

PHILIPPIANS

Standing Together In Christ (1:27 – 2:11)

Commentary: Week Three

New American Commentary¹

Exhortation to Christlike Character [1:27–2:18](#)

This verse begins a new section of the epistle. A change of tone signals a change of direction. Paul moved from information to exhortation, and three primary exhortations occur: [1:27–30](#); [2:1–4](#); [2:12–18](#). Both before ([1:12–26](#)) and after ([2:19–30](#)) the exhortations, Paul shared information about himself. The word “only” (“whatever happens,” NIV) also marks a change, such as seen in [Gal 2:7–9](#). Paul’s concerns about Christian relationships surface during this discussion.

(1) A Unified Stand [1:27–30](#)

In this first section of commands, Paul urged the church to be true to the faith. Paul’s actual words were, “to walk worthily of the gospel of Christ.” The command may be taken broadly, but Paul’s specific concern was a unified stand for the gospel. Both of these elements were important. The church at Rome stood for the gospel, but there was no unity. That hurt its witness. The Philippians had the opportunity to witness to the world by their unified stand for the gospel. This would be particularly impressive if they stood strong through the sufferings they were called to endure. Two matters need to be discussed: the nature of their stand ([1:27–28](#)) and Christian suffering ([1:29–30](#)).

THE NATURE OF THE PHILIPPIANS’ STAND ([1:27–28](#)). [1:27](#) The main verb “conduct yourselves” (*politeuesthe*) called the church to appropriate conduct. It is an unusual term, and the verb form occurs only here and in [Acts 23:1](#). Normally Paul used the verb “walk” (*peripateō*) to describe a Christian’s conduct. Here he used the verb “conduct yourselves as citizens” (*politeuō*). Scholars differ as to the exact force of the word in this text. It was a word built upon the Greek *polis* (city) and had overtones of citizenship responsibilities. Paul made conscious use of the term. The noun form occurs in [3:20](#) in calling the Philippians to appropriate ethical conduct. There he stated that “our citizenship is in heaven.” No doubt the readers would have associated the word with the Roman citizenship which they prized so much. This was Paul’s way of reminding them of the obligations of people who participate in a society. In this case, the society was of Christians whose strongest ties were in heaven.

Paul expressed his concern for the church earlier ([1:24–26](#)). He so longed for its maturity that he was convinced that God would leave him on earth to help it grow in faith. In reality it could grow with or without him, and now he spoke of the possibility that he would not come. If he were absent, perhaps because of the unfavorable verdict in his trial or unexpected delays, he still longed to hear of its good spiritual condition. Paul had no inflated ideas about his importance. The church was capable of standing for the gospel.

The Christian’s stand is “in one spirit.” This is the first of the several words for unity that bind together [1:27–2:4](#). The word “spirit” is used in parallel with the word “soul” ([1:27b](#); “as one man,” NIV), and thus refers to the attitude that should characterize the church. It naturally cannot refer to the Holy Spirit, nor does a combination of the Holy Spirit working to strengthen the human spirit satisfy the parallel

1. Richard R. Melick, *New American Commentary – Volume 32: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 87-114.

constructions. Paul drew on the imagery of persons to describe the function of the body of Christ. It is unnecessary to distinguish between “spirit” and “soul” here. They both explain the immaterial part of persons, and the point Paul made was that the church was to unite inside and out. Both “one spirit” and “one soul” mean that there was no divisiveness. The differences between the words are minimal.

The stand is explained in two complementary ways. The positive statement is “contending” for the faith of the gospel. The imagery changes again. Before, Paul used the idea of a Greek *polis* to explain the Philippians’ relationship to the Lord. Then he used the metaphor “stand,” which was taken from the military. Paul’s mind moved to the athletic games where he had seen team sports in action. The metaphor is rare, occurring only twice in the New Testament (cf. [Phil 4:3](#)). If the Roman military element appreciated the military associations with the word “stand,” the Greek population would identify with the necessity of “contending as one man” as was demanded in athletic games. It does little good for individuals on a team to contend individually rather than as part of the team. Similarly, the church was to contend “as one man.” Complete harmony of purpose and coordination of various elements was necessary to achieve God’s purposes.

The struggle was described in positive terms. The Philippians were to contend “for the faith of the gospel.” The expression “faith of the gospel” has many possible interpretations, and there is little clear precedent in the New Testament that favors any one of them. The context assumes that people opposed the church and its message. That means that this construction probably relates to its taking the gospel to the world. Paul must have meant “contending for the advance of the gospel.” The NIV translators have captured that meaning by the statement “for the gospel.” The team effort supplied by the church would present the gospel to the world. Together the members also would explore the implications of the gospel in each other’s lives.

