on earthly things” (Phil 3:19), Paul encourages Christians to “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves” (Phil 2:3). This is the context for Philippians 2:5-11. Paul inserts a familiar lyric for his audience to underline Christ’s exemplary humility which all should seek to imitate.

Although most attribute the Philippians Letter to Paul, contention still exists among New Testament scholars regarding the authorship of Philippians 2:5-11 as it differs in style and tone from the rest of the epistle.<sup>10</sup> Larry Krietzer articulates: “By all appearances, it is as if Paul has here taken the earlier christological hymn, a hymn that ultimately proclaims the exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ by God the Father himself, and removes it from the christological frame in which it was originally set.”<sup>11</sup> However, some maintain that Paul did scribe verses 2:5-11. They agree that “the passage is not a hymn; rather it is exalted prose written by Paul himself.”<sup>12</sup>

Whether or not Paul personally penned this Philippians excerpt does not change the heart of the christological message. More important is the social context out of which Paul chooses to include the hymn in his communication to Philippi and the function of the famous passage within the body of Paul’s epistle. The hymn is a conduit through which Paul calls Christians to embrace the good news of Christ’s salvation. He desires that the Philippians value God’s authority through Christ and adopt the corporate interests of the Church community despite living in a city governed by Rome and commercial interests.

In promoting Christian unity, Paul does not reject social diversity among peoples. Instead, he challenges those of varying backgrounds and traditions to acknowledge the unifying force of Jesus’ life. Fred Craddock advocates that Paul also did not preach against individuality in regards to personal responsibility for one’s intentions and actions, but does make clear that if “minding one’s own business meant an unwillingness to bear another’s burden...a coldness to all the ways we are members one of another, then such individualism is destructive of the community and a contradiction of the gospel which

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<sup>8</sup> Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians*, 49.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Oakes. *Philippians From People to Letter* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 74.

<sup>10</sup> Raymond Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*. Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 491.

<sup>11</sup> Larry Krietzer, ““When He at Last is First!”: Philippians 2:9-11 and the Exaltation of the Lord,” in *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 114.

<sup>12</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins. “Psalms, Philippians 2:6-11, and the Origins of Christology,” *Biblical Interpretation*. 11 (2002): 365-7. Here Collins details the research of Gordon D. Fee and others who propose that Paul is the original author of the christological hymn.

speaks and sings of a Christ who was first and always the servant of others.”<sup>13</sup> In truth the uniqueness and distinctions individuals, families, or countries use to differentiate themselves pale as compared to the promise that accompanies Jesus’ exceptional identity. Diversity is only discouraged as it impedes the advancement of the gospel of Christ.

## II. Exegesis: Union Between Divinity and Humanity in Christ

Unity is an issue in the context of broad cultural diversity at Philippi, but also in the face of internal rivalry among some Christians who “proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition” (Phil 1:16). Paul presents the christological hymn as it combats the preaching of leaders with motivations of “envy and rivalry” (Phil 1:15). Philippians 2:5-11 is proceeded with a clear directive: “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (Phil 2:4). Egotism separates individuals from their community, and accordingly from God.

In the hymn that follows, Paul commissions the followers at Philippi to strengthen the body of their church in the context of Christ’s spiritual and bodily sacrifice. Jesus’ celebrative life fails to gain complete meaning outside the context of community. When all members of the body do not work toward a sense of harmony in purpose, the body is disjointed as it fails to embrace the message of Christ’s resurrection. Just as one person’s condemnation of Christ was not enough to crucify him, so too an individual’s faith is not enough to realize the totality of the Messianic revelation.

Christians in service and worship recognize together a “binding obligation to be carried out in dutiful response to a divine epiphany.”<sup>14</sup> When in the Philippian epistle Paul inserts the instruction: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” (Phil 2:5) he encourages the church body as a whole to embrace a Christly mindset. Fee illustrates, that “in you” “primarily means ‘among you,’ that is, ‘in your community relationships.’”<sup>15</sup> Without a congregation of committed members, this mind cannot function fully. As Raymond Brown notes, Paul desires that believers at Philippi “stand firm in one spirit, striving with one mind for the faith of the gospel—a *koinonia* of the Spirit.”<sup>16</sup> Christ bridges the inconsistencies that threaten to alienate individuals from discipleship.

