

Imago Dei identity as embodied in the incarnation: Kenosis as a catalyst towards identity formation



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This article is a study of Philippians 2, verses 5 through 11, and reflects on Paul's presentation of Christ in his incarnation as the identity which fully embodies the *imago Dei*. The image presented in the foundational biblical text for this article is known as the *kenotic* image, which serves as the catalyst towards the identity of the *imago Dei*, as anticipated by the biblical narrative – introduced in Genesis 1:26–27 and accomplished in the New Testament. Philippians has had a great influence on the thought of many theologians because of the significant ideas expressed in this passage. Thus, the hymn recorded in Philippians 2 is one of the great examples of the New Testament, which describes both the process and the goal of the transformation of any individual towards the formation of the *imago Dei* identity. Christ is presented as the perfect model of the *imago Dei*, and his incarnation undertook different stages or phases.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This passage, as a hymn, reflects literary, historical, and theological contexts. Its literary context considers the source, the grammatical, and the redaction criticisms; its historical context considers the historical criticism that reflects on the author, date, and recipients of this text in its original format; and its theological context reflects on the tradition and canonical criticisms. Reading this passage in these various contexts reflects a pattern for a particular identity. Hence, the imperatives found within this passage serve as the catalyst to form the identity of the *imago Dei*.

Keywords: Christ; identity; incarnation; kenosis; Philippians.

Introduction

‘ὁς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων οὐχ ἄρπαγμόν ἡγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ’,¹

This text, Philippians 2:6, makes a reference to the concept of *imago Dei*, and it is used in the New Testament, as making an allusion to Genesis 1:26–27, in the context of highlighting the possibility of humankind attaining that image which Christ fully embodied. In the context of this article, we attempt to show how that very image of God in Genesis 1:26 is embodied fully in Christ Jesus, and how followers of Jesus are encouraged to imitate that image. The passage which is relevant for this discussion is Philippians 2:5–11, and here there is a connection between God (εἰς τὸν θεόν = *elōhîm*), Christ (Χριστός Ἰησοῦς = *Christos Iēsous*) and man (ἄνθρωπος = *ādām*). Philippians Chapter 2, verse 6, appears in the context of Philippians 2:5–11: Paul was encouraging the church at Philippi, and the surrounding churches, to imitate Christ as he is the full embodiment of the *imago Dei*.²

Many have referred to that image described in Philippians 2 as the *kenotic* image. This suggests that Jesus Christ is the model image Christians must transform to be like. Philippians introduces his image as the *kenotic* image. Paul noted in that letter that Jesus Christ will transform (*metaschematizō*) our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body (Phlp 3:21). In Christ, we notice in the Christology of Philippians that God redeems humanity to his original condition and reveals this in the *kenotic* image of Philippians 2:5–11. Dunn (1998) in his commentary on this passage noted that:

The pattern of redemptive ‘recapitulation’ is evident in a sequence of passages – both in the thought of Christ’s identification with the human condition, under sin and under the law, in order to redeem that condition, and in the thought of the exalted Christ as the pattern of a new humanity, with the divine image renewed and the divine glory restored. (p. 75)

1. Aland et al. (2006); (Phlp 2:6).

2. Fee (2007:372) went further by observing that the immediate context of verses 6–8 is Chapter 2:1–5, and thus, verses 6–8 function primarily as a paradigm; in pages 372–376, Fee makes a few preliminary comments that have a bearing on the origin and structure of this passage, as well as its significant role in the context of this letter (I may add that, perhaps, these verses play a significant role in the context of the Pauline letters, in the perspective of this article). Also see introductions to Philippians by Guthrie (1990), Carson and Douglas (2005) and Elwell and Yarbrough (2013).

