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Mind of Christ

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11

By Ron Tyler

Philippians 2:5–11 is valued for its high Christology; since so much has been written about it, one hesitates to say more. Another statement of its meaning is appropriate, however, because the significance of the passage's Christology and function has been lost in much of the literature. Several of the writers in this issue of *Leaven* refer to it and build on its meaning.

INTRODUCTION—PHILIPPIANS 2:5

Philippians 2:5 functions as an introductory formula for the passage.¹ The Greek literally reads: “this you (plural) think in you (plural) which also in Christ Jesus.” Observe the following:

1. The phrase “in you” can best be rendered “among you.” Paul is concerned that the entire Philippian church share this attitude.
2. The term “this” at the first of the sentence, while related to what has preceded in 2:1–4 (the unity plea), serves to introduce yet another related topic, “the mind of Christ.”
3. The verb “you think” (see 1:7; 2:2) means more than merely thinking. It conveys the idea of a state of mind, a fixed attitude toward something, a disposition.² The verb

is a present imperative and can be rendered “have this attitude” or “have this mind.” The TEV renders it “the attitude you should have is” while the NAB translates “your attitude must be.” The RSV opts for “have this mind among yourselves.” The NRSV chooses “let the same mind be in you that.”

4. The verb tense for “think” is continual in nature, indicating Paul’s desire that the Philippians constantly possess this attitude.

Translators must supply a missing verb in the last half of verse 5. Of the various options that exist, two are the most likely. The first is to supply the same verb used in the first half of the verse, rendering “*think* among yourselves that which you also *think* in Christ Jesus.” The meaning then is to have the attitude that you have experienced in Christ Jesus. Moffatt’s translation follows this alternative, thus “treat one another with the same spirit as you experience in Christ Jesus.” The second option is to supply the verb “was,” which then translates “have this mind among yourselves which *was* in Christ Jesus.” I will follow this second line of reasoning.

A final problem in the last half of verse 5 is the meaning of the phrase “in Christ Jesus.” Again, there are two

likely options: First, that the phrase means “in your church relations.” Paul, accordingly, urges the Philippians to practice this attitude with one another—among themselves. And second, the phrase may mean that “which belonged to Christ,” thus designating that mind “which Christ had.” Many feel this is the best interpretation, since it leads naturally into verses 6–11. The TEV renders the phrase “that Christ Jesus had.” I follow this translation.

Summary of verse 5. Paul is calling the Philippians to follow the path the Lord took during his lifetime by continually sharing the attitude that Christ had. Sharing this attitude means *doing* something actively. The Philippians are to have the “mind of Christ”: “Constantly have this mind among yourselves which was in Christ Jesus.”

THE MIND OF CHRIST—PHILIPPIANS 2:6–8

What is the “mind of Christ”? It is a selfless, servant-centered, and humble and obedient mind. Let us explore these three themes.

1. *A selfless mind (verse 6).* The “who” in verse 6 refers to Christ as the subject. The participle *huparchon*, translated “being,” connotes one’s essential nature and underscores a continuing state.

Christ was in the “form,” or better, the “nature” of God. There are two Greek words for “form,” and both are used in our passage. One word denotes an essential form of something. The other, found in verses 6–7, means “nature” or “likeness.” Thus, Christ had the “nature” or “likeness” of God. At this point, we must not read later theological ideas back into the text. Paul simply means that Christ manifested in his life the character of God. In Jesus, the early Christians saw God himself uniquely working.

Some scholars suggest that Christ’s being in the “nature of God” alludes to Adam’s being formed in God’s image (Gen 1:26). However, unlike Adam, who, being human, sought divinity (Gen 3:5), Jesus, being deity, relinquished his rightful position of honor. Even more to the point are Jewish texts that describe divine Wisdom as the perfect, archetypal image of God. In these instances, “form” is best understood as “role” instead of “image.” The “servant” (see below, 2:7) of Isaiah 53 also was “poured out” or “emptied himself,” not in incarnation, but in death.³

The language “by force he should try to become” allows for three possible interpretations. The first interpretation translates the Greek “a prize to be seized” (RSV and TEV). The NEB has “he did not think to snatch at

equality with God.” Here, “equality with God” is something Christ did not have, yet refused to take. The second interpretation translates the Greek “a prize to be held tight.” The JB has “yet he did not cling to his equality with God.” Here, “equality with God” is something he already possessed, but freely gave up. The final interpretation translates the Greek “a piece of good fortune.” Here, a divine status is something Christ held, but refused to use in an exploiting manner. The NRSV reads “did not count equality with God as something to be exploited.”⁴

2. *A servant mind (verse 7).* “But” is *alla*, suggesting a strong contrast. It could be rendered “instead of this.” That Christ “emptied” himself means that he did not count his life as something to be retained. He emptied himself and took the nature of a human being. The image conveys the idea that Christ became very human, voluntarily, and experienced the total human situation. The Greek word translated “himself” is in an emphatic position, that is, it comes early in the sentence and indicates that it was his own choice: “but *himself* he emptied.” The TEV reads “of his own free will.”