One also may examine the remainder of the christological hymn in a corporate context. On the surface, the temptation exists to accept Christ’s sacrifice primarily as a remission of personal sins. This enticement perhaps stems from the fact that Christ is the only Son, sole actor, before God. However, such an interpretation negates the grand sweep of God’s saving grace. The sacrifice of Jesus is a forgiveness of the sins that human beings commit against God, but this foremost includes those transgressions that individuals commit against one another as well as the sins that societies perpetuate among themselves.

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<sup>13</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians*. Interpretation Bible Commentary (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 38.

<sup>14</sup> Ernst Kasemann, “A Critical Analysis of Philippians 2:5-11,” *Journal for Theology and the Church* 5 (1968): 45-88.

<sup>15</sup> Gordon D. Fee. *Philippians*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 92.

<sup>16</sup> Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 487.

The fact that Christ Jesus “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited” (Phil 2:6) does not focus on the possibility that Jesus conceivably would abuse his divine role,<sup>17</sup> but instead addresses the human tendency to take advantage of social status for personal benefit. As seen in ancient and contemporary history, beneficiaries of affluence are prone to manipulate others and institute stratification in order to secure domination. However, in the example of Christ as both low servant and exalted King, the vulnerability of the lowest position teaches one to lead without distancing community. Leadership is an alliance. Accepting the mind of Christ removes the importance of individual status in hierarchy. As Dennis Jacobsen outlines, Jesus’ sacrifice “inspires a community in which hierarchy is abandoned and power is shared.”<sup>18</sup> In a Christ-minded society, God exists as fountain of all things and human beings exist as an egalitarian genus of God’s creation. The naming of classes and divisions should not be necessary in order to distinguish individuals if ideally all collectively choose to lead lives modeled after Christ.

Far from the most coveted social status, Christ takes up the “form of a slave” (Phil 2:7), the lowest of earthly occupations. This is not a move to justify human classifications, but instead it is an effort to mark all with a servile status before God, thereby leveling the stratum of human ranks. This revolutionary maneuver would obviously appeal to lower class peoples of Philippian society, who as they endured lives of hard labor, could turn to the church for spiritual affirmation. Such persons join with a church who worshipped a Christ who “humbled himself” (Phil 2:8), and “emptied himself” (Phil 2:8) with exemplar humility. The leveled slave status of all those who humble themselves before the Lord is furthered by the act of emptying.

As Craddock determines, the word “empty” may be translated as “in vain” or “nothing,” “and is virtually synonymous with ‘poor.’”<sup>19</sup> Thus, “slave” denotes a role of servitude, but also a position of nonentity. The individual soul empties itself of worth in favor of a unified identity among children of God. “Poor” may point to an economic, physical, or spiritual lacking, but underlines that all that lacks in the human condition can be completed through relationship with God in Christ. In this respect, the more humans present themselves as humble, depriving themselves of their own desires as they conflict with God’s commands,<sup>20</sup> the more God will enhance their spirits.

Emptying is an ongoing process: “there is no limit to self-humbling as long as anything remains which may be poured out.”<sup>21</sup> The *kenosis*, or self-emptying, of Jesus serves as the path toward “salvation and a vehicle for distributing the power of God throughout the community of believers.”<sup>22</sup> As Jesus exemplifies, one demonstrates

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<sup>17</sup> In gospel reading, when tempted by Satan, Jesus does not exploit his Divine power. (Mt 4:1-11, Mk 1:12-13, Lk 4:1-13). See also: Dennis A. Jacobsen. *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 46. In regards to Jesus’ self-emptying, Jacobsen maintains that “the point here is not that Jesus abandons power or condescends to enter our suffering as an act of divine commiseration, rather that God in Jesus enters into the human condition to set us free from bandage to sin and death...”

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing*, 46.

<sup>19</sup> Craddock, *Philippians*, 41.

