

Ministry Matters™ | Articles | Group Study: The Christ Hymn

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September 8, 2011



Scripture: Philippians 2:1-11

Background Scripture: Philippians 2:1-11

Key Verse

Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus.
(Philippians 2:5 CEB)

Focus

One way people honor others they revere is to imitate them. In what ways does our imitation mold our behavior? As a pattern for living and worship,

we imitate Christ Jesus as we recall his life and sacrifice on our behalf.

Goals

1. to examine the Christ hymn as an affirmation of faith.
2. to focus on who Jesus is and remember what he did for them.
3. to create a contemporary affirmation of faith based on the themes of this early hymn.

Pronunciation Guide

kenodoxia (ken od ox ee' ah)
phroneo (fron-eh'-o)
koinonia (koy-nohn-ee'-ah)
schema (skhay'-mah)
morphe (mor-fay')

Understanding the Scripture

Philippians 2:1

The verse begins with a rhetorical “if then there is.” The following four characteristics—*encouragement, consolation, compassion, sympathy*—presume the existence of these things already present in the Philippian community. Linking the first (encouragement) with the qualifier “in Christ” asserts a key theme in this entire passage as well as the whole of Paul’s writings. “In Christ” speaks of the mystery of life lived in relationship with God through Jesus Christ. To be “in Christ” is not only an expression of faith but also of community, with God and with one another. Another word to be noted for special attention in this opening verse is “sharing:” the Greek *koinonia*, a word likewise referencing our community in Christ with God and with one another. Linking that sharing (community) with “Spirit” affirms the way the Spirit gives life to Christian community, a theme Paul develops extensively in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11. An important difference between the NRSV and the NIV in this verse relates to what love is specified: (NRSV: “any consolation from love”; NIV: “any comfort from *his* love” *italics added*). In the Greek, there is no reference to “his,” and the passage leaves it open as to whether the love the author has in mind is that of Christ for us, or ours for Christ (or one another).

Philippians 2:2-4

The intention for recalling the qualities listed in verse 1 is now made clear: to make Paul's joy complete. How that joy is to be made complete by the community is enjoined by: "be of the same mind, having the same love." "Mind" occurs twice in verse 2 (and it also occurs in verse 5). The Greek word *phroneo* goes beyond a reference to intellect. It encompasses "attitude" and viewpoint. "Same mind" is not thinking in lockstep, but rather having a common view and perspective. What brings that commonality is our life "in Christ." Verse 3 uses two words that will become crucial as this passage unfolds. The first is "humility." In this era, humility was not embraced as a virtue by the surrounding culture, but viewed with suspicion as implying servitude (not a quality in vogue in an empire built on military power and political dominance). The other word, translated as "conceit," is *kenodoxia*. It is a compound word that literally means "empty of glory." In the second half of this passage, "emptying" and "glory" both play pivotal roles.

Another difference between the NRSV and NIV in verse 4 has important consequences for meaning. The NIV reading suggests we not look "only" to our own interests but "also" to those of others. The NRSV omits both "only" and "also." In the Greek text of this verse, there is no word for "only" and some but not all manuscripts have "also." One possible solution is to translate "also" as "rather."

Philippians 2:5

Verse 5 introduces what many believe to have been an ancient hymn of the church. It is unclear whether Paul borrowed this from a preexisting source (for example, a hymn that the Philippians used in their liturgy) or whether Paul wrote this specifically for this occasion with an eye for it being used in worship. *Phroneo* ("mind") occurs again, only now the origin for this attitude or perspective has clearly to do with Christ. The lack of clarity in the grammar at the verse's end leaves open several possibilities. Is it that we have the same mind as Christ Jesus, suggesting a clear imitation of Christ? Or is it that we have the same mind *that you have* in Christ Jesus, slightly leaning the verse back toward verse 2 and the community's "same mind." The emphases need not be taken as contradictory, but rather complementary, understanding that the "imitation of Christ" always brings connection to the community that lives in Christ, and vice-versa.

Philippians 2:6-8

The "hymn" form proper begins with these verses that constitute its first half. The focus is upon the "humiliation" of Christ, not inflicted but freely taken on. "Form" occurs three times in these verses, although two Greek words are used. *Morphe* occurs in verses 6 and 7 ("form of God," "form of a slave"), and generally refers to an internal "essence," while *schema* in verse 7 ("human form") is more of an external "appearance." The most striking theological assertion is that of Christ choosing not to exploit "equality" with God but rather "emptying" (*keno*—see note on "conceit" in verse 3) himself of such prerogative and taking on the form of a servant or slave. Again, such humility would have cut against the grain of what the wider culture would have viewed as positive. "Being born in human likeness" is one of the few references Paul makes to Jesus' birth. In the hymn, humility is expressed in obedience, which is the essential virtue of a servant. Such obedience takes the particular form, in Jesus' life, of the cross. The movement of emptying self of privilege to fully assume the human condition leads ultimately to Christ sharing the inevitable experience of human mortality.