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Schillebeeckx (1969:230–231), in his discussion of the humiliation and exaltation of Christ as the prototype of humankind, commented that Christ came to restore our relationship and dialogue with the living God, and in doing so, he restored the Christian meaning of the secular and of the intramundane task of life, which happens through redemption. He continues to remark that the redemption leaves its mark not only on the life of grace with God, the ultimate meaning of human life, but also on the intramundane task as incarnation of this communion of grace. Like Christ, humankind goes through a ‘kenosis’ in the world on its way to heavenly glorification.³

Paul shows us, by explaining Christ’s *kenotic* image, that transformation towards this image is a process; hence, in introducing this letter, he writes that: ‘I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus’ (v. 6). This is not achieved ‘overnight’; even for Christ, this transformation was a process, and so followers of Jesus are called to a process of maturity. Thus, ‘Paul’s concern is for the growth of his readers in such qualities as love, knowledge and righteousness’ (Marshall 2004:345).

One commentator in introducing the book of Philippians confirmed this by stating that some aspects of life cannot be rushed; spiritual growth is no different than physical growth – both require time and great patience (Jones 1999:1555). Therefore, in the context of Philippians, Paul wrote to prescribe the ‘path’ to spiritual maturity in his refutations of the rules and regulations to spiritual maturity imposed on the Philippi Christian community by the false teachers.⁴ Marshall (2004:344) commented that one of the dangers to the church arose from a group of people (rival travelling preachers) who appear to have been encouraging Jewish ritual and legal practices as the path to spiritual perfection or maturity (Phlp 3:1–4:1). In his prescription, he presented to them the Image of Jesus Christ as the model to imitate; this Image of Christ emerges in the hymn of Philippians 2:6–11, and it emerges as the *kenotic* image.

The *kenotic* image is a reference to Christ’s self-denial through emptying himself, as introduced above. So Philippians 2:5–11 presented the example of Jesus, whose attitude every believer must imitate.

Philippians has had a great influence on the thought of many theologians because of the significant ideas expressed in this passage. Martin and Dodd (1998) commented that:

One of the best known and most influential passages in the New Testament is the hymn of Philippians 2:5–11 which traces the

dialectical path of Christ from pre-existence – or pre-temporal existence – to incarnation to exaltation.⁵ (n.p.)

Hawthorne (1998) added that this passage is:

One of the most exalted, one of the most theologically and Christologically significant texts of all the texts of the New Testament, if not indeed the most, and because there is still no sign that these verses have yet disclosed their full secrets or completely opened up their rich treasures. (p. 96)

However, there seems to be an ongoing robust debate amongst many theologians regarding the place of this passage within Christian theology. Many have referred to this passage as a point of the beginning of Christology; they suggested that Paul was proving the divinity of Christ. However, other theologians think that this is a misrepresentation of this passage, particularly in its historical context. They suggest that reading this passage in its historical context, one realises that Paul shows us the way in which those who are in Christ ought to live. How we must conduct our lives. One commentator wrote (Hooker 2000):

The passage is, indeed, an important Christological statement – but its importance lies not only in what it says about Christ, but also in its implications for the lives of those who acknowledge Christ as Lord. (p. 476)⁶

The other debate regarding this passage revolves around the originality of this pericope.

The argument is about whether this pericope, referred to as a hymn, was included by Paul when he was writing this composition or whether it was added later. Marshall (2004) observed that:

The careful language of Philippians 2:6–11 with its rhythmical prose is often taken to betray use of an earlier composition, a Christian hymn celebrating the career of Christ, which was then taken over into this letter to express Paul’s sentiments. (p. 347)

Hence, some scholars like Brown (1998) suggested that Philippians 2:5–11 existed before Paul, perhaps as a hymn, and this hymn contains a rich Christology, although Paul uses it here not for the sake of Christology itself but to offer Christ as an example of what it means for the Philippians to ‘look not to your own interests but to the interests of others’ (2:4). It is plausible to suggest that this hymn already existed when Paul wrote this composition; however, Paul contextualised it and included it as it helped to substantiate his argument in the composition. Moreover, it is clear that there is a thorough explanation of a Christology; however, such a Christology has ethical implications. Lohmeyer, as cited by Brown (1998:6), suggested that within this passage is the key to understanding the motive for Christian living. Hence, ‘The literary form of the passage gives rise to the suggestion that here we are in touch with the worshipping life of the early Christians’ (Martin 1998:2).

