

A Proper Hermeneutic and Exegesis of Philippians 2:1-11

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Genre-Specific Hermeneutical Methodology

The New Testament letter to the Philippians was written by the apostle Paul in approximately 61 AD. The genre of Philippians is *epistle*. It is a letter written by Paul to the church in the city of Philippi. The New Testament epistles are occasional documents written in the first century from one party to another, usually from an apostle or evangelist to a Christian church, for a specific purpose. Epistles are not meant to be read as narrative records of particular events. They are also not meant to be exhaustive textbooks on theological matters, although they do contain significantly developed theological statements and ideas.

Often, what appear to us to be some of the most profound theological statements in the epistles are statements of views which the author shares with his audience. So, such a view or (profound theological) statement is usually not brought up in order to teach the view itself but as an illustration for another point, distinct from the theological point on which we have become fixated. Paul and his audience share these same theological and christological viewpoints, and that is why the author can draw on his and his readers' commonly-held views to impress on them some other point which logically flows from the theological reality understood by both sides. Such commonly held and mutually understood viewpoints presented in the epistles are generally taken for granted by both the author and the recipients of the letter.

Now, there are times in which a New Testament author develops theological points and weaves together certain theological themes into a longer treatise within the epistle itself, and this is especially true in longer epistles, such as Romans and Hebrews. Therefore, it is important to identify which theological themes are being expounded in the text of the epistle, or in any biblical book for that matter, and which statements are taken for granted by author and recipients alike.

A second thing that it is important to remember is that all of the theology in the New Testament is *task theology*. Task theology is theology that is inscribed in order to directly address and deal with a particular situation within the particular community of the addressees. Task theology is occasional in nature, and all theology in the New Testament is task theology because all New Testament documents are occasional documents. That is, all New Testament documents were written in response to certain questions, problems, or dilemmas that had arisen and that the author felt needed to be addressed. Therefore, all of the New Testament documents are occasional documents because they were written for a specific purpose to specific individuals to address specific issues.

So, what we look for first when studying a New Testament epistle is the occasion and purpose of the document. We want to ask questions like: Why was it written? What questions and problems does it address? Why are these particular situations being addressed? Much of this important situational information may come from the epistle itself. However, it is generally helpful to enlighten ourselves with background information concerning the times and situations of both the author and the recipients first. This will make exploration of the theological treatise within the epistles much more informed and fruitful.

When studying particular addresses and problems within an epistle, it is very important to identify the *main idea* of the passage. Ask: What is the author's central message? What is the gist of it? and try to summarize what the author is saying in one sentence. Next, we want to identify *supporting statements*, statements that support the main idea. Thirdly, after we have thus examined the central message of the passage, we then want to ask pointed *hermeneutical questions* of the passage. Hermeneutical questions help us search for more information that might be contained in the passage which in some way helps develop, emphasize, or otherwise support the author's message. These questions also help us see how all the parts of the passage fit together and undergird the main idea of the text. Some examples of deeper hermeneutical questions are: What likely problems or situations is the author addressing in this passage? Why was this particular passage written? What response does the author hope to elicit from the readers of this passage? In order to know how a particular passage should be applied in contemporary times and situations, its *application* to the situation of the original audience must be ascertained first. Then, we can identify appropriate parallels between contemporary situations and the situation of the recipients.

Philippians: Getting the Big Picture

The apostle Paul wrote this epistle to the church in the Roman city of Philippi while under house arrest in Rome (Philippians 1:1, 13-14, NIV & NIV, 2002). The primary purpose of the letter is that it seems to be a thank you letter from Paul for a monetary gift that the church had sent him (Philippians 4:10-20, NIV). Paul also uses the occasion of writing this letter to inform the church of his current circumstances and wellbeing (1:1-26), to encourage them to live holy and work toward perfect unity (1:27-2:16; 4:1-9), to attend to the affairs and wellbeing of the church (2:17-30), and to admonish them to follow his example in seeking to know and obtain the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ Jesus (chapter 3). Although Paul's main purpose for writing Philippians was to thank them for sending their gift of support (NIV, 2002), the bulk of the letter addresses Christian living and unity within the church (Philippians 1:27-4:9).