[1:28](#) The second explanation of standing firm is negatively stated: “without being frightened.” The term occurs only here in the New Testament and suggests a reflex action resulting from being startled. The church was to have an unflinchable steadfastness, even in the midst of persecution. Whoever the opponents were at this point, they were not to intimidate the Philippians.

The fact that the church stood fast became a sign. The question is, To whom was it a sign? Scholars have taken two positions regarding the rest of this verse. First, some see the steadfastness as a confrontation to unbelievers and a confirmation to believers. Therefore, the same situation produced a twofold result. Unbelievers would see the stand of the church and know that destruction was coming. They would be warned to accept the truth. On the other hand, the church would be encouraged by its own stand, knowing that God strengthened it and that salvation was sure. This interpretation contrasts the words “to them” (*autois*) and “of you” (*hymōn*) in [1:28](#).

Others interpret the construction with reference to the non-Christian world entirely. They point out that the words “to them” precede the rest of the sentence and must mean that both aspects of the church’s steadfastness were a sign to unbelievers. Thus, they would know of their destruction and the believers’ salvation. This makes better sense of the passage. The fact, then, that the Philippians could stand firm in the face of adversity proved their relationship to the Lord. Others could see a hidden strength. Paul did not enumerate the ways he knew the church would be confronted by such a proof. Apparently it was the inner strength to live and die for what the Philippians believed. Such strength had to come from God himself, not from mere human resources.

CHRISTIAN SUFFERING ([1:29–30](#)). The reason unbelievers would arrive at that conclusion is that God granted suffering to Christians. The text makes a direct connection between “the sign” and suffering, using a Greek word which must be taken as providing a reason. These verses speak to the nature of Christian suffering ([1:29](#)) and the Pauline model of suffering ([1:30](#)).

The Nature of Christian Suffering (1:29). [1:29](#) Paul spoke straightforwardly about Christian suffering. In this text he clearly said it was a privilege, that God had in fact graced them with suffering. That raises serious questions, and it is necessary to understand Paul's thought carefully. The suffering was "on behalf of Christ," as stated twice in [1:29](#). The words "on behalf of" appear to be vicarious, i.e., in his place. The words recall [Col 1:24](#), where Paul stated that he suffered eschatologically, "for the sake of his body." The phrase does point out that Paul had in mind the specific suffering that comes to Christians as they serve Christ.

The fact that suffering was connected with believing reinforces Paul's claim that it is a grace gift. Paul lived with persecution, and he realized its redemptive value, but here he did not address that. The key to this phrase "on behalf of Christ" is [Phil 3:10](#) where Paul revealed his deepest desire of knowing Christ. That knowledge involved knowing resurrection power and the fellowship of suffering. Suffering confirms Christians' faith, brings them into closer contact with the Lord, and provides a vehicle for making commitment real and tangible. It is one thing to accept suffering and resign oneself to it. It is another to realize the privileges that come through it.

The Pauline Model of Suffering (1:30). [1:30](#) Paul's life provided the model of the suffering he identified here. In [1:30](#) he used athletic imagery again ("struggle," *agōna*) to remind the believers that they would go through what he did. In a parallel, [1 Thess 2:14–16](#), Paul explained that his suffering related to calling the Gentiles to Christ so that they could be saved. The universal nature of the gospel presented a problem to Gentiles, who had their own religions, and to Jews, who wanted the Gentiles to accept Judaism. The result was that Paul suffered at the hands of both groups, and the church at Philippi would do so as well. Paul had to develop a theology of suffering. He did so without becoming calloused to human need and without accepting suffering as good. The danger for Christians at Philippi and elsewhere was that as they endured suffering they would have one of those reactions. Suffering is evil because it comes from sin in the world. Paul stopped far short of mixing good and evil, which would make evil (suffering) a good thing. He did, however, realize the benefits and privileges of being involved in a battle for the truth and that battle scars were inevitable. The supreme model of that was Christ. Similarly, Christians should remember that general suffering sometimes comes because they live in a world which suffers as a result of sin, that Christians are called to a unique Christian suffering because of their identification with righteousness in an evil world, that it is a divinely given privilege to be involved in this battle, and that the struggle becomes redemptive in attesting the grace gift in their own experience. The Philippians were, therefore, to take heart if they were called to suffer. Their steadfastness would demonstrate the reality of their relationship to God.

(2) A Unified Mind [2:1–4](#)

Paul's thoughts turned from the need to withstand pressure from the outside to the attitudes that were to characterize Christians. In [1:27](#) he exhorted them to unity, and here he continued that thought. The passage unfolds in three parts: the basis of Paul's appeal to unity ([2:1](#)); the essence of unity ([2:2a](#)); and the expression of unity ([2:3–4](#)). In actuality, these three are part of another long sentence in the Greek text, and there is one basic command: "Make my joy complete."

