

"THE WORLD IS MY PARISH" — JOHN WESLEY



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The Poured-Out Life: The Kenosis Hymn in Context

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[Ministry Topics](#)
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[Non-English](#)
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One of the most well known and moving passages in Paul's writings is Philippians 2:5-11, known as the Kenosis Hymn (from the Greek word *ekenosen*, "he emptied," v. 7). There is a lack of consensus on how exactly to interpret the passage, and still less agreement on the role it should play in the life of the community of faith. However, few would deny the centrality of this particular passage in the Book of Philippians or its broader importance for a deeper understanding of the person and work of Christ. -1-

It is easy to forget, accustomed as we are to viewing the Bible through large theological categories such as "Word of God" or "Truth," that much of the Bible emerged from a community of faith that was itself grappling with the down-to-earth problems of service to God. This is especially true of the New Testament Epistles, which are real letters written (usually) by individuals to particular people in particular situations in a given time frame. To acknowledge this is not to assume that they are frozen in the past by time and circumstance with no real value for today. Quite the contrary, the community of faith has continually affirmed that the Epistles communicate God's word to humanity and so have enduring value for faith and practice. Yet the fact that the Epistles are real occasional letters must be taken seriously in interpreting their message for appropriation by the Church today. The recognition of this fact establishes some guidelines for interpreting the Kenosis Hymn in Philippians.

Guidelines for Interpreting the Hymn

First, while Paul did not hesitate to use lofty and magnificent theological formulations to address the rather mundane problems of the New Testament churches (compared by one writer to using a cannon on a rabbit! -2-), this particular passage is not a theological treatise. The assumption that the passage is a mine out of which propositional truths about divine reality may be dug has led to some bitter divisions within the Body of Christ. Rather, the passage should be approached initially in terms of the context and purpose of the letter itself, and its function within that context.

Second, the Kenosis Hymn is generally recognized by scholars to be an early Christian hymnic affirmation of faith quoted secondarily by Paul. Much ink has been spilled trying to establish the "original" meaning of the hymn to the Early Church. However, if we take seriously the fact that Paul is writing to a community of faith to deal with practical matters, then the original meaning of the hymn must be subordinate to its present context and function within the Epistle.

Finally, being a letter, the "book" of Philippians will to some degree reflect the needs and concerns of the persons involved, both the author's and the recipients'. While a complete portrait of neither Paul nor the church can be painted from the Epistle, the life situation of both, their relationships to each other, and the matters that concern each of them have shaped both its content and its manner of expression. An awareness of these factors and how they are expressed will provide both a social and a literary context in which to set the Kenosis Hymn while providing a basis for application to the modern church.

The Historical Context

Paul's relationship with the church at Philippi had been warm and cordial. Although he had been imprisoned on his first visit there (Acts 16:11-40), it was the first church founded in Europe. The initial success there was fondly recalled by Paul (Phil. 1:3-5). The church had continued to support Paul in his missionary efforts (4:15-18). The warm introduction to the Epistle, its cordiality second only to 1 Thessalonians, reflects the continuing close relationship between Paul and the Philippians (note 4:1).

However, it is clear that Paul is in perilous circumstances. Not only is the gospel that he has preached faithfully being threatened by self-serving, ambitious preachers (1:15-17; 2:20-21; 3:18-19), but he himself is in prison, facing imminent death (1:7, 12-16; 2:17; cf. 3:8-14). Yet there is no depression or gloom in this Epistle. On the contrary, joy and rejoicing are prominent (1:4, 8, 25; 2:2, 17-18, 29; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10). Paul faces his circumstances with a faith born not only out of God's past sustenance and provision (4:11-13) but also out of a lively hope in the future. His hope is based on his own commitment to a set of values that so transcend earthly concerns that he can refer to things highly valued by earthly standards as rubbish (3:4-11; cf. 1:1 9-26; 3:20-21)!

Paul is so committed to values beyond himself that he can actually rejoice in his own dire circumstances because they have advanced the opportunity for the proclamation of Christ (1:1 2-14). This attitude is reflected in the opening line of the Epistle by a self-designation common of Paul: servant (or "slave"; Greek, *doulos*, cf. Gal. 1:10; 2 Cor 4:5; 1 Cor. 7:22). It is significant to note that while Paul customarily establishes his authority as an apostle in writing to the churches (as in the first verses of Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians), in this Epistle he simply calls himself (along with his coworker, Timothy) "servant."

It is this warm relationship between the Philippian church and Paul, and his portrayal of himself as the faithful bond-servant of God who suffers and rejoices because he has chosen the path of service to others, that provides, the backdrop for Paul to address the needs and concerns of the church at Philippi.