To understand this in a broader context of Paul’s theology, see the article by Martin (1993).

See also Hooker (1975).

3. For a detailed discussion of Schillebeeckx’s (1969:210–233) theological discussion of humanity, which should go through a process of ‘kenosis’ to eventually attain glorification, see his chapter entitled, ‘Dialogue with God and Christian secularity’, where he discusses the mystery of God as the centre of man’s essence, and the humiliation and exaltation of Christ as the prototype of humankind.

4. The process of spiritual maturity as referred to in this chapter is used interchangeably with the process of growing into the same image of Christ.

So, what also mattered for him in this regard was the significance of this hymn in the life of the follower of Christ. Therefore, Johnson (1999:374) noted that Paul's language in 2:6–11 is dense and rhythmic, possibly indicating reliance on a traditional Christian hymn about Jesus. The correspondence in structure and language to the rest of this section is so close that it is also possible that Paul himself wrote the hymn or, at the very least, that he conformed his language in the surrounding text to match the vocabulary of the poem.

Imitation of Christ

Certainly, of greater significance, it is understanding the content of the hymn and how it functions for Paul which will enable the reader to comprehend Paul's larger argument in the book of Philippians. The undertone of this letter is fellowship (*koinonia*), a call to Christian fellowship, and this is observed clearly in the Greek and less obviously in the English versions. Paul uses different forms of the term 'fellowship' (*koinonia*) in 1:5; 2:1; 3:10; and 4:15. Hence, Johnson (1999:373) commented that, 'Paul's rhetoric is even more powerful because he has made fellowship the organizing principle of the letter'. Therefore, those who are 'in Christ' (2:1) should share the love, compassion and sympathy that come from him and behave in an appropriate manner towards one another. This is possible if we follow the example of Christ, which Paul portrays in 2:5–11.

Philippians 2:5–11 presents to us both an example of how believers can live harmoniously together and also the means toward that end; and this is possible if believers remain in Christ and have the same mind. We already have the power to live together in the way suggested by 2:6–11.

Paul begins this passage by stating: 'Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus' (v. 5). This phrase appears here as a preface to the content of the character of Christ, whom believers must imitate (as most English translations put a colon after it, which suggests that what follows describes the attitude of Christ). This phrase has two implications, as it suggests that either the people who are called to imitate Christ have that mind which they are called to possess or they are called to have that mind. Johnson (1999) explained this by stating that:

[T]he ambiguity of the Greek should not go unnoticed, as it can be read both indicatively ('you do have') and imperatively ('you must have'). They have this mind already because of the Spirit (1 Cor.2:16); but they must strive to live it out in imitation of Jesus. (p. 376)

The phrase used here: 'let this mind be' is a translation of the Greek word *φρονέω* (*phroneō*), which means to exercise the mind intensively to interest oneself in (with concern or obedience), so that you can be like the person you have set your affection on.⁷ The principle in this case is that we are to

7. One should note that there are different Greek concepts within Paul's letters that are translated as mind in the English translations; one such concept referred to in this section is *φρονέω* (*phroneō*) (Philp 2:2, 5; 3:16 Rm 8:5; 12:16), and the other concept is *νοῦς* (*nous*) (Rm 1:28; 7:23; 11:34; 12:2; 14:5), which, according to Louw

make the Lord Jesus our model and, in all respects, frame our lives, as far as possible, in accordance with his great example, as the *kenosis* image serves as the catalyst towards identity formation.