Philippians 2:9-11

"Therefore" in verse 9 is more than a bridge word between the previous section on Christ's humiliation with the second half of the hymn that celebrates Christ's exultation. Even more importantly, "therefore" asserts that it is *precisely* the path of obedience that leads to the experience of glorification. The unique character of Christ's obedience and God's honoring of it is reflected in

Paul's choice of language. The verb used for "highly exalted" occurs nowhere else in the entire New Testament. The celebration quickly moves into a repeated assertion of the "name" of Christ. The phrase that God "gave him the name" restates a point made in the first half of the hymn; that is, Jesus did not "make a name for himself." His *name*, which in Semitic culture carried with it the idea of one's identity and renown, comes as a gift from God. The liturgical nature of this poem or hymn becomes more striking as it envisions the worship due to the One whom God has named. "Jesus Christ is Lord" is one of the earliest summaries of Christian faith. The hymn ends with the glorification of God, which itself is the most essential facet of all worship.

Interpreting the Scripture

Preaching From the Hymnal

John Calvin is credited with once saying, "the Nicene Creed was meant to be sung rather than spoken." In other words, the framing of our faith in creeds and statements of doctrine aims at leading the community to worship. Another way of looking at it would be this: The most profound statements of theological acumen may remain dry as dust unless they are joined to action of the heart (and exercise of the will) in leading us to union with God and with one another.

The previous commentary has already noted that many scholars have long associated this passage in Philippians with a hymn or liturgical poem. Clearly, Paul does not give us a "hymnal number" so that argument can be made without dispute. But the association of this passage, along with others considered in this unit, as arising out of the community's liturgical experiences and resources makes a very important point that links to John Calvin's remark. Namely, the exposition of faith and its celebration are not two separate movements. Or to put the matter another way, what we sing in church serves as a primer for what we hold to be true.

That has several implications. First among them is this: We ought to be paying attention to the messages of the hymns we use. Having a good old familiar tune does not necessarily mean the song "fits" the text being preached upon. Second, music is itself a medium that conveys faith. Part of the reason we feel comfortable with words that, if we were merely saying them aloud might give us pause (for example, framing the faith in martial terms), is that music itself has a power all of its own to convey the *experience* of faith.

Let me give an example. Two years ago, I helped officiate at an ecumenical service for our community's Finnish-American festival held at the local cemetery. A men's choir from Finland had been asked to sing, although we did not tell them what to sing. So at the end of this service of remembrance, they took their place and began to sing a cappella. I do not speak Finnish. But I got that feeling sometimes called "a chill up your spine" as the tune quickly came into recognition: "Abide With Me." It was, for me, the most moving element of that ceremony. To be sure, as they sang, the English words came to mind. But even more powerfully, the tune and harmonies unlocked deep remembrances of hearing that song as a child at my home church's Lenten services, where that hymn closed each evening service.

The hymnal, in its words and in its melodies, can be a powerful and evocative source of preaching. And one of the reasons, as Paul may have had in mind if he did indeed draw this passage from the Philippians' liturgical tradition, is that music touches deep places that words alone sometimes cannot go.

The Way of the Servant

The first half of Paul's hymn depicts the movement of humiliation in regards to Jesus' not grasping any prerogative that might have been claimed. In music, this half of the hymn would be set in a minor key. It begins on the note of equality with God, which is then yielded for the sake of being born in human likeness as a servant. From there, the way of the servant humbly descends through obedience to the intersection with crucifixion and death.

This is not the narrative of triumphalism. This is not the narrative of “my God is stronger than your God.” This is the narrative of the not long-before journey through Passion Week. This is the narrative of the way of the servant.

Sometimes, the church is quite comfortable accepting this way to describe the life of Jesus. But let’s not get carried away and bring these ideas into the council meeting or into our own lives. Wasn’t Jesus doing this for us, so we wouldn’t have to?

You could argue that, except for verse 5: “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” In other words, as this lesson’s focus reminds us: This is a call to live in imitation of Christ—to live in imitation of Christ’s servanthood; to live in imitation of Christ’s servanthood as individual disciples and, yes, as communities.

The “same mind” of the one who yielded prerogative of position is not an easy way, when what we often prefer is having things go our way and people like us and, heaven forbid, not making demands of others (or ourselves) that might drive them (or us) away. The narrative of the servant is not a narrative written on too many book leaf covers on how to succeed in life and business— and church. But there it is, in the “hymn” Philippians invites us to sing, and in the singing to ask ourselves: If we share in Jesus’ servanthood, whose feet might we end up washing?

The Way of Glory

The first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks: “What is the chief end of man?” The answer it gives is this: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

The glorification of God is where the second half of Paul’s hymn eventually ends. The “descent” narrated in theological minor keys in the first half of the “hymn” now is paired with the “ascent” narrated by the second half’s major keys of exaltation, naming, confessing—all leading to the glory of God.