The verb “emptied” has a number of theological interpretations, most notably the kenotic theory of the incarnation. The verb translated “emptied” should be understood symbolically, not metaphysically. Paul is not saying that Christ laid aside his divine attributes. In other locations, Paul uses the verb to mean “to bring to nothing,” “to make worthless,” or “to empty of significance.” In this context, Christ gave up his rights and voluntarily took the form of a servant.

The phrase “taking the form of a servant” occurs at the same time as the “emptying” of Christ. The word “nature” (“form”/“nature”) of a servant is the same word used for the “nature” of God. They should both be translated the same way to observe the obvious parallelism.

The phrase “he became in the likeness of men” means that Christ’s humanity was real. The term “men” is plural and underscores Christ’s relation to all humanity. Paul affirms the reality of Christ’s true humanity.

Many interpreters believe Paul has in mind Adam in Philippians 2:6–7. There are several significant distinctions, but two stand out: First, neither Jesus nor Adam was yet equal to God, that is, both were tempted to *grasp at equality*. Jesus refused the temptation; Adam yielded. Second, Jesus did not consider being equal to God something to be *clung to*. Here, Adam, a creature unequal to God, sought to be equal to God. Conversely, Jesus,

In all our relations with one another, we are to have the mindset that characterized the Lord of heaven and earth.

already equal to God, willingly emptied himself and became a human being.⁵

Isaiah 52–53, the suffering servant, is behind much that Paul writes here. In the Gospels (especially in Luke), Jesus assumes the role of the suffering servant as the model for his life and ministry. That same servant theme is then passed on by Jesus to the disciples as the key to Christian discipleship. Christ emptied himself, served, suffered, and died. Christ acted on our behalf without any thought for himself. He was totally selfless in what he did. He lived with no eye to a reward. That is what God rewarded and highly exalted. It is the servant mind of Christ that Paul calls upon the Philippians to practice.

3. *A humble and obedient mind* (verse 8). Christ's mind is *humble* because he was *obedient*.

Humble mind. Humility is a uniquely Christian value. In the Greco-Roman world, humility was not highly viewed; it was something possessed by persons of lesser status. Greek moralists regarded it as self-abasement. But in the New Testament writings, informed by the life of Jesus Christ, humility becomes a positive virtue—a drastic reversal! When a believer recognizes his utter dependence upon God for everything (true humility), he will act in humble ways toward other people.⁶ That is what Jesus meant by “poor in spirit” in Matthew 5:3. Peter says, “Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you” (1 Pet 5:5–6).

Obedient mind. The Greco-Roman value system respected one who would suffer, and even die, for what he believed. Judaism also respected obedience to the point of death. Many stories about Jewish martyrs have been preserved. But Paul stresses “death on a cross”—crucifixion, the most degrading form of execution, reserved for non-Roman criminals who were slaves or free persons of the lowest status.⁷ It is this act of ultimate humility toward which Paul urges the Philippians, based on the life of Christ. For Paul, Christ's death is always central.⁸

GOD ACTS—PHILIPPIANS 2:9–11

We now see three major shifts in emphasis. First, we see a change in the central actor—from Christ (verses 6–8) to God (verses 9–11). Second, we observe a shift in themes—from suffering/humiliation (verses 6–8) to glory/exaltation (verses 9–11). Finally, we see a contrast between Jesus as servant (verses 6–8) and Jesus as Lord (verses 9–11).

The name above every name that is now bestowed upon Jesus is “Lord,” reflecting what scholars generally agree was the earliest Christian confession, “Jesus (Christ) is Lord.” Christ's Lordship is not limited to the human realm. He is Lord of the total created order. There is no area of the created order, above or below, in which the servant Christ's Lordship is not appropriate.