So, Fowl (1998) explained that:

Paul is trying to form in the Philippians the intellectual and moral abilities to be able to deploy their knowledge of the gospel in the concrete situations in which they find themselves, so that they will be able to live faithfully (or 'walk worthily' 1:27). (p. 145)

Christ's life was characterised by the promotion of the glory of God and the salvation of humankind. Thus, his example of self-denial was to accomplish that goal; hence, he chose to empty himself to achieve this goal. So, this 'hymn establishes a model for Christian imitation in terms of possessing and dispossessing positions of power' (Johnson 1999:374), thus the *kenosis* of Christ.

Kenosis of Christ

The hymn conveys that although Christ existed in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself (vv. 6–7). Christ negated himself, deprived himself of his worth and denied himself his divine rights. What is meant by this is that the heavenly Christ did not selfishly exploit his divine form and mode of being, but by his own decision emptied himself of it or laid it by, taking the form of a servant by becoming human.

Christ emptied himself further on by taking up the cross, as Johnson (1999:375) elucidated that 'the cross is the ultimate symbol of self-emptying'. The first path of the person who imitates Jesus is 'the way of the cross', as Jesus himself said: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me' (Lk 9:23). Jesus emptied himself by taking the 'way of the cross' and so calls us to follow that same example. Bearing the cross has always been a fundamental calling for everyone who desired to follow Jesus; however, many Christians have lost this principle in their different pursuits, as Kempis (1981), in *Of the Imitation of Christ*, noted that:

Jesus has now many lovers of his heavenly kingdom, but few bearers of His cross. Many He has who are desirous of consolation, but few of tribulation. Many He finds who share His table, but few His fasting. All desire to rejoice with Him, few are willing to endure anything for him. Many follow Jesus unto the breaking of bread; but few to the drinking of the cup of his passion. Many reverence His miracles; few follow the shame of His cross. (p. 83)

The universal symbol of the Christian faith is the cross: a call to living under the cross. We all know that every religion and ideology has its visual symbol, which illustrates a significant feature of its history or beliefs. For Christians, it is the cross that denotes dying. The call to follow Jesus is possible only if we commit to denying ourselves and taking up the cross. What does it mean to deny ourselves?

..... and Nida (1996:349), refers to a particular manner or way of thinking – disposition, manner of thought or attitude.

It is surrendering our will and affections to God and making him the supreme object of our love and happiness. To deny oneself means denying the sinful self, deny ungodliness and worldly lust; to deny self-righteousness and to renounce one's works of righteousness, especially in the business of justification and salvation; to deny oneself the pleasures and profits of this world, when in competition with Christ. Stott (1989:323) remarked that 'To deny oneself is... to turn away from the idolatry of self-centeredness'.

This denying of oneself will involve suffering; however, one must gladly accept suffering for the cause of following Christ. Suffering is inevitable for anyone who wants to follow Christ because the way of Christ is 'counter-cultural' and negates the many ways of the world, and it calls one to follow the way of self-denial – which is not an accepted attitude in the world (cf. 1 Pt 4:12–19). The world encourages one to amass himself with as much power as one can get so that they can rule over the 'weak' in their surrounding or context and secure themselves in that.

Christ says that one must deny themselves by emptying themselves, and dispossess themselves of all that power, and trust God; because insistence on security is incompatible with the way of the cross, and such hope on false security may lead one away from the way of the cross. Bock (1996) wrote:

Materialism and the pursuit of power, independence, and security are probably the biggest obstacles to spiritual advancement. Everything in our culture from commercials to our education pushes us in the direction of advancing our standard of living for more comfort. To pick up a cross means walking against the grain of cultural values, so that our own expectations and needs take a back seat to God's call. (p. 268)

Taking up the cross is indispensable in the process of denying ourselves; therefore, we can boast in taking up the cross, as Paul wrote in Galatians 6:14, 'May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...'. Yes, the cross is a difficult calling, but it is the path we must take to become like Christ. Christ-likeness is going to be reached through struggles, because there is an element of struggle involved in following Christ in Christian living; thus, godliness will be accomplished through struggle. Suffering is a necessary element of Christian living, as Paul says, 'For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him' (Phlp 1:29).