<sup>20</sup> T.A. Friedrichsen. “The ‘Christ Hymn’ (Philippians 2:6-11),” *Living Light*. 36.2 (1999): 33.

<sup>21</sup> J.A. Motyer, *The Richness of Christ: Studies in the Letter to the Philippians* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1966), 82.

<sup>22</sup> Jacobsen. *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing*, 46.

humility by word and by deed. To “empty” the self is an action Jesus lives out not only as he takes human form, but as his obedience leads him to crucifixion. Christ Jesus on the cross “functions as an exemplar, a concrete expression of a shared norm from which Paul and the Philippians can make analogical judgments about how they should live.”<sup>23</sup> As one who strives for emptiness, Paul thus owns, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13). Implicit here is an ever greater fullness given by the Spirit enabling a faithful disciple to bear trials and ultimately to triumph in Christ. Paul testifies: what seems impossible in the eyes of the world becomes possible for one centered in Christ.

Paul, however, as he focuses on self-emptying through Christ’s example, threatens to separate himself from the human context of the “brothers and sisters” whom he welcomes to “join in imitating me” (Phil 3:17) because Paul supposes that he can participate in Christ’s “sufferings by becoming like him in his death” if he could “attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil 3:10-11). A more appropriate assertion in the context of Christian community is his later claim: Christ “will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory” (Phil 3:21). The resurrection in store for the church is not the physical resurrection of each member, but a living out of an eschatological hope.

Because Jesus’ divine status separates him from all human beings, an individual cannot identify with Christ’s simultaneously servile and exalted position without the framework of a broader humanity. According to the sequence of the christological hymn, Christ’s resurrection is the launching point for his exaltation as God bestows upon him the “name above every name” (Phil 2:9). Paul and his followers cannot participate in this adoration except as worshippers. The “triumph of the crucified” warrants universal acclamation. As J.A. Motyer highlights, Christ crucified and raised is parousia linking the promises of the Old Testament to all ages and in Christ, “by him alone” God gains glory (Phil 2:11).<sup>24</sup>

As God depends on the acknowledgment of his Son, Paul indicates his reliance on Philippian believers. Should the congregation overcome selfish aims and internalize Christ’s salvific message, Paul can “boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain” (Phil 2:16). The life and death of Christ is a model for Paul, but just as Christ’s saving grace relies on a community of believers, so too Paul’s preaching is futile without the firm faith of the church. Paul in mission maps out constellations of churches throughout the Mediterranean in his time that will bear the witness of Jesus Christ. Philippi is one such location, a Roman province connecting Western and Eastern worldviews, that Paul believes will continue to “shine like stars in the world” (Phil 2:15).

However, the physical outline of the city of Philippi is all that remains today of the ancient Roman settlement. This fact led Lightfoot in the early twentieth century to the conclusion that as it was “born into the world with the brightest promise, the church of Philippi has lived without a history and perished without a memorial.”<sup>25</sup> Philippi faded as a byway between the trading destinations in the Mediterranean, but The Letter to Philippians remains the link between early Christian thought, as it illumines the divine

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<sup>23</sup> Stephen Fowl, “Christology and Ethics in Philippians 2:5-11,” in *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 145-46.

<sup>24</sup> Motyer, *The Richness of Christ*, 85.

<sup>25</sup> Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians*, 65.

and human relationship of Jesus. Lightfoot's reflections are too damning. Although fewer facts remain about Philippi than other cities that Paul visited in the first century, a history of the city survives through Paul's testament to the Christians living there under Roman rule. The city requires no memorial. Although the township itself is an empty tomb of sorts, the resurrection Paul preached to the Philippians extends far beyond the destination of his original epistle. Whether or not the words of verses 2:5-11 are his alone, they capture an early christology alive just decades following Jesus' crucifixion and rising. Now, ages later, the problems that hindered the churches at Philippi continue to encumber the mission of modern Christianity.