THE BASIS OF PAUL'S APPEAL TO UNITY ([2:1](#)). [2:1](#) Four statements form the basis of Paul's appeal to the Philippians. The statements are introduced by "if" in both Greek and English. Although the word "if" brings doubt to mind, these clauses express little hesitancy. They should be translated "assuming ... then make my joy complete." All four statements introduce the command of [2:2](#), and they identify Paul's avenue of approaching the church. Paul gently reminded the believers of what he and they had in common.

The four statements recall the blessings of being in a Christian community. The first statement is, “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ.” Commentators differ on the precise meaning of the word translated “encouragement” (*paraklēsis*). The Greek word is capable of meaning *encouragement* or *exhortation*. The tone of this section is warm and gentle, as Paul appealed to their common experience of Christ. The best understanding of the word seems to be “encouragement” that comes from Christian commitment. Second is the blessing of “comfort from his love.” The NIV correctly translates this as affirming Christ’s love for his people. The “fellowship with the Spirit” is the third statement of blessing. All agree that this refers to the Holy Spirit. The question is whether this is fellowship brought by the Spirit or fellowship in the Spirit. Finally, there is “tenderness and compassion.” Again these terms refer to the mercies shown them by the Lord. These statements make a strong emotional appeal. Their rhetorical value clearly surfaces, and though Paul approached the Philippians gently here, the combined effect of the statements was powerful. The church had a common experience of grace, and Paul built upon that in his exhortation. Since the other three of these qualities seem to be spiritual in nature, it is best to take this as a fellowship the Holy Spirit provides.

THE ESSENCE OF UNITY (2:2a). 2:2a Paul wrote to produce like-mindedness. His approach shifted from the blessings they shared in Christ to the Philippians’ responsibility to Paul, their spiritual father. Paul’s joy would be complete when they stood together in unity. His references to joy here suggested the anticipation of presenting a mature group of Christians to the Lord. His joy was that his life work would amount to something in God’s economy and in the lives of other people ([1 Thess 2:19–20](#)). This personal appeal, therefore, was a way of encouraging them onward for the glory of God.

The content of his exhortation is that they be “like-minded.” The verb used here occurs ten times in Philippians (of twenty-three times in the Pauline corpus). It speaks to the intellect (i.e., a way of thinking), but it goes beyond that. It incorporates the will and emotions into a comprehensive outlook which affects the attitude. With this word and the contexts in which it occurs, Paul spoke of the values and ambitions which surface through the mind. This is unity. It is not found in an identical life-style or personality. It occurs when Christian people have the same values and loves. Paul sought that in this church.

THE EXPRESSION OF UNITY (2:2b–4). 2:2b Three characteristics express the unity of the church. They are goals for which to strive, and they provide the measurement of success. The three are stated in different ways, and either grammatical or logical units express them. The first is the same outlook. Three ideas combine to emphasize its different aspects: having the same love as Christ did; having a harmonious affection; and valuing the same thing. The NIV translates “having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose” ([2:2b](#)). Together these speak to the unity found among those who are going the same direction. There is nothing superficial about it. This unity comes from the core of one’s being.

[2:3](#) The second measurement is humility. Paul expressed this both negatively and positively. Negatively, the Philippians were to avoid “selfish ambition” and “vain conceit.” Selfish ambition motivated the preachers Paul described in [1:17](#). Perhaps that was fresh in his mind. It led him to think about conceit, a seeking of glory which is, in reality, empty because it focuses on the individual rather than on the Lord. The positive side corrects improper attitudes. They were to act in humility. Before the New Testament era, the word “humility” had a negative connotation. The adjective related to it “was frequently employed, and especially so, to describe the mentality of a slave. It conveyed the ideas of being base, unfit, shabby, mean, of no account. Hence ‘humility’ could not have been regarded by the pagan as a virtue to be sought after.”

Nonetheless, “humility” introduces a key theme of the passage. Paul further described it in [2:3](#) and [2:5–11](#). He urged the Philippians literally to “count others as excelling over themselves.” This also relates to the mind and values. The word “excelling” (“better,” NIV) occurs in [3:8](#), where the pursuit of Christ excels anything Paul had before he engaged in it. The word “consider” occurs in the hymn to Christ ([2:6](#)), as does the word for “humbled” ([2:8](#)). Since the model of Christ loomed in Paul’s mind, Christ’s

actions provided the necessary motivation. Christ's humility is the standard for evaluating the worth of others and actions toward them. This does not mean that personal concerns should be overlooked. Elsewhere Paul clearly stated that Christians must take care of their own affairs as an act of love for the congregation ([1 Thess 4:9–12](#)). The next verse implies the same truth. Humility begins with a realistic appraisal of oneself and others as being in the image of God. This relates intimately to the next characteristic, where the topic is continued.