Paul begins the epistle by addressing the entire church at Philippi, including the leadership and ministers and thanking God for their fellowship in the gospel (Philippians 1:1-7, NKJV). He then informs them that he prays their love will continually increase so that they might be true representatives of the righteousness of Jesus Christ (vv. 8-11). Next, Paul reminds them that all of his affliction and troubles have helped to further the

gospel, both by his personal witness as well as by inspiring others to preach Christ (vv. 12-18). Paul goes on to describe his certainty that the Lord will deliver him, although he is uncertain whether it will be through his death for the cause of Christ or by allowing him to go free so that he can continue to labor for the gospel (vv. 19-26). Either way, God will receive the glory (v. 20). For Paul, “to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (v. 21). Finally, Paul admonishes them to live Christ-like lives in all their conduct for the sake of the gospel, so that whether or not he will be able to see them again, the message will be proven true to everyone by the unity and boldness of the church in the face of their sufferings (vv. 27-30).

Thesis Statement of the Passage: Philippians 2:1-11

Paul admonishes the church to work toward perfect unity by humbling themselves and putting the needs of others before their own in the same way that Jesus, being God, humbled Himself to the point of becoming a human and dying a sinner’s death. This one long sentence summarizes Paul’s message here in Philippians 2 verses 1-11. Now, to dig deeper into the passage, to check our work and the accuracy of this statement as well as mine for any additional points or implications we might not have noticed or covered in the thesis statement, we will engage a two-step hermeneutical process. First, we will compare three different reputable translations, the NKJV, NIV, and NLT. Next, we will ask pointed hermeneutical questions of the text as we understand it based on the translations. For a description of this second step, see Strauss (2011), page 78. In - answering our interpretative questions, we will employ sound logic and reason and consult

Interpretation Step 1: Comparing Translations

Philippians 2:1-11 is an encouragement to the Philippians to be humble servants of one another. The ultimate example which we are to follow is Jesus Christ Himself, and He is the greatest example of humility and self-sacrificial servitude. Paul builds upon the incarnation, life, and crucifixion of Jesus to demonstrate how the Philippian Christians should behave toward one another. Reading from the New Living Translation (NLT), verse 3 simply states, “Don’t be selfish; don’t try to impress others,” and the New International Version (NIV) reads, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit” (Philippians 2:3, NLT & NIV). While the first part of this statement is vague in the NLT’s rendering, “Don’t be selfish,” the NIV is clearer in stating that “nothing” should be done “out of selfish ambition.” The latter more specifically expresses a clear manner of behavior, selfish ambitions, which is much more useful than simply stating, “Don’t be selfish.” On the other hand, the second part of this verse is clearer in the NLT. It states, “Don’t try to impress others” is easier to put into practice than the NIV’s vague, “Do nothing out of... vain conceit.”

At the transition from Paul’s exhortation to Christ’s example in verses 5-6, the NIV does injustice to verse 6’s, “Who being in the form of God” (NKJV). This concept is expressed as, “Being in very nature God,” in the NIV. The latter utilizes the theological term “nature” which attempts to explain how Jesus Christ can be both God and man

simultaneously. It is an unhelpful insertion into this particular passage and can undoubtedly cause confusion. The term used in the NKJV, “form,” is easier for readers to understand and lacks the more abstract theological implications of the term “nature.” The Greek term μορφή (morphe) indicates a visible image or appearance, and μορφή θεου should be understood to signify what is visible of the invisible God (cf. Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). The NLT seems to understand Paul’s message a little better than the NIV since it paraphrases “being in the form of God” (NKJV) as, “though He was God” (NLT). The NLT’s translation does not allow for the possibility that Jesus was part of God, somewhat God, or like God in some way but states plainly what this passage seeks to convey, that he was God with respect to his preincarnate identity.