The Literary Context

Paul's introduction in this epistle is cordial, including a prayer (1:3-12) in which he emphasizes the communal nature of the gospel by the repeated use of "all of you" (1:4, 7 [twice], 8, also 1:25; 2:17, 26). He also emphasizes the commonality between them ("sharing," *koinonia*, 1:5; "partners," *sugkoinonous*, 1:7; cf. 4:4-16). He then expresses his earnest desire to continue serving and working with them (1:23-25). While the whole tenor of the letter to this point has evoked images of community, close relationship, and selfless servanthood to God, the first hint of a problem emerges in 1:27. Here Paul begins addressing practical concerns relating to the life of the community of faith at Philippi. The emphasis on being "steadfast in the spirit" and "struggling together with one mind" for the sake of the gospel suggests that the unity of

the community needs strengthening.

It is critical for the interpretation of the rest of the Epistle to note that the first imperative Paul directs to the Philippian community concerns proper Christian lifestyle. While Paul makes the same appeal to other churches (cf. Eph. 4:1; Col. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:12), here he departs from his usual vocabulary and uses a technical word (*politeuesthe*, 1:27) that means "to discharge one's obligation as a citizen" or "to fulfill one's obligation to the community." -3- The Philippians were proud of their status as Roman citizens, their city being a Roman colony, and would clearly understand Paul's call to fulfill societal obligations. But Paul is not calling them simply to be good citizens but to fulfill their obligations to the Christian community. This would result in a unity of spirit, mind, and purpose. Paul does not immediately explain what that obligation entails, but there is built into the letter already an expectation that it is somehow related to Paul's dire circumstances, a hint given support by his reference to suffering related both to himself and to the Philippians (1:29-30).

This call to proper citizenship in the gospel is reinforced by the first verses of the second chapter, where the love, compassion, and sense of community (*koinonia*, 2:1) that come from Christ are used as a basis for a renewed appeal for unity (the same mind-set, the same love, united in spirit, of one purpose). The problem in the Philippian community is finally revealed to be selfishness and arrogance (v. 3). Internal dissension is threatening the love, unity, and fellowship of the community (cf. 2:14; 3:18-19; 4:2). While the cause is not revealed, the solution is understood by Paul to be a proper ordering of one's life. Priorities must be made according to a set of values that places the welfare and interests of others above concern for self (2:3-4); a humility arising from the very nature of being Christian. This would have two implications: the Philippians would fulfill their obligations to the community of faith as citizens of the heavenly kingdom, and the community itself would be built around a set of values and concerns far different from the rest of the world (3:17-20).

The Kenosis Hymn, then, occurs in this setting, giving expression to Paul's call for worthy fulfillment of Christian obligation and servanthood.

The Kenosis Hymn (Phil 2:5-11)

5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
(RSV)

The introductory line to the Kenosis Hymn (2:5) presents several problems of interpretation. First, there is no clear referent for "this" (*touto*). From the present context it is reasonable to conclude that Paul is referring to the whole attitude of like-mindedness, unity, and humility that has been the Epistle's focus since 1:27.

Second, the phrase *en humin*, usually translated "in yourselves," as a personal attitude each person should have, probably should be understood within the context of the strong emphasis on community as "among all of you"; that is, as an attitude toward each other.

Third, the last phrase lacks a verb in Greek. The usual practice is to supply a form of the verb "to be": "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus" (2:5, NASB; cf. NIV, KJV). While this is permissible, it is also possible to use the original verb ("have ... attitude") in the second clause, a common Hebrew usage found less frequently in Greek. Understood in this way, the verse reads: "Think this (in this manner of humility) toward each other which you also think in Christ Jesus (as Christians)." "In Christ Jesus" refers to those who have been baptized into Christ (cf. Rom. 6:11, 23; Gal. 3:28; *et al.*). Therefore, being "in Christ" is the basis for having the attitude of humility that Paul has just shown to be necessary: on the basis of the attitude of humility that you have before Christ as Christians, you should also have the same attitude in your relationships with one another (cf. NEB). This understanding of 2:5 fits well with the context as Paul elaborates the nature of the worthy conduct that is the obligation of Christians.

The actual Hymn itself begins in 2:6. It can be divided into three parts: verse 6, introduced by the pronoun "who" referring to "Christ Jesus," which focuses on the **privileged status of Christ**; verses 7-8, introduced by the disjunctive "but," contrasting with verse 6, which focuses on the **self-abasement of Christ**; and verses 9-11, introduced by a strong referential conjunction (*dio kai*, "therefore also"), implying that the last part is a necessary result of the preceding, which focus on the activity of **God exalting Christ**. Thus, there is a movement of the status of Christ within the hymn. He first appears on a level of **equality with God** (v. 6). Then, by his own choice, **he lays aside that equality** and takes on the role of a servant (vv. 7-8). Finally, **he is exalted by God** to a status equal with God (vv. 10-11).