[2:4](#) The third measurement is consideration. The Philippians were to “look out” for others’ interests as well as their own. Some Greek texts insert the word “also” in this sentence so that it reads “also the things of others.” This may reflect an early interpretation, and it surely is a correct inference. Some then interpret this exhortation to mean that the church is to focus on the good qualities of others in the church. A way to unity, then, is watching to see how God works in others the qualities he desires in everyone. The focus shifts to others rather than personal spiritual qualities. The interpretation is attractive. It answers the problem of self-centeredness and false glory. It also does not relieve Christians of an obligation to care for their own things. It expresses the dynamics of church relationships and fits the example of Christ. In reading the text, however, it seems that Paul had more in mind. A natural reading suggests a broader reference point than merely spiritual qualities. Any concerns of others were to become the concerns of all! The Philippians were to imitate Christ, and it seems unlikely that Christ focused on the good spiritual qualities of the people for whom he left heaven. He died in spite of the fact that they were not spiritually attractive.

(3) The Example of Christ [2:5–11](#)

Paul exhorted the Philippians to proper attitudes in [2:1–4](#). In [2:5](#) he repeated that exhortation. The repetition emphasizes its importance. Even more, however, it introduces the model of humility and servanthood: the Lord himself. [Philippians 2:6–11](#) recalls the attitude and actions of Christ as he left the glories of his pre-existent, eternal state to assume humanity and die vicariously. The Philippians were to imitate him because, in so doing, the problems of disunity would be solved.

The thrust of the passage is clear, but scholars have debated almost every aspect of these verses. They have debated the form of the text. Is it a pre-Pauline hymn known and appreciated by the early church? If it is a hymn, what is its arrangement and order? In addition to the form of the text, they have debated the function of the text in the context of the epistle. Is it theological, presenting Christology and soteriology as a foundation for the Philippians’ action? Is it ecclesiological, exhorting them to unity in the church? Is it psychological, explaining how persons are to view themselves and their positions in life? Once questions of form and function are answered, there are questions about the details of exegesis. Almost every word of the text has been debated. The following analysis cannot indicate the breadth of the debate. Rather, significant conclusions are presented, along with suggestions as to how the hymn functions in its context.

THE FORM OF THE TEXT. The basic question regarding form is whether these verses are an early Christian hymn. Most contemporary scholars interpret these verses as a hymn because of the rhythmical quality, rare words and phrases, and motifs. The second portion of the passage, [2:9–11](#), goes beyond the demands of the immediate context. It seems to be the second stanza of the hymn about Christ. Although the exaltation theme presented there contributes to the context, here Paul advocated humility, not exaltation. If the verses do constitute a hymn, which seems reasonable, they reveal something of the worship of the early church. At least two characteristics predominate: They express a depth of theology which reveals in particular a highly developed Christology; they reveal that the early church had formulated its Christology in cryptic but powerful language. Further, the fact that Paul could appeal to the (apparently) well-known hymn indicates the widespread interest the early church had in Jesus.

The second question pertains to the theology of the hymn. Is it proper to exegete the hymn theologically if its ethical function is primary? Rather than explore the meaning of the hymn, some bypass the difficult questions it poses in favor of making an application. They assume that since Paul's concern was moral (the nature of self-sacrifice), the illustration is the point. Generally, these interpreters do not seek the explanation of important words and ideas. Rather, the impact of the hymn in its totality, as opposed to its content, becomes the total message.

Such a procedure fails at two important points. First, it does not take account of the point of illustration. Paul picked this hymn *because* it conveyed what he wanted. That means that he accepted the content of the hymn and saw in it the greatest example of proper attitudes. Second, the illustration loses its impact if the details have no significance. The dramatic distance Jesus traveled from the "form of God" to "the death of the cross" dramatically reveals the servant mind that each believer was to have. Hermeneutically, this material first calls for a serious exegesis of the content of the hymn as a free-standing theological expression. Further, the hermeneutical task involves applying that to the church. No one in the church could repeat what Christ did. They did not start where he started, they could not suffer the way he suffered, and they could not be exalted to the position he occupied. That is not the point. The mind of Christ is the point of application, and that loses its impact without its theological foundation. The older interpreters who asked questions about the Christology of the passage, the meaning of the emptying, and the nature of the exaltation asked the proper questions. That dimension was essential. At the same time, however, the application of the text to individuals and the church at large completes the text as it stands in its canonical form.