The second half of the hymn is not a rejection of the first half, a sort of “don’t worry about all that humiliation because what life’s *really* about is glory.” In fact, “therefore” in verse 9 serves notice that Christ did not get to the glorification part without the first half. Therefore, out of the way of the servant comes the rejoicing, comes the celebration. It’s like an age-old problem faced by the church. Easter is our victory, our celebration, but it doesn’t make sense unless it comes with Passion Week and Good Friday and the tomb-death silence of Holy Saturday. As it was with Jesus, so it is for us.

But the passage is clear: Humility does not end in death, but in God’s uplifting to life and hope. The One against whom others conspired and spoke hatred to achieve his crucifixion is now the One whose name outshines and rises above all. That, too, is part of what “let the same mind be in you” is about: namely, that our hope and destiny are linked to the exaltation proclaimed in the second half of this hymn. And that this is all about, not *our* glory, but God’s glory.

How do we glorify God? That is not something that awaits the end of history, but begins here and now. Our glorification of God is by no means limited to what we do as liturgy, but rather by what we actually do—the justice we seek, the compassion we exercise, the love we express—that gives glory to God in the whole of our lives. Glory is not what God gives to us; it is what we offer to God in our worship, in our service, in our relationships. Where glorification leads is where the end of the Philippian hymn leads: to the fulfillment of God’s purposes in Jesus Christ for all of creation. For that hope, we give glory to God.

Sharing the Scripture

Preparing Our Hearts

Explore this week’s devotional reading, found in **1 Peter 2:18-25**. This is a difficult passage that

needs to be read within the context of the slavery that existed during this period. While we find slavery abhorrent, the idea found in this passage of enduring injustice, as Christ did, is helpful to us. Jesus suffered for us. In doing so, he entrusted himself to God. How are you experiencing injustice? What do you need to entrust to God today?

Pray that you and the group will praise Christ, who endured injustice and suffering for our sakes.

Preparing Our Minds

Study the background Scripture and the lesson Scripture, both of which are from Philippians 2:1-11. Think about how our behavior is molded as we imitate others.

Leading the Group

- Pray that those who have come today will seek to be like Christ.
- Encourage the group to describe someone who has served as a mentor or advisor to them by answering questions such as: How did this mentor help them? In what ways did they try to imitate the one who was guiding them? How did the mentor's behavior help shape their own behavior? How would they rate this mentor/ mentee relationship?
- Read aloud today's focus statement: **One way people honor others they revere is to imitate them. In what ways does our imitation mold our behavior? As a pattern for living and worship, we imitate Christ Jesus as we recall his life and sacrifice on our behalf.**
- Read Philippians 2:1-4. Unpack the meaning of these verses by using the commentary for them in Philippians 2:1, 2-4 of Understanding the Scripture.
- Invite the group to read in unison Philippians 2:5, which is today's key verse.
- Read this verse from several other translations, as listed here, and encourage the group to discuss what this verse really means:
 1. "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." (New International Version)
 2. "Take to heart among yourselves what you find in Christ Jesus." (Revised English Bible)
 3. "Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus." (New American Bible)
 4. "Make your own mind the mind of Christ." (New Jerusalem Bible)
- Choose a volunteer to read Philippians 2:6-8.
- Read or retell "The Way of the Servant" to help clarify the meaning.
- Select someone to read Philippians 2:9-11.
- Read or retell "The Way of Glory" to help clarify the meaning.
- Ask the group to consider the hymn in its entirety to answer these questions:
 1. What do you learn about Jesus?
 2. What do you learn about God?
 3. What lessons for living as a Christian do you learn from this hymn, assuming you choose to let Christ's mind be in you?
- Read aloud each name/descriptive word on the list below and invite the students to state what this name says to them about who Jesus is and what he did on our behalf. If time permits,

suggest that volunteers look up each verse and read them to the group.

1. Advocate: 1 John 2:1
 2. Alpha and Omega: Revelation 1:8
 3. Beloved Son: Luke 3:22
 4. Bread of Life: John 6:35
 5. Faithful Witness: Revelation 1:5
 6. Good Shepherd: John 10:11
 7. Great High Priest: Hebrews 4:14
 8. Head of the Church: Ephesians 1:22
 9. Image of God: 2 Corinthians 4:4
 10. Light of the World: John 8:12
 11. Messiah: Luke 2:11
 12. Pioneer and Perfecter of Our Faith: Hebrews 12:2
 13. Resurrection and Life: John 11:25
 14. Rock: 1 Corinthians 10:4
 15. Savior: Luke 2:11
 16. Son of David: Matthew 1:1
 17. True Vine: John 15:1
 18. Word: John 1:1
- Encourage the group to draw relationships between these names/descriptions of Jesus and what they have learned about him in Philippians 2:1-11.
 - Pray that all who have participated will continue to allow their minds to be molded after the mind of Jesus.
 - Conclude the study by leading the group in this benediction from Jude 24-25: **To the one who is able to protect you from falling, and to present you blameless and rejoicing before his glorious presence, to the only God our savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, belong glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time, now and forever. Amen.**

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