

Christ's Hymn: A Divine Image of Leadership in Philippians 2:5-11

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### Abstract

Christ's Hymn in Philippians 2:5-11 offers one of the most poetic pictures of humility, suffering, and sacrifice in all of the New Testament, and the verses reveal a fresh perspective into the King of Kings. Paul's letter to Philippi contains messages on fellowship and unity, but this study focused primarily on the ethical guidance and call for humility revealed to Christian leaders in the rich verses of the Hymn. Of particular focus was the application of socio-rhetorical interpretation of the sacred texture, the divinity perspectives within Paul's letter (Robbins, 1996). Drawing insights from the pericope, the expositional lessons for Christian leaders were explored to assist leaders in understanding divine leadership lessons through the model of Christ and thereby being better equipped to navigate through an increasingly secular society. Using such Scriptural revelation to guide leadership theory provided unique and powerful direction for Christian leaders as they seek to fulfill their calling to be uniquely different types of leaders that witness for God and glorify him.

*Keywords:* Christian leadership, servant leadership, Philippians 2, leadership, Socio-rhetorical, sacred texture, Biblical leadership, Scriptural leadership.

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Scripture offers leadership wisdom for contemporary leaders that is contrary to the ambition driven, narcissistic model that the world has traditionally promoted. Christian leaders are called instead to follow the Spirit-filled, Biblically guided leadership model that encourages servanthood, compassion, and divine empowerment by the Holy Spirit (Bekker, 2012).

Harvesting lessons from Scripture requires not just the consideration of a few key verses, but the development of a comprehensive leadership model based on solid exegetical inquiry (Bekker, 2006). This paper was purposed to consider the Christological hymn in Paul's letter to Philippi as a sacred leadership example with instruction for the disciples, early church leaders, and contemporary Christian leaders. The poetic character of the pericope offers a unique proclamation of Christ's divinity, and in the revelation, provides insightful guidance for today's leaders, much of which is increasingly reflected in more recently developed leadership theories. Because of the nature of Philippians 2:5-11, my research will focus on the how the sacred text connects humanity and divinity by applying Robbins' (1996) socio-rhetorical analysis of the sacred texture. Socio-rhetorical interpretation explores texts from various perspectives, including the divine, resulting in a "textured tapestry" (Robbins, 1996, p. 2). Paul's divine hymn calls for a human commitment to modeling the nature of the messianic Jesus, and depicts a model of leadership that is contrary to historical leadership concepts as well as to the leadership perspectives of the early Jewish and Gentile communities. Jesus' leadership described by Paul offers a divine model of leadership, a sacred alternative for Christian leaders to consider.

### **The Letter to Philippi**

Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians to encourage the church he had previously planted to grow in unity through adapting a practice of humility (Dunnett, 2001, p. 68). Reflective of

Paul's connection with the Gentile church, the epistle is viewed as the most personal of Paul's letters to the churches (Kent, 1981). A lack of humility also plagues relationships today, creating fragmentation and disunity, so the message Paul delivered to Philippi offers wisdom for contemporary leaders as well. The Philippians letter was one of Paul's prison epistles (Holman illustrated Bible dictionary, 2003) and while there is some dispute over the location of his imprisonment, Kent (1981) argued that the letter was most likely written while Paul was imprisoned in Rome.

Grieb (2007) suggested that the origination of Philippians from prison likely added weight to the message. The seriousness was further amplified by Paul suggesting that he was imprisoned for Christ and the Gospel (Philippians 1:12) and in mortal danger (Philippians 1:20), therefore making the message all the more urgent. The letter to the Philippian church was also a note of encouragement for the early church, exhorting the members to practice unity, fellowship, and sharing, especially by entering into the partnership of the Gospel with Paul and Jesus (Allen, 2007). Within Paul's personal note to the Philippians, was embedded one of the most touching and poetic sections of Christology in the New Testament, Christ's hymn in 2:5-11 (Kent, 1981) which will be the focus of my discussion. Philippians 2:3-4 provided an effective introduction for Christ's Hymn in verses 5-11 describing its purpose which would be to deliver the message of humility and selflessness (Grieb, 2007):

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Phil. 2:3-4, ESV)

### **Sacred Texture of Philippians 2:5-11**

The sacred texture of socio-rhetorical analysis is concerned with how the text speaks of God, directly or in the background, including holy characters such as priests or scribes, spirits, divine history, redemption, salvation, human commitment reflecting God, or the religious community (Robbins, 1996, p. 120). Philippians 2:5-11 is a sacred description in its entirety and therefore my exploration of the sacred texture in the pericope was intended to reveal the lessons for the readers grounded in humanity's relationship with God (Robbins, 1996). The totality of the socio-rhetorical analysis was meant to develop an understanding of how the sacred depiction of leadership guides contemporary Christians, and in particular, contemporary Christian leaders.