One final concern must be expressed. Many interpreters question the Pauline authorship of these verses. Specifically, they point out that this hymn has a decidedly Semitic background which seems to translate an Aramaic original; typical Pauline themes are missing; and there is, according to some, an un-Pauline emphasis on the "servant of the Lord" from the Old Testament. The situation, however, could account for many differences in wording; linguistic data are not conclusive; Paul did write in poetic style ([1 Cor 13](#); [Rom 8:31ff.](#)); and many Pauline elements are present in the hymn. In actuality, no one can know whether Paul wrote these words originally or only incorporated them. Further, it matters little in the interpretation of this text, although it contributes to an understanding of Pauline Christology. What does matter is that Paul chose to use this material to make his point; it is consistent with his views about Jesus, and he put his approval on it by building his argument around it. In fact, some scholars believe the entire epistle serves as a commentary on these verses, though that is unlikely. The hymn serves to illustrate and explain the exhortations of its content.

ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT. These verses contain two parts: an introduction in the form of a command (v. [5](#)) and the hymn to Christ (vv. [6-11](#)). The hymn has two movements: the humility of Christ (vv. [6-8](#)) and the exaltation of Christ (vv. [9-11](#)). The following commentary will focus on conclusions and major questions. Space forbids the type of analysis that deals adequately with each contested portion.

The Introduction to the Hymn ([2:5](#)). [2:5](#) Paul introduced the hymn to Christ by looking both backward and forward. Looking back, he picked up the theme of the proper attitude which he commended in [2:2](#) (with the word "like-minded") and [2:3](#) (with the word "considered," also found in [2:6](#)). Looking ahead, Paul anticipated the epitome of the proper mind, Jesus.

Two primary questions arise in [2:5](#). What is the meaning of "your attitude should be the same as," and what is the sense of "Christ Jesus"? The NIV handles these problems by presenting a highly dynamic, almost paraphrased translation. The KJV says, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." The differences come from the Greek text chosen as well as the translator's preference. The first question relates to whether the verb translated "your attitude should be" (*phroneite*) is active or passive. The KJV takes the passive, "let this mind be." Most Greek texts have the active form, and that is the better reading. It should be translated, "You think this in you." The second question concerns "in Christ Jesus," which occurs at the end of the verse. As the text stands, another verb is needed to make a

complete statement, and some translators add “was.” The sense then is “have this mind in you which *was* in Christ Jesus.” Others have repeated the main verb of the first part of the sentence for a translation like: “You think this in you which you think in Christ Jesus.” That means that the Philippians were exhorted to think properly as Christians, as those “in Christ Jesus.” The translation has much to commend it. Immediately, however, Paul appealed to the attitude of Christ, and the most natural reading is to understand Paul to say, “Think this in you which Christ thought in him.”

The Hymn to Christ (2:6–11). Paul commended Jesus’ disposition by appealing to his attitude (v. [6](#)) and his actions (vv. [7–8](#)). The order is both logical and chronological. One led to the other. Paul employed the same order in vv. [1–4](#), where he addressed the attitude (v. [2](#)) first, then actions toward each other (vv. [3–4](#)). Perhaps Paul’s exhortation was based on the hymn which he anticipated. In this text Jesus’ attitude (presented negatively to make a positive point) led to his redemptive actions.

[2:6](#) The main verbs are the key to the structure, and Jesus’ attitude is presented in the first. Jesus “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped.” Precise knowledge of why that was so remarkable comes from the phrases which modify and explain the significance of his attitude.

Two parallel statements show the exemplary nature of Jesus’ thoughts. The first is “being in very nature God,” which is compared to the second, “equality with God.” The former is normally translated by the English word “form,” which is true to the literal meaning of the Greek *morphē*. Commentators have debated hotly the meaning of the word “form.” Basically, the word means “form, outward appearance, shape”; but since it occurs only in [2:6](#) and [2:7](#) in the New Testament, the context must determine its precise meaning. Clearly, the “form of God” and the “form of a servant” must mean the same thing. Some take that to mean that the visible appearance of God is not a factor because he is invisible, and therefore the text calls for a nuance of the word. This meaning should not be dismissed too quickly, however. The hymn called the readers to consider the preexistent state of Jesus, when he was in the form of God. Physical eyes cannot see spiritual realities, only spiritual eyes can. Given the context, it would not be uncommon to use the term to state that he actually “appeared as God” to those who could see him. Nothing in the context requires that human eyes see the form. Similarly, the “very nature of a servant” does not require that human eyes be able to see that form, although with spiritually enlightened eyes one sees it. The question is whether he had that form. Surely the actions described of him here are appropriate to the servant role, and they appear in his death on the cross. The word “form” means an outward appearance consistent with what is true. The form perfectly expresses the inner reality.