The cross stands at the very heart of the Christian faith. No man or woman who follows Christ ever escapes the cross. Jesus knew that everyone who came to him, in every country and in every culture and age, would have to face the discipline of cross bearing, as he noted in the record of Matthew 10:24: 'the servant is not greater than his Lord'. The point here is that the disciple who takes up his cross is doing what Jesus does; he is following in the same way as his Master. Luke makes an emphasis in his citation of Jesus' call to his disciples to carry the cross, by saying that this type of self-denial is a daily calling (9:23). Some disciplines of the Christian life are quite occasional, but cross bearing is continuous – it is a daily calling.

Therefore, we must be careful not to conceive of this self-denial, in a chronological fashion, as if the Lord were exhorting his hearers to practice self-denial for a while, then after a lapse of time to stop carrying the cross. The order is not chronological in the sense that we make this decision once, and therefore, we are guaranteed a ticket to heaven; instead, it is a logical decision that we must make every day of our lives. Carrying the cross is a full-time job, not a weekend hobby. It is a lifestyle and a commitment, which never takes a holiday. It is a daily calling.

Every day there will be things coming across our path, which will crucify us. There will be times when we have to swallow our pride, times when comfort and pleasure elude our grasp, and endure frustrations which run across our desire for an easy life.

Therefore, self-denial and crucifixion is the only way to gain life. Jesus has this matter in mind after speaking of the cross, as in the next verse he says, 'For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it'. (Lk 9:24). Jesus seems to appreciate the necessity of daily trials, troubles and tribulations in the life of a Christian, because he knows that these hardships result because of self-denial and they are instrumental in making one become more like him. God will use such opportunities to transform one more and more into the image of Christ. Warren (2002) remarked that:

We are like Jewels, shaped with the hammer and chisel of adversity. If a jeweler's hammer isn't strong enough to chip off our rough edges, God will use a sledge hammer. If we are really stubborn, he uses a jackhammer. He will use whatever it takes. Every problem is a character-building opportunity, and the more difficult it is, the greater the potential for building spiritual muscle and moral fibre. (p. 196)

Scripture continues to tell us: in Ephesians 4:24, 'You were ... created to be like God, truly righteous and holy'. Peterson (1995), in the Message translation, interpreted this verse as saying:

Take on an entirely new way of life – a God fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you. (p. 482)

The cross is essential in character building; thus, God's ultimate goal for one's life on earth is not necessarily comfort, but character development, and this will only happen through daily cross bearing. As believers, we are called to live in this manner. As Bonhoeffer (1963:79) put it: 'When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die'.

Servanthood of Christ

Part of Jesus' self-denial involved taking the nature of a servant, as Paul noted that Jesus emptied himself, made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant (v. 7). The word used for servant is δούλου, meaning 'a slave'; metaphorically, it means one who gives himself up to another's will, like the service of Christ in extending and advancing his cause among men, devoted to another to the disregard of one's own interests.⁸

8. Paul used two different Greek words in his epistles, which are translated as servant in our English translations. The first one is transliterated as *doulos*, which means a

A servant is an attendant, one who is called to be a steward. The word serve or servant is found about 1452 times in some English Bibles; thus, it is one of the largest topics in the Bible. Jesus was a servant to everybody who came across his path: the rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick, believers and unbelievers. Foster (1998:162) wrote that, 'True service is indiscriminate in its ministry'. We see Jesus demonstrating this kind of service in John 13:5–15, where he washes the disciples' feet; when he finishes washing their feet, he instructs them:

If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. (vv. 14–15)

Now, Paul may have been aware of this incident and, perhaps, made an allusion to it in writing of the example of Christ that all must comply with this command, as Jesus himself said that he gave us an example to follow.