Philippians 2:10–11 reflects Isaiah 45:23 (“every knee will bow, . . . every tongue will declare”) and refers to the final submission of all nations to God. In the ancient social world, one often bowed the knee in reverence before a deity or ruler. The reference to those “in heaven” would include the angels—perhaps the rebellious angels believed to rule the pagan nations. Greeks worshipped gods in the heavens, earth, sea, and underworld; traditional Greek mythology also placed the shadowy existence of departed souls in the underworld. Paul announces that all categories of beings, whatever they are, must acknowledge Christ's rule because he is exalted above them.

Why does Paul include this passage (2:5–11)? Why does he call upon them to have this “mind of Christ”? Because Christ is the model of humility and self-sacrificial love to which Paul, throughout this letter, is calling the Philippians—and because there are some problems in the Philippian church.

Three problems can be identified. First, there is *legalism* (3:1–11)—the “doing of deeds for justification.” Paul's “cure” for this is a strong Christology. Second, there is *perfectionism* (3:12–16)—being above sin, so that what one does in the body does not matter. Paul's “cure” for perfectionism is, likewise, a strong Christology. And finally, there is *antinomianism* (3:17–4:1)—a leaning

toward free grace, believing that sin does not matter. Paul chooses Christology to deal with this problem as well.

In other words, in all our relations with one another, we are to have the mindset that characterized the Lord of heaven and earth. This is typical of Paul, because he views all “practical” issues in terms of theology. For him, ethical concerns are always the outgrowth of theology. Paul would never feel comfortable with decisions made any other way. Mere expediency, following the path of least resistance or the culture of which we are a part, would be most inappropriate for him. Indeed, his response to pettiness in church is often a hymn, a liturgy, a prayer, or a doxology.⁹

What function does this passage serve within the larger context? Although deeply theological, it is part of a context of exhortations. Philippians 1:27–2:28 consists of four exhortations of appeal:

1. The appeal for *steadfastness* (1:27–30)
2. The appeal for *unity* (2:1–4)
3. The appeal for humility with the *mind of Christ* (2:5–11)
4. The appeal to *realize* God’s salvation (2:12–18)

So, our passage is an exhortation to have the “mind of Christ.” Paul sets forth this mindset in his analysis of Christ (2:5–11); he translates it into daily life by citing examples of it in action. Ancient moral writers often adduced examples to prove their points; furthermore, it was common and expected in ancient ethical instruction for a teacher to refer to himself as an example. Paul thus points to Jesus (2:5–11), to Paul himself (2:17–18), to Timothy (2:19–24), and to Epaphroditus (2:25–30)—four examples, known to the Philippians, who modeled the “mind of Christ.”

Notes

¹For other examples of this, cf. Ephesians 5:14; 1 Timothy 1:15; 3:16; 2 Timothy 2:11.

²I-Jin Loh and E. Nida, *A Translators Handbook on Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (New York: United Bible Society, 1977), 54.

³Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994) combines both ideas in a convincing manner.

⁴F. F. Bruce, *The Letters of Paul: An Expanded Paraphrase* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965), 167. “He did not exploit equality with God for His own advantage.” Bruce is valuable for studying the letters of Paul because he prints the English Revised Version of 1881 opposite his own translation.

⁵Cf. Brown, 135.

⁶For an outstanding discussion of the uniquely Christian virtue

CONCLUSION

The three states of Christ—pre-existence, existence, and post-existence—are the basis for an ancient hymn,¹⁰ whose words form an appropriate conclusion to our study:

*My heart and voice I raise,
To spread Messiah’s praise;
Messiah’s praise let all repeat;
The universal Lord,
By whose almighty word
Creation rose in form complete.*

*A servant’s form He wore,
And in His body bore
Our dreadful curse on Calvary:
He like a victim stood,
And poured His sacred blood,
To set the guilty captives free.*

*But soon the Victor rose
Triumphant o’er His foes,
And led the vanquished host in chains:
he threw their empire down,
His foes compelled to own
O’er all the great Messiah reigns.*

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of “humility” contrasted with that of the pagan world, cf. R. L. Ottley, “Humility,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (London: T & T Clark, 1913), 6:870–72.

⁷Cf. Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Augsburg: Fortress, 1977). Also Gerald O’Collins, “Crucifixion,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:1207–10.

⁸James Denney, *The Death of Christ* (London: Hodder & Stouetton, 1903) is among the greatest studies on this concept ever done. It has been often reprinted.

⁹James Denney affirmed that the church’s confession should be sung, not signed. Cf. *Expository Times* 60, no. 9 (June 1949): 239.

¹⁰Benjamin Rhodes (1743–1815).