This pattern of **privilege-servanthood-exaltation**, which is presented in the hymn as Paul's elaboration of the proper Christian life-style, is shown to be working out in Paul's own life and is used as a basic structural element of the entire Epistle. Paul has clearly cast himself in the servant role by the initial greeting (1:1) and the recounting of his circumstances (vv. 12-16). He also testifies that he himself has enjoyed privilege, which he has gladly and freely laid aside and has "counted as loss for the sake of Christ" (3:7, NASB; cf. vv. 8-14). He makes it clear that he anticipates a day of exaltation so eagerly that "to die is gain" (1:21). Paul sees himself so clearly following the path of servanthood that was established by Christ, especially in his present circumstances, that he can refer to "the fellowship of His sufferings" and "being conformed to His death" (3:10, NASB). It is in this spirit that Paul can point to himself and say, without trace of arrogance or pride, "Follow my example" (3:17; cf. 1 Cor 11:1).

Paul deliberately uses himself and his circumstances to illustrate the proper exercise of the role of servant exemplified by Christ. Paul repeatedly uses the word *phronein* (to set one's mind on, to have an attitude) to refer to the mind-set of humility and selflessness to which he originally called the Philippians and which the Kenosis Hymn illustrates (2:5; cf. 2:2; 1:7). He also uses it to refer to his own attitude of selfless commitment, which he invites them to share (3:15). He uses the same word to highlight the wrong mind-set, that of selfish preoccupation with earthly values (3:19), and to commend their own concrete expression of the proper concern for others (4:10).

It is this willingness to lay aside all rights of personal privilege, to submit in the spirit of servanthood to the needs and concerns of others, that is the heart of this letter. From Paul's side we see it as one who is a faithful servant following the Servant-Christ. From the Philippians' side it is as those who are obligated to exhibit that servanthood as followers of Christ. To show Christ as a servant, then, is to illustrate what being "in Christ" entails.

Paul argues that to fulfill one's obligation as a citizen of the heavenly kingdom is to empty oneself as He did, and to take on the role of a servant. One must commit oneself not only to sharing grace but also to suffering (1:5, 7, 29-30). S/he must be willing to be "poured out" in the service of others (2:17), to have a mind-set and lifestyle that is different from the values of the world (3:18-19). S/he must exhibit true humility, understanding that to be "in Christ" means to be a servant because Christ came to the world, not as Lord but as Servant (cf. John 13:2-20)!

The Kenosis Hymn for Today

The Kenosis Hymn functions as an ethical example, an illustration of what Christian citizenship means. Unity comes in serving God through service to each other. There is danger of selfishly looking out for one's own interests at the expense of others, or of arrogance born of pride in one's status, birth, or achievements (cf. 3:2-11). The solution to problems in interpersonal relationships is an attitude of humble commitment to others. A spirit of self-sacrifice is an expression to others of the love exemplified in Christ, love that was "obedient unto death, even a cross-death!" **True servanthood empties self.** Paul uses Christ to illustrate this. He had every right *not* to choose the path of servanthood rather than claim His rightful status. And Paul bears witness that he himself is walking the path of servanthood, perhaps to his own cross. And he calls the Philippians to follow!

There is no room for triumphalism here! There is no room for a feel-good religion that does not take its servant role seriously. There is no room for a victory that does not first know the "fellowship of His sufferings" in behalf of others; no room for piety that does not pour out, yes, even totally empty, oneself for the interests of others.

But there is hope here. It is found in the last part of the Christ Hymn (2:9-11). God eventually exalted the Servant-Christ. His humility became glory. And Paul strongly points to an exaltation as well, affirming that "the body of our humble state" God will transform into "the body of His glory" (3:21, NASB). Jesus said to the religious people of His day: "The greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted" (Matt. 23:11-12, NASB). But for Jesus, the path to that glory led through an emptying of himself, through servanthood that led to a cross. For Paul, the path to that glory led through a prison cell, through a poured-out life that caused him to say, "To die is gain" (1:21).

There is joy here, too (1:4, 25; 2:17-18; 4:4). It is not a superficial joy that evaporates at the first adversity. It is a joy that goes hand in hand with servanthood and sings in the face of death itself (2:17-19)! To take seriously this sort of servanthood disallows any sense of exaltation as reward or motivation, or as a formula for spiritual success: "Last now, first later!" -4- That is not authentic servanthood.