### III. Application: Bridging Reading Between the Text and the Interpreters

Although important through exegetical and hermeneutical inquiry to assemble a background and interpretation for a pericope, the complexity of context should not cloud a text's primary objectives. For Paul in dialogue with Philippi, the message at stake is the unison of the body of Christ. In this context, the passage should function as a link, not only to the contemporary Church, but also to the very foundation of Christ's reconciling revelation to the world. Paul opens Philippians 2:5-11 to all those who would recognize Christ, and participate in an extended priesthood of believers that includes "every knee" and "every tongue" that pronounces: "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil 2:10-11). This is unmistakably an inclusive call incorporating the cosmos.

God names reconciliation for all peoples through Jesus: "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name" (Phil 2:9) The Divine in connection with the created dismisses the disparities that separate soldier from slave, or Asian from Roman or Greek. Christians strive to be "children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation" (Phil 2:15), not with the implication that the cultural and ethnic differences alive at Philippi are the unavoidable means for dissension, but neither are they the means for salvation. Although variation is inherent to God's creation, it is Jesus and his witness alive at Pentecost that testify to the unity possible amidst Hellenistic, Asian, or Jewish socio-political divisions. In his epistles, Paul articulates that God's chosen are set apart together from nonbelievers not by nationality or written law, but by faith.

The insight different peoples bring to Scripture creates a network of understanding that individual interpretation lacks. If "theology is primarily a cognitive enterprise, an intellectual dimension of faith which concerns the whole structure and order of intelligibility in the universe,"<sup>26</sup> the message of Philippians should be examined collaboratively. In line with a unified body of Christian believers, "theologizing is done not to 'build walls' or to exclude others; rather, it is done to create dialogue, tolerance, and appreciation of another's theology."<sup>27</sup> An absence of dialogue easily sparks misinterpretation. For this reason, in the context of scholarly criticism, "Interpreters who employ the various forms of criticism in a complementary way will arrive at a much fuller meaning of the biblical text."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Yeo Khiok-khng, *What Has Jerusalem to Do With Beijing? Biblical Interpretation from a Chinese Perspective* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998). 10.

<sup>27</sup> Yeo, *What Has Jerusalem to Do With Beijing?*, 11.

<sup>28</sup> Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 28.

The nuances of language and theological implications in a passage like the Philippians 2:5-11 hymn would have been controversial in Paul's time, but perhaps generate more discussion today in light of the scope of Scriptural study and the cultural, temporal, and linguistic barriers that separate contemporary Christians from the Philippian church Paul addresses. With an academic focus foreign to a Christian of Paul's day and age, modern scholars dissect the hymn for the sake of study with the danger of dismantling its authority. It is the diversity of perspective with which modern readers approach the text that serves as a reminder of the varied cultures and worldviews that were present at Philippi that Paul sought to unify under the humble Jesus of 2:5-11.

Although Christ empties himself before God, his identity is exalted. In offering himself before the Lord, he does not exploit fellow members of humanity. Likewise, Christians in community are called humbly to approach God and one another respecting cultural, gender, and ethnic differences that do not detract from divine worship. Stephen Fowl believes in the beautiful reality that exists in God's variation: "Rather than a difference obliterating sameness, Paul's language of imitation in Philippians is designed to produce an ordered, harmonious diversity."<sup>29</sup> Solidarity in community through Christ enables true multicultural celebration.

The whole of Paul's christology may be entered through a variety of avenues, however, journeying Christians meet at Philippi in the context of Paul's epistle. Through the christological hymn of the first century, Paul reveals the human and Divine as it merges in Christ's humility symbolized by the cross. The missionary commissions all believers to take up this symbol as means to withstand and ease secular dissonance while drawing closer to each other through the body of Christ. As the authors of *Compassion* articulate, "We must say that the mind of Christ is the mind that gathers us together in community; our life in community is the manifestation of the mind of Christ."<sup>30</sup> The unifying force of God's sacrificial love continues to bridge the faith of modern Christians to the early Church.

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*Introduction to New Testament*  
*Exegetical Paper*  
Professor Yeo  
Fall 2004

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<sup>29</sup> Fowl, "Christology and Ethics in Philippians 2:5-11," 149.

<sup>30</sup> Nouwen, Henri J.M., Donald P. McNeil, and Douglas A. Morrison. *Compassion: A Reflection of the Christian Life* (New York: Doubleday), 51.

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