Philippians 2:5-11 is known commonly as the kenosis passage reflecting the theology of how Jesus emptied himself (Holman illustrated Bible dictionary, 2003). Also referred to as Christ's hymn, the pericope is poetic and lyrical (Utley, 1997), and most scholars believe Paul was quoting a hymn already in common use (Marchal, 2007; Holman illustrated Bible dictionary, 2003) and that may have been familiar to the Philippian church (Grieb, 2007). While some scholars also dispute whether Paul actually wrote such a poetic passage, the hymn is certainly consistent with Pauline theology (Kent, 1981), and is the most succinct passage in Scripture combining the works and identity of Jesus (Easley, 2002, p. 308). In the sacred texture of Philippians 2:5-11, Jesus was described as truly God in his essence (morphe) and truly man in his form (scheme) (Utley, 1997), and the verses encompassed a unique Christology from the very beginning of existence until Jesus was exalted (Kent, 1981, p. 100).

The opening verse, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus," (Phil. 2:5) set the purpose of the Christ's hymn, that the disciples at Philippi would follow the example set by Jesus (Ellsworth, 2004), that they would draw on the lessons of humility offered

by Jesus (Myers, 1987), and align their thoughts and attitudes with Christ (Kent, 1981). Having prepared the saints for the hymn's message, Philippians 2:6-11 then poetically described Jesus as a unique example of humility (Kent, 1981) from which to draw guidance. Verse 6 explained that while Christ was the form of God, he chose not to 'exploit' the equality, but instead chose to be subservient to the Father's will (Carson & Moo, 2005, p. 501). The idea that Jesus would not consider himself to be of the same status as the Father would have been better understood by the original listeners' due to their status-conscious culture (Allen, 2007). The humility described in verse 6 is not intended to diminish the deity of Christ. Jowers (2006) reminded that the New Testament clearly describes Jesus as God in verses such as John 1:1-4, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made", John 8:58, "Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.'", and John 10:30, "I and the Father are one." So Jesus chose humility, but that choice did not diminish his nature as part of the Godhead.

The chosen humility of Jesus was further expounded upon in verses 2:7-8 of Paul's letter whereby Christ took on human form, becoming like man and assuming the form of a servant, laying aside his majesty (Kent, 1981), and being obedient even unto death (Ellsworth, 2004). Jesus did not become any less God, but added to himself humanity as he took on the form of man empowered by the Spirit (Utley, 1997). Jesus "left his heavenly glory for a manger." (Utley, 1997, p. 180). As Jesus emptied himself, he chose to humble himself, to become like man and add on manhood, and took the form of a servant (Kent, 1981). The text in verse 7, described the kenosis as "taking the form of a servant," and it is in Jesus assuming such a "form" that the apparent confusion over Jesus' relationship to the Father was clarified (Jowers, 2006, p. 766).

Because of the adding of humanity to God, Augustine referred to Philippians 2:6-7 as the key to understanding the human condition and the true mystery of the nature of Jesus (Jowers, 2006). Jesus, being seen outwardly as a mere man, modeled the depth of humility desired as he was obedient to the Father's plan even to the cursed death by crucifixion, a form of death that was reserved only for foreigners and slaves (Kent, 1981).

Such humility has been reflected in the contemporary leadership theories of authentic leadership (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008) and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2010). Both of those follower-focused theories approach leadership in a manner where humility, the reduction of power-distance, and the minimization of the traditional hierarchical approach to leadership are often contrary to societal norms as they were in Jesus' era. The element of humility that manifests in authenticity has been captured by the relatively recently developed authentic leadership model. In addition, while I will focus on the obvious and exegetical connections between Christ's hymn and the particular authentic and servant leadership theories, authenticity is considered by many to be a "root construct" (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) at the foundation for all positive contemporary leadership theories (Qian, Lin, & Chen, 2012) including transformation, ethical, servant, spiritual, authentic, and even charismatic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Nelder & Schriesheim, 2011) so the impact of the concepts within the pericope may be generally broader.

Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, and Walumbwa (2005) asserted that authentic leadership requires an advanced level of moral awareness and development, a principle that the humility and altruism of Christ as described in Philippians 2:5-11 depicts. The theoretical definition and dimensions of authentic leadership are;

a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development. (Walumbwa et al., 2005, p.94)

Many of those same principles that define authentic leadership theory (Gardner et al., 2005) are reflected in Christ's hymn including an awareness of a leader's impact on others, the openness of relational transparency through humility and the authenticity as Jesus took on the form of man so he could relate to mankind, and the internalized moral perspective, accepting a higher morality of humility and altruism, that are contrary to societal pressures. Authentic leadership theory clearly encompasses the core principles of humility and altruism within Christ's hymn in Philippians 2:5-8.

The contemporary leadership theory that most exemplifies the humility described in Philippians 2:5-9 is servant leadership. The theory of servanthood is based on the key principle that a "great leader is seen as servant first" (Greenleaf, 2010, p. 87). The fresh view of power, authority, and calling (Greenleaf, 2010) in a contemporary leadership theory, is not only reflective of the humility and altruism described by Paul's Philippians 2:5-9, but the theory more generally encompasses the broad theological lessons of the New Testament. The "servant first" principle of humility aligns with Jesus, who being "... in the form of God ..." (v.6) took the form of a servant and humbled himself to the point of death on the cross, "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow" (v.10), yet throughout his walk on earth and after exaltation he was a successful, new kind of leader whom crowds of disciples followed. Yukl (2010, p. 420) lists seven key values of a servant leader and among them, both humility and altruism are the

elements of servant leadership reflected most directly in Philippians 2:5-11. Treating others with respect, helping others, making sacrifices for others well-being, placing others needs ahead of one's own are found in Jesus' model of leadership where he even offered his life willingly that the needs of all mankind for relief from their fallen nature, for both Jew and Gentile, would be satisfied through the Christology Paul described in the letter to Philippi. As with authentic leadership theory, servant leadership finds at its roots, a model of upside down, humble leadership Christ demonstrated throughout Scripture and Paul included in Philippians 2:5-11.

Christ's hymn, after poetically describing the voluntary humbling of Jesus, then turns to the purpose and consequences of Jesus' obedience and humility. In Philippians 2:9 the author wrote, "Therefore God ..." not only exalted Jesus, but Kent (1981) suggested that Jesus was actually "super-exalted" through the resurrection, his ascension, and his glorification making his name above all others (p. 124). That is, in the end, all that Jesus had set aside when he assumed human form was restored and he was even further exalted (Kent, 1981). Now exalted, Paul wrote in verses 10-11, that all creation would submit to his mighty name, worshiping and declaring his Lordship, all to the glory of God (Ellsworth, 2004; Kent, 1981). The purpose of Jesus' incarnation was therefore fulfilled in God's ultimate glorification (Utley, 1997, p. 182), not only for the Jew, but so the Gentiles could join the community of the faithful. The unity delivered through Christ's action allowed that every tongue should confess Jesus' lordship as Isaiah had prophesied in Isaiah 45:22-25; that salvation for the gentile nations would be accomplished through the God of Israel (Allen, 2007)

### **The Divine Model of Leadership**

The Christ's hymn in Philippians 2:5-11, while primarily a proclamation of Christ's divinity, offered instruction on humility (DeSilva, 2004) for the Philippian church, disciples,

church leaders throughout history, and contemporary Christian leaders of today. That is, the hymn was a brief, simple, yet powerful synopsis of a new kind of leadership that is now emerging within leadership theories. The strength of the message was evident to Paul's contemporary audience as well. So beyond the parallels with contemporary leadership theories, how does Paul's writing inform contemporary leaders?

Bloomquist (2007) suggested that Paul, a prisoner both physically and metaphorically, offered a counterintuitive perspective on suffering, obedience, and humility in Philippians 2:5-11, and so as Jesus was exalted due to his submission, humility and suffering, so should leaders view difficulties and status differently. Leaders in Jesus' model must take the form of slaves before mankind, be willing to suffer (DeSilva, 2004), and mimic Christ's humility (Carson & Moo, 2005). The hymn was filled with guidance on obedience, imitation and sacrifice (Marchal, 2007), a unique picture of a life as "one of obedient submission" (Marchal, 2007, p. 248), a model of humility and altruism that current leaders may find offensive in their pride but a model that is the Scriptural design for leadership.