The description “very nature of God” parallels “equality with God.” “Equality with God” is, therefore, another explanation of Jesus’ nature. The form of the expression stresses the manner of his existence since the word “equal” is actually an adverb showing how he existed. In the Greek text, the phrase is introduced with an article so that it should read “the equality with God,” referring back to something already identified as equality. Thus “form of God” and “equality with God” refer to the same state of existence, and the NIV correctly translates “in the form of God” as “in very nature God.”

Two other matters relate to Jesus’ preexistent state. The first is the meaning and force of the participle “being.” The word basically meant “to exist originally” but later was used as an intensive form which meant “really exist.” The result is that Jesus “really existed” in that form. The force of the participle (“being”) is debated as well. Most interpreters take it with a concessive force (“although being”), and that stresses the dramatic nature of Christ’s humility.

The second matter is the meaning of “something to be grasped.” Some understand the words to mean “something to hold on to,” while others take them to mean “something to rob.” Often Jesus is contrasted with Adam, who selfishly attempted to rob God of what he had no right to possess. He wanted to be “like God.” This contrast may have been in Paul’s mind, but any suggestion that requires the sense of aspiration to “equality with God,” as though it were not Jesus’, cannot fit the passage. With this understanding, Christ would have refused to do what Adam did. He refused to grab what was not his.

Two factors speak against that understanding. First, the text more naturally reads “not to be clutched.” Since he already possessed “equality with God,” Jesus had nothing to grasp. He was able to release the appearance of deity. Second, when the word “grasped/clutched” is studied with words like “consider” (*hēgeomai*, [2:3](#), [6](#)) the “idiomatic expression refers to something already present and at one’s disposal.” The passage may mean, therefore, that Christ did not think of his equality as “something to use for his own advantage.”

[2:7](#) The hymn moves from attitude to actions. Two verbs describe successive actions as Jesus gave himself for humanity: “He made himself nothing” and “he humbled himself.” Each has a phrase modifying it. The first of Jesus’ choices was to empty himself. The NIV translation “made himself nothing” captures the spirit of the passage but overlooks many theological discussions of the past. Historically, interpreters have wondered of what did Jesus empty himself? The question shows that a theological interest predominates in the passage. Most modern interpreters, however, point out that the hymn does not speak to that point. The contrasts between “Lord” (v. [11](#)) and “servant,” (v. [7](#)) and “very nature of God” (v. [6](#)) and “human likeness” (v. [7](#)) express the emptying. Thus the emptying is that God became human, Lord became servant, and obedience took him to death. The verb “emptied” (NASB) does not require a knowledge of what was emptied ([Rom 4:14](#); [1 Cor 1:17](#); [9:15](#)). Often it is translated simply “to render void, of no effect.” This passage affirms simply that Christ left his position, rank, and privilege. They were “of no effect.”

Two ideas modify the verb “made himself nothing.” They are: taking the very nature of a servant and being made in human likeness. These statements explain both how this took place and what it means. Paradoxically, being “made nothing” means adding humanity to deity rather than subtracting deity from his person. The language has a vagueness to it; that vagueness allows for theology which cannot be expressed easily, a theology of the relationships between the divine and human in Christ.

The relationship between these ideas reveals further the movement to death. Some interpreters take the two ideas to be simultaneous, so that being a servant and becoming human explain each other and refer to the same action. Others see a progression: first servanthood, then humanity. Certainly the first, the “very nature of a servant,” speaks to an attitude which produced the action of assuming humanity. It logically precedes.

Because of the close relationship between these modifying ideas, their content should be seen in parallel, rather than with fine distinctions of meaning. The “very nature of a servant” means that Jesus’ outer actions (appearances) conformed to the inner reality. Jesus’ servanthood issued in humanity and, later, obedience to death. Some assume that his servanthood was his humanity. That brings questions of how humanity is servant and to what is its slavery. These questions, however, go beyond the text, and they cannot be answered from the passage. This text says simply that he was genuinely a servant. It does not explain what that means, other than the giving of his life in death.

The description “human likeness” really stresses Jesus’ humanity. While on the surface it may seem to say that Jesus was not really man, that conclusion finds almost no support. In fact, likeness “does not suggest any degree of unreality in Christ’s humanity; the word is almost a synonym for ‘form’ (*morphē*) and ‘image’ (*eikōn*); but it leaves room for the thought that the human likeness is not the whole story.” It must be seen in light of the next statement, that he was found “in appearance as a man” (v. [8](#)). The change from the plural (“human likeness”) to the singular (“appearance as a man”) may reinforce that conclusion. Finally, the verb “being made” (v. [7](#)) contrasts with “being” ([2:6](#)). He existed originally in the form of God; but at a specific point, he became human.