It is interesting to notice that Paul uses two types of verbs in this passage: principal verbs and participle verbs. Principal verbs are the verbs considered first in rank or importance, and in this instance, they are 'did not regard', 'emptied himself' and 'humbled himself', whereas participle verbs are the words formed from the verb like 'going' or 'gone', and in this case, they are 'taking' and 'becoming'.

Therefore, the actions indicated by the participle verbs are dependent or serve those actions indicated by the principal verbs. So Jesus had to 'empty himself' before 'taking the form of a servant'. This also proves true for human beings, because one must forget about their rights to be a true servant; one must learn to let go of their status to be a real servant.

You cannot serve effectively if all that you are concerned about is your status. Jesus voluntarily gave up his divine status to come and serve the world, as Paul noted that although he existed in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped (2:6). Therefore, this was possible because he 'emptied' himself. Brown (1998:130) noted that the term 'emptied' could be understood only in the sense of total surrender and self-sacrifice, as the word 'form' is not something external to content. What is internal is also external, and what is external is also internal. Therefore, for this reason, the figure has to create for himself a substantial new existence in self-giving. It is the form of a servant.

Service is an investment that pays in more than monetary ways. It pays in character development. An old saying is true: 'The way to the throne room is through the servant's quarters'. Matthew 23:11 says, 'But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant', and Matthew 20:26 says, '... whoever desires to become great, Let him be your servant'.

You cannot talk about servanthood and humility; these two are seamless, as service is the most conducive to the growth of humility. So, Christ became a servant because he was humble; so, the humility of Christ was the substratum of his servanthood attitude.

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slave or bond-servant (as used in Phlp 2:7); the second one is transliterated as *diakonoi*, which means a menial worker or a waiter, the word Paul used in 1 Corinthians 3:5.

Humility of Christ

Christ, 'being found in appearance as a man he humbled himself...' (v. 8). Having taken the appearance of a human, humanity in his fallen state is characterised by arrogance; he had to humble himself to be able to reflect the image of God. Jesus lived a humble life, and humility was at the core of his philosophy. Humility is one of those qualities or virtues which are hard to define. Boice (1998:72) even remarked: 'how little we know of humility, even after many years of Christian life. Yet how essential humility is to true discipleship'. The best way to understand humility is to find out what it is not. Humility is the antithesis of pride, and pride itself seems to be one of the biggest problems in human relations. Jeffress (2002:186) defined pride by stating 'Pride is the attitude that credits ourselves with our successes and blames others for our failures'. The problem about pride is that it is very subtle, and most of the time, it is hard to notice. Sanders (1994) in his attempts to define pride suggested three tests that every individual must go through to determine the level of their pride:

The first test is the test of precedence, which asks: How do you react when another is selected for the position when you expected to fill the position? When another is promoted instead of you; when another's gifts seem greater than your own? The second test is the test of sincerity, which asks: 'When we are honest with ourselves, we often admit our problems and weaknesses; but how do you feel when others identify the same problems and weaknesses in you?' The third test is the test of criticism, which asks: 'Does criticism lead you to immediate resentment and self-justification? Do you rush to criticise the critic?' (p. 154)

Pride seems to be evident in most human relations, and individuals are able to effectively deal with it only when they encounter God; as St. Augustine (1958), in his classic work: *The City of God*, captures this reality when he remarked that:

[I] know, of course, what ingenuity and force of arguments are needed to convince proud men of the power of humility. Its loftiness is above the pinnacles of earthly greatness which are shaken by the shifting winds of time – not by reason of human arrogance, but only by the grace of God. (p. 3)

The power of this humility impacts every aspect of living. It could best be exemplified by the attitude that seeks to honour others above ourselves; as in the verses that precede the description of the example of Christ with regard to humility, Paul described this state by stating:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. (vv. 4–5)

Moreover, a humble example is characterised by obedience to God, as we see in the life of Christ, who, as the writer of the epistle to Hebrews wrote, had learnt obedience from what he suffered (Heb 5:8). He suffered through the 'way of the cross', which was self-denial; he was humble enough that he even died like a criminal, as the hymn continues to convey that: 'And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!' (v. 8). Thus, choosing

an ethical lifestyle may not necessarily be popular, and it may lead to a form of suffering (see Phlp 1:29).