The thematic picture of humility in Christ's hymn suggests that if leaders are to follow Christ's example, they are to demonstrate humility and have faith that victory will prevail not simply for their own exaltation, but for God's glory (Kent, 1981). That is, as leaders heed the lessons of Philippians 2:5-11 and willingly empty themselves of status (Allen, 2007), choosing obedience and humility, they will find exaltation that glorifies God (Utlely, 1997). Humility prepares the leader's heart for altruism, as Christ "gave himself for the well-being of others and humbled himself that others might be exalted ..." (Grieb, 2007, p. 267), and Paul exhorted leaders to follow God's example of self-giving and presented himself (Phil. 1:12-14, 19-26), Timothy (Phil. 2:21), and Epaphroditus (Phil 2:30) as examples to be followed (Grieb, 2007).

For leaders to view their role in such a counter-cultural manner where humility and altruism reign, they must begin by recognizing that others, “whether ally or opponent, friend or enemy” (Grieb, 2007, p. 268) have infinite value to God, a value worthy even of the suffering of Jesus on the cross (Grieb, 2007).

There is not better model of selfless humility for Christian leaders than that of Jesus Christ (Lightner, 1985), and while Christ’s hymn in Paul’s letter to Philippi offered an extraordinary, poetic image of that virtuous humility in Christ (Karleen, 1987), the New Testament was filled with other demonstrations of Jesus’ remarkable humility (Torrey, 2001) including:

- Luke 2:4-7 which recounted the humble birth of the savior in a stable.
- Matthew 20:26-28 as Jesus corrected the disciples’ lust for power, “It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”
- Matthew 21 described Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey as prophesied by Zechariah.
- John 13:4-16 where, in arguably the most striking image of humility, Jesus washed his disciples’ feet and explaining the lesson, instructed them “For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.” (John 13:15-16)

**Jesus demonstrated that true leadership is reflected through a servant’s heart (Utley, 1997) and such leadership intent is not only fundamental to Christian leadership, but**

**increasingly reflected in a number of modern theories including within the pillars of authentic leadership (Walumbwa et al., 2008) and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2010;**

**Yukl, 2010).Conclusion**

As scholars “discover” sound principles for leadership, those discoveries are eerily reflective of principles espoused 2000 years ago in Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi. Recent leadership theories increasingly capture the framework of Christ’s hymn, the call to humility and altruism, and while such theories are tainted by the social pressures, attitudes and cultural practices within which they are developed (Grieb, 2007), God’s guidance revealed by the sacred texture of Philippians 2:5-11 offers an anchor of unchanging truth, not swayed by contemporary pressures. Exploring the sacred texture of Philippians 2:5-11, great insight is found not by focusing on the deep theology of the kenosis or form of God, but from the clear lessons of Christ’s humility (Marchal, 2007, p. 247) that offer sound truth for the Christian leader. The message is clear that those who humble themselves will be exalted in God’s Kingdom, that the last will be first, and that those who will lead, must be servants of all. Ellsworth (2004) asked best, “Who can measure the gap between the throne and the cross?” (p. 38) Seeing love exemplified, “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8) how can Christians, especially Christian leaders not follow such an example. The most recent leadership theories appear to agree as they try to capture such principles.

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Philippians 2:5-11, long cherished and mined for its riches, has shaped the very language and architecture of orthodox Christian confession of Christ. Yet few scriptural texts have generated as much interpretive comment and controversy. There is in fact a consensus about much of the kenosis hymn and there appeared to be a near universal agreement that Paul was describing Christ's pre-existence as a divine being. More importantly, although Ehrman claims that there were no "rising and dying gods" myths in the ancient world, Martin's book notes "similarities between the hymn and Hellenistic parallels in the stories of gods who came down and thereafter were apotheosized..." (p. 281.) Gordon D. Fee, "Philippians 2:5-11: Hymn or Exalted Pauline Prose?" *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 2 (1992): 29-46. Philippians 2:5-11: Hymn or Exalted Pauline Prose? Gordon D. Fee. [p.29]. Regent College Vancouver, Canada. Scholarship, on the other hand, because of its exalted description of Christ in the midst of a piece of paraenesis, has long debated its meaning and role in its present context. Indeed, so much is this so that one can easily be intimidated by the sheer bulk of the literature, which is enough to daunt even the hardest of souls.<sup>1</sup> The debate covers a broad range of concerns: form, origins, background of ideas, its overall meaning and place in context, and the meaning of several key words and phrases (ἰσαοῦσα, κενώσας, μορφῆς, τῆς ἐκείνου, κενώσας).