Interpretation Step 2: Asking Hermeneutical Questions

1. What is the author’s purpose in light of the passage’s genre and historical and literary context?

In Philippians 2:1-11, Paul is calling the Philippian Christians to a deeper understanding of Christ’s love and for that deeper love to be manifested in their lives. In chapter 1, Paul prays that their “love may abound still more and more” so that they may “approve what is excellent” and be “without offense till the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:9-10, NKJV). It is Paul’s desire that this group of loving Christians become more loving by becoming more like Jesus Christ.

Paul introduces the topic of unity in a series of four conditional statements. The NKJV and NIV translate these as four “if” statements while the NLT makes them into a group of rhetorical questions (Comfort, 2008, 165). These four statements represent the benefits of maintaining unity in Christ (Longman & Garland, 2006, 213). Paul begins with listing the ideals of community living in the church of God and then proceeds to describe the individual qualities that will help bring about such unity. He tells them that he will be overjoyed if they all think, love, and live in unity and harmony (Philippians 2:2, NKJV). His main point is that if they will be unselfish in all that they do, will not try to exalt themselves in the eyes of others, and consider the personal needs and situations of others as equal to or more important than their own, then they will be like Jesus Christ and will in this way achieve perfect unity in their fellowship (vv. 3-5).

2. How does this passage inform our understanding of the nature of God and his purpose for the world?

Although this passage is littered with profound theological statements, it is important to remember the author’s purpose mentioned above. Paul is not writing Philippians 2:1-11 in order to teach a lesson on the deity of Christ or on the incarnation. Rather, these two truths seem to be mutual assumptions among Paul and his recipients (Longman & Garland, 2006, 219). Paul wrote this passage to teach the church a lesson about humility. However, the passage does provide some significant insight into the nature and heart of God. In it, we get a glimpse of what the earliest Christians, including the apostles, believed about the identity of Jesus and the subject of the incarnation.

First, from this passage we learn that Christians need to practice humility because God Himself is humble. Paul's use of language in verse 5 indicates that he wants the Philippians to both adopt the attitude of Christ and put that attitude into practice in their lives (Martin, 1976, 90). This concept is further developed by Paul's exposition of Christ's ultimate example of humility in both His incarnation and His death on the cross. Paul presents common truths about the incarnation, sufferings, death, and glorification of Christ in order to provide the ultimate example of how he wants his readers to think and behave.

The second important lesson that this passage reveals is that status is not something that God really respects or takes into account. In the text, Paul explicitly refers to Jesus as God. That he was "in the form of God" implies that He preexisted His human life as God, and the idea that He was "equal with God" demonstrates the fact that, although He became a man, Jesus never ceased being divine (Philippians 2:6, NKJV). Rather, He humbled Himself in two ways, by "[giving] up his divine privileges" (v. 7, NLT) and by "[dying] a criminal's death on the cross" (v. 8). Paul's point is that, although Jesus was God, He "made Himself nothing" (v. 7, NIV) by becoming a human being and subjecting Himself to the divine plan, becoming obedient unto death on the cross (v. 8). How could Paul's readers be proud, exalt themselves, or attempt to exercise dominion over others if the Lord whom they serve humbled Himself in such a profound manner (Longman & Garland, 2006, 219)?

3. Is the author addressing any problems within the church?

As mentioned previously, Paul prays for the Philippians that their "love may abound still more and more" (Philippians 1:9 NKJV). Paul writes Philippians in response to a gift sent to him by the Philippian church (4:18). So, he is clearly not condemning them for a lack of love. Rather he is commending them for the love they have shown thus far, and he is teaching them to increase that love even more.