Humility leads to complete obedience, as Williams (2003) cited Stowell who commented that:

Humility is not a quiet, reserved super-sanctimonious posture in life. The truly humble person can be appropriately bold and can enjoy life to the fullest – laughing and crying with great expression. Humility is the driving desire to give God the glory in all things and to obey him regardless. (p. 190)

This obedience was part of redemption; so, ‘as God redeemed and exalted the obedient, humiliated Christ, so God will redeem the obedient, through suffering’ (Fowl 1998:146). Thus, because of obedience, God exalted him, as the last stanzas of the hymn state that:

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, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (vv. 9–11)

Therefore, he was exalted.

Exaltation of Christ

The last few verses of this passage move us into a totally different mood – and into a different structure again. The triumphant ‘therefore’ in verse 9 introduces the action of God, who now responds to Christ’s self-emptying humiliation. Likewise, as reflected in Genesis 1:26–28,⁹ image precedes dominion; thus, this was exemplified in the life of Christ. God has exalted him above all in heaven and on earth; all will bow to his name, and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. One commentator remarked that the emphatic ‘And therefore’ (v. 9), which governs the last three stanzas, introduces a new turn (Brown 1998:9). Thus (Kreitzer 1998):

It is frequently noted that in 2:9–11 we are presented with a sudden change of subject. In the opening two stanzas of the hymn (2:6–8) it has been Christ who was the focus of attention; it was he who was on center stage, so to speak. In the third stanza, however, it is God who becomes the principal actor; it is God who takes over the action of the Christological drama. (p. 119)

Christ’s exaltation speaks of Jesus as a human becoming a being that is divine through this whole process of transformation delineated in the passage.

It is shown that these both forms – becoming and being – are contrasted to show Jesus’ divinity and humanity, as Brown

(1998:10) noted that ‘the divine figure dwells in the sphere of being, and the human figure in that of becoming’. This again provides a model for Jesus’ disciples who are in the process of transformation to becoming formed into his image.

Hence, Brown (1998) noted that:

[H]ere the norm of the moral was posited as the ultimate determination of all existence. The religious ethical act, determined the form and meaning of divine existence, and likewise the religious existence of the believer. (p. 10)¹⁰

There are others who refuse to accept the ethical interpretation of this passage; one key proponent of this development is Käsemann, as Fowl (1998:140) noted that ‘Käsemann’s primary aim was to undermine the “ethical idealist” interpretation of this passage’. However, Kreitzer (1998) in making a case for the ethical interpretation of this passage made the following observation:

Suffice it to say that a growing majority of interpreters agree that Paul does appeal to the example of the earthly Jesus (as expressed within the pre-Pauline hymn) and that he deliberately does so in order to elicit some action on the part of his audience. It may well be that traditional sayings of Jesus about humility and exaltation (such as that recorded in Matt.23:12/Luke 14:11; 18:14), or even the tradition of Jesus acting as a servant to the twelve disciples at the Last Supper (as recorded in John 13:3-17), are ultimately what lies behind the hymn. In any case, Paul wants the Philippians to act in humility and self-effacement and thereby follow the example of their Lord who was rewarded by God for his obedience. (p. 113)

The ethical undertones of this hymn are clearly seen when the exegete uses the hermeneutic tool of rhetorical criticism, which determines the process and order of an argument in a letter to reveal the intention of the author. Kreitzer (1998:114) elaborated by stating that: ‘three common means whereby a speaker/writer might try to persuade his audience are commonly noted: *pathos* (the appeal to emotion); *logos* (the appeal to reason); and *ethos* (the appeal to the moral character or reputation of the speaker and his argument)’.