With these words, the text praises the attitude of Jesus. The hymn was to be used in worship, and as such, it was doxological. The total impact was to move the church to appreciate and imitate Jesus’ actions. Each word contributes to the meaning. Certainly interpreters need not read more into the text than was intended, but overtones of Christology exist which cannot be dismissed. First, it affirms Jesus’

pre-existence. Before he came to earth, he existed fully as God, in essence and appearance. Second, he became human. Like the movement from riches to poverty in [2 Cor 8:9](#), this text follows the movement from the exercise of lordship to the obedience of the servant. The hymn teaches that Jesus added servanthood to lordship as he added humanity to deity. In so doing, he elevated humanity beyond what it had known before, as [Heb 2:6-8](#) affirms (quoting a fulfillment of [Ps 8:5-6](#), LXX). Paul easily affirmed both the deity and humanity of Jesus by using (and not correcting) this hymn. The words convey significant theological meaning that adds reality to the impact of the worship experience. Recalling this servanthood also exhorted the believers to unity.

2:8 Having entered the world of humanity, Jesus “humbled himself” ([2:8](#)). This describes a second stage in Jesus humility. Like the first statement, two ideas modify this one, explaining the extent of Jesus’ actions. First, when he was found in fashion like a man, he chose humility. This statement reinforces the previous section of the hymn, but it also introduces a new phase of Jesus’ action. At this point, people can identify with him. Second, he became obedient to death. The text does not suggest to whom Jesus was obedient, though most obviously God willed such an action. As a true servant, Jesus chose to obey even when it cost his life, and that further in a most ignoble way. The impact of crucifixion on the Philippians would be great. No Roman could be subjected to such a death, and the Jews took it as a sign that the victim was cursed ([Gal 3:13](#)). Perhaps it made a point to Paul’s opponents as well, whom he described as “enemies of the cross of Christ” ([Phil 3:18](#)). The cross, so dear to Paul and other devout Christians, was an embarrassment to many. That, in itself, demonstrates the extent to which Jesus went.

2:9 Again the passage changes both tone and structure. The hymnic character continues, but God becomes the subject, rather than Christ, and the purpose of God’s actions becomes evident. God exalted Jesus. Two statements reveal the nature of God’s actions. First, he “exalted him to the highest place”; second, he “gave him the name that is above every name.” The two relate to each other so that together they express God’s action.

Jesus’ exaltation is stated graphically. The word translated “exalted to the highest place” actually means *superexalted*. Some scholars have taken the word in a comparative sense, that God exalted him more than before. Thus they seek a new position for Jesus after the ascension. Others, however, point out that this is a superlative degree. He was exalted “to the highest,” a contrast which compares the lowliness of the “death of the cross” (v. [8](#)) with the exaltation of restored glory. Finally, many interpret this in the context of the human Jesus. The hymn describes the exaltation of humanity in Christ.

In determining a solution, several matters must be kept in mind. First, the action of “super-exaltation” occurred as a consequence of Jesus’ voluntary humility. It clearly came because of his servant-like attitude and actions. Second, these actions began in eternity past. The sequence of thought is that his attitude was such that he was able to add humanity. A position that rewards Jesus as man, therefore, seems to enter the drama in the second act. Surely God’s blessings took into account the attitude which prevailed in Jesus’ pre-existent state. That is the primary point of the passage. Third, “super-exaltation” should be taken seriously. It was not something that happened to the earthly Jesus only; it began in eternity past. Fourth, it has overtones of a change of position, even though exaltation lies at the heart of its usage. Fifth, the exaltation involved granting to Jesus the title “Lord” (v. [11](#)). This places the focus on function as well as being. The “super-exaltation,” therefore, is as much a functional matter as an ontological one. These scholars argue for an interpretation that elevates Jesus *in position* more than before, while recognizing that he could be no more than God before or after.

The second portion of the exaltation is that God “gave him the name that is above every name.” Though the introduction to this portion of the hymn suggests that God’s blessings were the outcome of Jesus’ humility, this verb implies a gratuitous giving of honor. Jesus was not “paid” for his servanthood; nevertheless, as a consequence, God chose freely to grant him a high name. Most agree the “name that is above every name” is the title “Lord.” Further, most agree that the title refers to Jesus’ character, as well as to his function. This corresponds to Peter’s preaching at Pentecost ([Acts 2:36](#)) and to the view of the

early church generally. The new factor is that, by virtue of Jesus' humility, he became the object of adoration in the Godhead, as well as the administrator of God's affairs. The worship accorded him in [2:10–11](#) supports this fact. Other passages speak to his function of Lord as well ([1 Cor 15:24–28](#); [Eph 1:20–23](#)). Now, since the ascension, all that God is comes to us through Jesus, and all who come to God do so through Jesus.