In Philippians 2:1-11, Paul is teaching the church to walk in humility. Therefore, it is safe to assume that he is not teaching them this lesson because of problems in the church but because he is showing them how they can improve the fellowship which they already enjoy. However, the fact that Paul needed to teach them about Christ-like humility betrays their failure to attain to the perfect, loving humility of Christ. Longman and Garland explain that it was normative in Roman culture to earnestly covet high status "and to promote one's own honor" (Longman & Garland, 2006, 214). However, this does not necessarily indicate that the Philippian church was not humble or loving toward one another. It can be certain that they still had room to grow because they had not yet attained to the perfect standard of humility which was exemplified in the incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

4. Does Paul's exposition on the incarnation and life of Christ support the Trinitarian doctrine that Jesus is a second eternal person apart from the God who is His Father?

Again, it is essential to keep in mind that the theology of this passage is task theology. The theological views and perspectives presented are intended to either support or further Paul's teaching on Christian humility. However, one important inference can be unmistakably made from this text, and that is this: Jesus is God. Two relevant questions can, then, be asked of the passage. How does the text present Jesus as God? Does it present Him as a second, co-eternal person with God or as God Himself who has come in human flesh? It is important to recognize that the emphasis of the passage is on Christ's humility, depicted in both the incarnation and the crucifixion. The text merely states that Jesus existed "in the form of God" (Philippians 2:6, NKJV). Paul precludes his description of the incarnation of Christ with the idea of Jesus existence as God. Therefore, it can be safely inferred that Paul is referring to Jesus' pre-existence as God prior to his human birth. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* agrees (Longman & Garland, 2006, 219). Similarly, the mention in verse 6 of His equality with God, which is a natural result of His being God, serves as a transition into Paul's mention of the incarnation in verse 7. So, Paul is saying that Jesus pre-existed His humanity as God Himself, and although He became a lowly human being, He never ceased being divine during His human lifetime.

Another question Trinitarians might ask of this passage is, why does the passage say that Jesus "became obedient" (v. 8) and obedient to whom? The answer lies in both the incarnation explained in verses 6-7 and in Jesus' appearing as a man (v. 8a). Paul says that Jesus existed "in the form of God" prior to His incarnation, and He never ceased being God, although He was fully human (Philippians 2:6). After Jesus' incarnation, it logically follows that He had now become human. The statement that he "humbled Himself" can either refer to "being found in appearance as a man" or to "[He] became obedient." The latter is the most likely meaning, given the English sentence structure in verse 8. "Being found in appearance as a man" is set off from the rest of the sentence with a comma, and "He humbled Himself" and "became obedient" is joined by the conjunction "and," indicating a close relationship between the two (v. 8). While it is true that God humbled Himself to the point of becoming a human being, what the text states is that Jesus Christ, already being human, humbled Himself to the point of obedience to the divine plan.

In Summary, although Jesus became a man, He pre-existed His human experience as God, and therefore He was subject to no one because He was God. However, He subjected Himself to His own divine plan and to His eternal existence which transcended His temporal human experience. This verse does demonstrate Jesus' relationship to God the Father as "subservient" (Comfort, 2008, 170), but only in His humbled humanity during the time between His incarnation and His crucifixion. It does not reveal a subservient role from all eternity.

Interpretation Step 3: Practical Application

Philippians 2:1-11 speaks volumes about the humility of Christ and God. Although He is both supreme and sovereign over every being and power in existence, He Himself is of a humble Spirit. God has no need to puff Himself up or impress others. He

has all of the power in the universe at His command. Therefore, it naturally follows that God would be the most humble being in the universe because He is the most powerful one. His incarnation as a man, His obedient life, and His brutal death on behalf of all humankind demonstrate God's humble love more effectively than any other act one could fathom.

The church of God would do well to keep in mind Christ's humble example, just as Paul admonishes here in Philippians 2. If we claim to follow Christ, then we must strive to follow His example. If we are His then, we are ambassadors for Him and for His gospel message to the world. We should want everyone to know how amazing our God is and how much He has loved us all. He loved us by becoming human like one of us and taking the punishment for our sins upon Himself. The absolute best way to proclaim this message is, first and foremost, to live it out by embodying the message in all of our actions and attitudes, our conduct and character, as good representatives of the Lord Jesus Christ and of His saving gospel. Amen.

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