All these rhetorical categories appear in the hymn. Paul makes an appeal to emotion by narrating the extent of Christ’s humiliation when he emptied himself and eventually died on the cross. He makes an appeal to reason by speaking of the ramifications of that action, which resulted in God exalting him.

He also makes a moral appeal by calling the followers of Jesus to imitate him, because that is a conduct that is worthy of the gospel of Christ (1:27).

Conclusion and summary

Through the use of hermeneutical study tools to prove the ethical interpretation of 2:5–11, one is able to make a case for the last stanzas of the passage (vv. 9–11) as also having an ethical bearing.

¹⁰There are other scholars who disregard the ethical interpretation of this passage; for more on this, see Morgan’s article on Ernst Käsemann’s Interpretation of Philippians 2:5–11, where she elaborates on this debate.

⁹As one reads the whole account of creation from the beginning, one discovers that the creation of humanity is the pinnacle of God’s creation; hence, God said: ‘let us make humanity in our image, in our likeness’. We are all aware that these descriptions do not refer to physical likeness. The words image and likeness here are translations of the Hebrew words: *tselem*, which means a resemblance; it is a representative figure, and *demuth*, which also connotes the idea of resemblance; but here, it maintains the idea of the image shaped or fashioned like its creator. Both these refer to spiritual and moral resemblance, and thereby to act in the manner of the creator. Both allude to having the nature and characteristics of God. Simply, this means to be godly; so, godliness precedes dominion; although intimately related, godliness underpins rulership. In essence, we have to be like God to rule like God; godliness is at the heart of kingdom administration. Humankind is heaven’s earthly agency for kingdom rulership influence. Humankind is intended to embody the nature of God on earth and serve as his divine representative in the physical world.

Thus, Schnelle (2009) explained that:

The Christian life is founded on Jesus' way to the cross, which is at the same time the essential criterion of this life. The ethical *proprium Christianum* is thus Christ himself, so that for Paul, ethics means the active dimension of participation in Christ. (p. 321)

Hence, Christianity is being true to Jesus Christ. Kreitzer (1998) cited Fowl who remarked that:

We would argue that by viewing vv.6–11 as an exemplar from which Paul draws an analogy to the Philippians' situation in order to justify the course of action he has urged in 1:27 we avoid the criticisms levelled against those who see 2:5–11 as proposing a model to be imitated. Further, in this view vv.9–11 play a crucial part in the function of the passage. If God does not vindicate Christ's suffering and humiliation, there is no reason to expect the same God to save the Philippians if they remain steadfast in the face of opposition. (p. 117)

Therefore, this gives enough reason that God will redeem humanity by restoring the original image he was created in, if he follows after Christ. In Philippians 2:5–11, Jesus represents Adam as he reveals the original intention of humankind. The Christology that is explained in the hymn suggests God's original intention in creating humanity in Genesis 1:26–28, in how God redeems humankind to that position where he must have dominion over all creation. Dunn (1998), in explaining the view of Christology in Philippians 2:6–11, observed that:

We may note especially the use of Ps. 8:6, describing God's intention in creating humankind, to complement Ps. 110:1 in describing the exalted Christ's lordship over all things. The 'subjection of all things under his feet' (Ps. 8:6) in effect completed God's original purpose in giving newly created humankind dominion over the rest of creation. The exalted Christ has fulfilled the function originally intended for humankind (Adam). (p. 74)

Throughout this hymn, Christ is presented as a fully human being that goes through transformation to restore the first human being, Adam, and in doing so showing all humankind what was God's original intention in creating humanity. Dunn (1998) summarised the message of this hymn by stating that:

Christ is presented as one who did not stand on status but emptied himself, as one whose whole life speaks of serving and not grasping, as one whose way to exaltation was only through death. Even if it were judged not to an expression of Adam Christology, it would still be a powerful way of saying that in Christ, his death and resurrection, God's original design for humanity finally achieved concrete shape and fulfillment. (p. 79)

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W.P.M. is the sole author of this article and is responsible for all the research conducted for this article.

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