Practical Examples

The Church today is beset by petty quarrels and selfish attitudes not unlike the churches of Paul's day. There are conflicts between larger branches of Christianity (Catholic-Protestant), between denominations (Baptist-Methodist), and between groups within denominations (moderate-fundamentalist). But there are also conflicts within local churches on all political (pastor-church board), economic (businessman-welfare mother), social (executive-laborer), racial (black-white), and personal (Smith-Jones) levels.

One local church board scrapped a successful busing program for underprivileged

children because the bus was bringing children who were poor and of the "wrong" color into their affluent suburban church. "We can't afford it! They don't pay their way," one said. "They're ruining our carpet," said another. Still another, "They're not like us. Don't they have their own church?"

Another church, claiming they could not possibly pay their excessively high \$8,000 mission and educational budget because of the tight economy, spent nearly \$10,000 to refurbish the church offices and landscape the grounds. "We must maintain our image in the community," they said.

Still another church nearly disbanded because of a severe conflict between opposing groups over how the worship service should be conducted. "It doesn't fit our needs. There needs to be more freedom," one group said. "We've never done it that way," another group said.

This sort, of pettiness even creeps into the ministerial ranks. I still painfully recall the conversation with a young preacher who, nearly a year after completing his ministerial education, was still working for a local company. "Oh, yes, I've been called to four different churches," he said, "but none of them could pay me more than \$15,000 a year, and we have to have at least \$20,000 to maintain our standard of living."

The examples are endless. To persons with these attitudes Paul points to the example of Christ, who traded His exalted position for the role of a servant, eventually to give His life for others. "Look at the servant-Christ," Paul says, "and be like that!"

The Church needs the unity of mind and purpose to which Paul is calling the Philippians. It needs a unity built around servanthood, a servanthood illustrated by the emptied Christ and the poured-out Paul. Perhaps the Church needs to see itself in a new light. Maybe it needs to see itself less as the proclaimer and defender of divine truth, and more as the servant of humanity, the footwasher who expresses his love by humble service (John 13). Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who poured out his own life at the hands of the Nazis because he refused to allow the church to be the tool of oppression, wrote:

The church is the church only when it exists for others. . . . The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving. . . . It must not underestimate the importance of human example which has its origin in the humanity of Jesus. -5-

We who profess holiness need the unity of mind and purpose to which Paul is calling the Philippians. We need to see ourselves in terms of our obligations to the community of those "in Christ" of which we claim to be a part. Maybe we need to see ourselves less in terms of "those who never sin" and more in terms of "those who serve," those to whom Jesus commanded, "Take up [your] cross, and follow Me" (Matt. 16:24, NASB). Maybe we need to see ourselves in terms of the Servant-Christ, the "man for others" who bends himself to struggle for the wholeness and healing of a wounded world." -6- Maybe we need to reexamine our own value structures that have been so subtly shaped by the success-oriented society around us. We need to see if we are acting in a manner worthy of the heavenly citizenship we claim. For Paul, to claim that citizenship meant to have a mind-set different from others. It meant a commitment to servanthood, a life poured out in service to others, totally emptied of self.

We live in a society dominated by rights-activism, permeated with the philosophy of "me first," and molded by the corporate ideals of efficiency and success. The Church

must be called to remember that demanding one's rights and privileges may be popular, even necessary in some cases, but if it does so at the expense of Christian unity and love, it is not Christian! The Body of Christ must be called upon to refocus on Christian humility, unity, and fellowship. We must make service to others, perfect love in action, our primary responsibility. An attitude of Christlike humility does not demand rights or protect its own interests; it seeks servanthood.

C. C. Meigs expressed this attitude in the song "Others":

Others, Lord, yes others!
Let this my motto be!
Help me live for others,
That I may live for Thee!

Idealistic? Yes. But then, so was Paul as he quoted the Kenosis Hymn to the Philippians from his jail cell!

NOTES

1. For a survey of interpretation of the Kenosis Hymn and an extensive bibliography see Ralph P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians 2.5-11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).
2. Fred Craddock, *Philippians*, Interpretation Commentary (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 43.
3. The only other occurrence of the word in the Greek New Testament is in Acts 23:1 where Paul's defense of himself and his mission to the Gentiles before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem is that he is fulfilling his duty to God. The same implication is carried through Philippians by Paul's use of a nominal form of the same word in 3:20 to contrast the mind-set of Christians who are citizens of heaven with those whose mind-set is on earthly things.
4. Craddock, *Philippians*, 42.
5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 2nd ed., ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 203-4.
6. The "man for others" is an idea developed by Bonhoeffer to describe the Servant dimension of the Incarnation. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, 202.

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