[2:10–11](#) The hymn explains the goal or purpose of God's exalting Jesus. Quoting the LXX of [Isa 45:23](#), with its own additions, two parallel ideas express Jesus as the object of worship. They are: every knee should bow and every tongue should confess. Employing typical imagery of the part for the whole, the knee and the tongue stand for worship and confession that Jesus is Lord.

Ultimately, every creature in the universe will acknowledge who Jesus is. Two concerns must be discussed: the meaning of "at the name of Jesus" and the description of which persons acknowledge him. The phrase "at the name of Jesus" may mean that he is the object of worship, that he is the medium of worship, or that he provides the occasion and focus of worship. The context clearly reveals that Jesus is to be the object of worship, as the name "Lord" and his exalted position indicate. That rules out Jesus as a medium of worship, but more may be required by this expression. In fact, more is intended. Wherever Jesus' name (and character) has authority, he will be worshiped. Since he is authoritative everywhere, as the next phrase indicates, he will be worshiped everywhere. The emphasis of this text, however, is not directly on the worship of Jesus. The language is that of triumph. The bending of the knee was a posture of submission, as was confessing "Jesus Christ is Lord." The hymn, therefore, speaks to Jesus as the conqueror of all and should be seen as parallel to such texts as [1 Cor 15:24–28](#). Thus the hymn points out that everyone will acknowledge the position of Jesus in the universe.

The second concern of this first purpose clause is the persons who submit to Jesus' lordship. The text states, "in heaven and on earth and under the earth." The meaning of the text is that it is *the knees* of beings located in these places. Paul could and did use personification to speak of the relation of inanimate objects to Christ ([Rom 8:19–22](#)), but this context is confined to persons. Jesus' lordship encompasses spiritual beings (those of "heaven"— good or evil), living human beings (those of "earth"), and dead persons as well ("under the earth"). Thus the hymn includes every conceivable habitation of personal beings.

The second purpose statement is that "every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." In a parallelism typical of poetry, both the universal nature of Jesus' lordship and the acknowledgment of it are reemphasized. "Every tongue" includes the same beings as "every knee" which bows. The confession "Jesus Christ is Lord" encapsulates this aspect of the Christian faith and may well have been the earliest Christian confession.

Honoring Jesus in this way fulfills God's plan. He elevated Jesus to the position of lordship (v. [9](#)), and the confession is "to the glory of God the Father." There is perfect unity in the Godhead. The actions of Jesus in his exaltation bring glory to the Father. Thus the Father honors the Son, and the Son honors the Father. In this dynamic, both display selflessness, and both receive honor.

This is an eschatological picture. The hymn brings the future into view by describing the culmination of history, when all persons will acknowledge Jesus' lordship. No evidence states that such acknowledgment will bring salvation, however. That must be cared for in the present, before Jesus conquers his enemies. The church bears witness to Jesus' lordship by confessing to the world "Jesus Christ is Lord" and offering salvation to those who accept that confession and make it the central part of their lives ([Rom 10:9–10](#)). Paul recognized, therefore, that some people will voluntarily accept the reality that Jesus is Lord and participate in his reign of glory. Others will deny that lordship and, in the end, be conquered by the Lord himself. For them, it will be too late to participate in the glory, and they will be destined to the punishment appropriate for those who resist the Lord.

In using this hymn, Paul reminded the Philippians of the greatest example of servanthood. The first section, on selflessness, applied directly to them. They were to be like Christ, the chief servant. Christ's attitude was to become theirs. They were to focus on giving rather than receiving. If God chose to exalt them, they would be truly exalted, but there were no guarantees of what that meant. True servanthood can never be perceived as simply an alternate route to the top, to exaltation.

Christ acted selflessly to accomplish the will of God. He even died to provide salvation as a part of the divine plan. God chose to honor him, determining that Christ would be the focus of the Godhead in its interactions with creation. Because of Jesus' actions, the way to honor God is to honor Christ. Even so, the glory Christ receives is a glory given to the Father. Again, a shared servant-hood works to the mutual benefit of all involved. The church had to learn this lesson. It would learn this lesson by focusing on Christ himself. Appropriately Paul employed a hymn to teach the lesson. Hymns were used in worship, and it was through worship that these attitudes would make their way from the mind to the heart and from attitudes to appropriate actions.